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Teaching Oz in Religious Studies - Part II

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The Wiz

It is the malleability of the Oz story to reflect different social, historical, and cultural contexts while utilizing recognizable symbols – special magical shoes, the Yellow Brick Road – which makes it such a powerful myth of America. Early in the twentieth century, within a few years of the publication of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, stage productions had already begun. The 1939 MGM film in which the title was shortened to *The Wizard of Oz* proved to be iconic in its portrayal of the story of Dorothy and her friends’ journey through the magical land of Oz and their journey of self-discovery. Oz started out as a literary narrative but is retold as a musical film. The Hollywood film musical was well established as a featured genre in which songs, their lyrics, and dance sequences were part and parcel of the narrative. The film musical, in turn, drew on the tradition of musical theatre. Musical theatre’s earlier predecessors included vaudeville, and prior to that, the minstrel show, the earliest popular stage entertainment in the United States.

Minstrel shows emerged in the nineteenth century as performances of imagined blackness based on racial stereotypes. Minstrel shows featured white performers in blackface (makeup, wigs, and costuming). Minstrel shows proved to be so popular that there were minstrel shows featuring black performers who donned costume and makeup on stage to perform caricatures.

While minstrelsy was supplanted by the movies as the most popular form of mass entertainment, it still lingered well into the twentieth century in stage shows and in film. Reflecting segregationist policies of the era, not many people of African descent who identified as black were cast in mainstream musical theatrical productions. Coupled with this practice, there were all-black musicals on Broadway. *In Dahomey* was the first such musical, staged in 1903. Others followed in subsequent decades leading up to the staging of the 1964 all-black cast of *Hello Dolly!* featuring Pearl Bailey in the title role.

The introduction of *The Wiz* in the mid-1970s featuring an all-black cast should not be separated from its contemporary sociocultural or historical context. This staging drew on Baum's original storyline, as well as on the 1939 MGM musical, but the story was transplanted from turn-of-the-century Kansas to contemporary urban, black America. The full title was *The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical of "The Wizard of Oz."* This title was a statement about the musical's positioning in relation to the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* which itself was positioned in relation to Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. And so, as an audience, we are presented with a version of a version of a version in the fashioning of an authentic representation. The direction and creative costume design by Geoffrey Holder is in itself worthy of exploration, as I will discuss below.

Occurring only a decade after the tumult of the 1960s, *The Wiz* reflected 1970s black American musical genres incorporating soul and gospel-tinged R n' B in its lyrical content. Its storyline featuring a young Stephanie Mills as Dorothy provided a powerful message of belonging, self-awareness, and affirmation of black identities through embodied performances. With costumes by Trinidadian-born dancer, choreographer, actor, and artist, Geoffrey Holder, the musical was a triumph, winning seven Tony's (considered the pinnacle of awards for Broadway musical theatre) in 1975. These included Best Musical and two for Holder as director and choreographer.

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