



HER VOICE BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

# The Wiz

*The Wiz* began life in 1974, as a Broadway musical with an all-black cast. It became the smash hit of the season, winning Tony Awards in seven categories: Best Musical, Best Score (Charlie Smalls), Best Director, Best Choreography, Best Costumes, Best Supporting Actor (Ted Ross as the Lion, the part he recreates in the film) and Best Supporting Actress.

After such success, it was inevitable that film studios would want to bring *The Wiz* to a wider audience. Universal quickly acquired the rights, persuaded Diana Ross to be in it, and engaged Sidney Lumet to direct. Lumet decided that for the film version, a lot of changes would be made; 'But,' he said, 'we will be true to three things – the original book by Frank L. Baum, *The Wiz* score by Charlie Smalls, and the talents of Diana Ross.'

Before detailed planning began on the film of *The Wiz*, Lumet read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* again and got the idea of turning it into an urban fantasy from Frank L. Baum himself. Lumet said in an interview, 'The original book is really about self-knowledge. The Lion is incredibly brave; the Scarecrow is the brains of the group; the Tinman steps on an ant and starts to cry – and yet he thinks he hasn't got a heart! All these people are searching for a magic formula that would give them something they already have. Now, as soon as you realise that that is the essence of the book, the rest becomes simple. It doesn't really matter how old Dorothy is and it doesn't have to be on a farm – it could happen anywhere.'

Twelve songs in the film come from the stage version; another four were written especially for the film. Some of the original songs were arranged differently in the film because Lumet and Quincy Jones wanted to try to recreate as many specific periods of black music and dance as possible. Every musical arrangement and every dance is based on one particular black style. For example, the four-four tempo of the Tinman's song 'What Would I Do If I Could Feel?' recalls the music of a funeral dirge. His next song, 'Slide Some Oil to Me' uses the syncopated beat of Dixieland music. Elsewhere in the score, the arrangements are influenced by Tamla Motown, gospel and soul, among other styles.

The dance sequences in *The Wiz* use more dancers than had ever been seen on the screen before. There are never less than 80 and in the Emerald City sequence, the total went up to 400, each of whom had to wear three different costumes. This sort of scene helped to make *The Wiz* one of the most expensive musicals ever made. (The 25 miles of lino needed for the Yellow Brick Road also cost quite a lot!)

Diana Ross was the big star on whom the whole production deal depended. If she had not agreed to play the part of Dorothy, then the film would probably never have been made. She had become so well-known during the previous ten years, as a singer with The Supremes and as an actress in such films as *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), that even bankers had heard of her. As a result the necessary \$30m became available.

The part of Dorothy was re-written to suit Ross. She was actually 34 when the film was shot, but it was agreed that she could pass for 24, so that's Dorothy's age in the film. Furthermore, three new songs were written for her –

‘Can I Go On?, ‘Is This What Feeling Gets?’ and ‘A Brand New Day Everybody Rejoice’.

**Terry Staples**

### **‘The Wiz’: a contemporary review**

As so often nowadays, a rather nice little musical seems to be peeping out from behind the fulsome distractions of this expanded version of a Broadway success. In updating Frank Baum’s novel from Kansas in 1900 to a contemporary all-black New York, William Brown’s book turned the original’s homely moral into a pleasantly hip cautionary tale about the dangers of urban living. The episode in the poppy fields, for instance, is logically transformed into a neon-lit infernal alley where ladies of the night busily push cocaine; while (in one of the best scenes in the film) the Forest of Fighting Trees becomes the New York subway, alive with snapping trash bins, clashing gates and electrical cables which extend deadly, probing tentacles.

Making clever use of Tony Walton’s superb sets, which lightly fantasise New York landmarks like the Public Library, the Chrysler Building, the World Trade Center Plaza or the Lincoln Center fountain, Lumet gets the film off to a good start by mingling two and three dimensional perspectives, so that his metropolis alternates between being alarmingly real and magically whimsical. Starting on a very tangible highway, for instance, the yellow brick road becomes a painted set reminiscent of the one in the Judy Garland version, dovetails on to what appears to be a real footbridge, and finally emerges facing a cyclorama Manhattan skyline. All this side of the film is impeccable, with a nice line in New Yorker jokes (the Big Apple naturally has an apple-shaped sun, and its yellow cabs disobligingly vanish whenever hailed) and a generous quota of striking moments: the truly sinister first appearance of the Munchkins, as graffiti on a dingy wall gradually begin to detach themselves; the quaint little patch of sunflowers, evidently somebody’s allotment amid the ruins of a derelict site, where the Scarecrow is forced to entertain four crows by singing their derisory anthem, ‘You Can’t Win’; the death of Evillene, flushed down her toilet-shaped throne as the water-sprinklers begin to work.

The trouble is that the film also has delusions of grandeur, and where Charlie Smalls’ pleasant original songs are kept pleasantly brief, Quincy Jones seems to have expanded all the ensemble numbers to inordinate length. Chief offenders are the ‘Emerald City Ballet’, which echoes the ‘Think Pink’ number from *Funny Face* through no less than three separate colour schemes; and the dances celebrating the deaths of the two wicked witches, conventionally choreographed with movements more or less indistinguishable from each other or from the ‘Emerald City Ballet’. The result is that *The Wiz* is very much a thing of fits and starts, further undermined by the curious casting of Diana Ross as Dorothy. Acknowledging that she is a good few years too old to fit the fantasy, the script makes some attempt to explain this away by presenting her as constitutionally afraid to go out and meet life; all the sillier, therefore, that the only effect her adventure has on her should be to make her want to dash home again. Engaging performances by Michael Jackson, Ted Ross and Nipsey Russell, though, and Tony Walton’s designs alone are worth the price of admission.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1979**

THE WIZ

Director: Sidney Lumet  
Production Companies: Universal Pictures, Motown Productions  
Executive Producer: Ken Harper  
Producer: Rob Cohen  
Associate Producer: Burt Harris  
Production Manager: Kenneth Utt  
Assistant Director: Burt Harris  
2nd Assistant Director: Alan Hopkins  
Script Supervisor: Lynn T. Ward  
Screenplay: Joel Schumacher  
Based on the play by (Book): William F. Brown  
Based on the play by (Music/Lyrics): Charlie Smalls  
From the book by: L. Frank Baum  
Produced on the New York stage by: Ken Harper  
Director of Photography: Oswald Morris  
2nd Unit Photographer: Jack Priestley  
Camera Operator: Jim Contner  
Assistant Camera: Hank Muller  
Special Visual Effects: Albert Whitlock  
Matte Photographers: Bill Taylor, Dennis Glouner  
Special Effects: Al Griswold  
Editor: Dede Allen  
Assistant Editors: Angelo Corrao, Marlayna Franklin  
Production Designer: Tony Walton  
Art Director: Philip Rosenberg  
Assistant Art Director: John Jay Moore  
Set Decorators: Edward Stewart, Robert Drumheller  
Chief Scenic Artist: Eugene Powell, Ed Garzero  
Fantasy Props: Eion Sprott, Richard Tautkus  
Prop Master: Connie Brink  
Assistant Costume Desigr: Dona Granata  
Costume Co-ordinator: Anna Hill Johnstone, Gloria Gresham  
Costumes: Tony Walton  
Make-up Supervisor: Robert Laden  
Special Make-up Desigr: Stan Winston  
Hairstylist: William Farley, Ted Long  
Music: Charlie Smalls  
Music Adaptation/Supervisor: Quincy Jones  
Orchestra Conductor: Robert N. Tucker Jr.  
Orchestrations: Quincy Jones, Pete Myers, Mendel Balitz, Bob Freedman, Ralph Ferraro, Greig McRitchie, Bob Florence, Chris Boardman, Dick Hazard, Wayne Robinson

HER VOICE  
BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

The Wiz  
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45  
...But Then, She’s Betty Carter  
Mon 7 Jun 18:00  
Amazing Grace  
Tue 8 Jun 18:10  
Twenty Feet from Stardom  
Thu 10 Jun 18:20  
Sparkle  
Thu 10 Jun 20:35  
Billie  
Tue 15 Jun 20:40  
Mavis!  
Thu 17 Jun 20:40  
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things  
Sat 19 Jun 15:20  
Dreamgirls  
Wed 23 Jun 20:30  
Whitney: Can I Be Me  
Sat 26 Jun 18:10  
What’s Love Got to Do with It  
Sat 26 Jun 20:45

Celebrating films starring and directed by Black talent and more



Choir Arranged/Conductor: Tom Bähler  
Dance Arrangements: Quincy Jones, Frank Owens  
Vocal Arrangements: Quincy Jones  
Music Adapted and Supervised by: Quincy Jones  
Supervising Music Editor: Jack Fitzstephens  
Choreography: Louis Johnson  
Sound Mixer: James T. Sabat  
Special Sound Consultant: Guy Costa  
Re-recording Supervisor: Dick Vorisek  
Supervising Sound Editor: Jack Fitzstephens  
Stunt Co-ordinator: Everett Creach  
Toto Owned/Trained by: Dawn Animal Agency  
Yellow Brick Road Created by: Congoleum  
Studio: Astoria Film Studios

Cast  
Diana Ross (Dorothy)  
Michael Jackson (Scarecrow)  
Nipsey Russell (Tinman)  
Ted Ross (Lion)  
Mabel King (Evillene)  
Theresa Merritt (Aunt Em)  
Thelma Carpenter (Miss One)  
Lena Horne (Glinda the Good)  
Richard Pryor (The Wiz)  
Stanley Greene (Uncle Henry)  
Clyde J. Barrett (subway peddler)  
Derrick Bell, Roderick Spencer Sibert,  
Kashka Banjoko, Ronald ‘Smokey’ Stevens (crows)  
Tony Brealond, Joe Lynn (gold footmen)  
Clinton Jackson, Charles Rodriguez (green footmen)  
Carlton Johnson (head Winkie)  
Ted Williams (1st munchkin)  
Mabel Robinson (2nd munchkin)  
Damon Pearce (3rd munchkin)  
Donna Patrice Ingram (4th munchkin)  
Harry Madsen (Cheetah)  
Glory Van Scott (Rolls-Royce lady)  
Vicki Baltimore (green lady)

USA 1978  
133 mins

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