

# SEVEN DAYS

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## Theater review: *Ozma of Oz: A Tale of Time*

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Movie buffs old enough to remember 1978's *The Wiz* can be forgiven a certain wariness about a production of playwright Suzan Zeder's *Ozma of Oz*. Her play premiered in Seattle just a year following the release of *The Wiz*, a film event that provided show biz with a cautionary tale about messing with the children's fantasy novels of L. Frank Baum. While the Broadway stage version of *The Wiz* was a Tony-winning hit, not even the star power of Michael Jackson and Diana Ross could spare the film rendition its grisly demise at the box office and in the press. More recent film adaptations have alternately hit and missed.

Perhaps *The Wiz*'s lesson is that film adaptations of the Oz franchise are a risky business, especially in light of the transcendent 1939 film that lingers like some Jungian archetype in the collective American pop cultural consciousness. Zeder's *Ozma*, by contrast, received accolades as a work of children's theater and continues to be staged around the world to this day. The Saints & Poets Production Company is currently staging *Ozma of Oz* in Burlington at the Black Box Theatre of the Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center.

Directed by Kevin Christopher, this production takes an earnest run at the curious *Oz* offshoot, based on the third book in Baum's series. Some of the troupe's most consistent players join two youth actors — Champlain Valley Union High School sophomore Lucy Pappas in the lead role of Dorothy Gale and seventh-grade sister Stella Pappas in three supporting roles — in an energetic production propelled by zany characters and pitched to theatergoers ages 6 and up.

What sense — or nonsense — young audiences might make of the play is difficult to gauge, though. Playwright Zeder herself, in an interview in the *Austin Chronicle*, said she considered the play "unfinished" and still in search of "its voice." The plot takes a lot of trippy twists and turns, but they're sometimes too wacky for their own good — and sometimes not super fun.

*Ozma of Oz* opens with teenage Dorothy accompanying her Uncle Henry, whose ill health forces him into a wheelchair, on an ocean journey to Australia for curative rest. She's none too pleased to be traveling with the old geezer — instead of hanging out with her boyfriend back in Kansas — and isn't shy about saying so. When a storm wracks the ship, Dorothy and Uncle Henry are tossed overboard and separated. Alone on a raft save for a talking

chicken named Bill, Dorothy discovers an oversized metal key with a mysterious inscription. She also rediscovers a sense of familial responsibility to Uncle Henry — just in time to make landfall, where he has arrived before her.

More discoveries await them in the strange land. The first is a character named Tic Toc, a self-described time machine — a clock man, basically. Tic Toc informs Uncle Henry and Dorothy that they have reached Oz and that, because they have freed him from his rock prison, time is now running again — with profound implications. Day will resume yielding to night in its natural routine, which is the condition that the subterranean Gnome King, Roquat, requires for his nocturnal army to run rampant aboveground. All hell will break loose. Worst of all, living things will once again age.

Enter the Wheelers! These menacing creatures on scooters (Bob Fishel and Jenny Gundy) seem intent on harming Dorothy, Uncle Henry and Bill — until they notice Uncle Henry's wheelchair. They mistake him for their ruler and leave the group alone. At this point, Dorothy, Uncle Henry, Bill and Tic Toc set off on a journey that brings them into contact with narcissistic Princess Langwidere, Roquat and the play's title character, Ozma. The story predictably ends with a set of tidy realizations about appreciating people for who they are and the value of mortal, multifaceted life versus idyllic, unchanging immortality.

The rambling, rollicking tale can be difficult to pin down from scene to scene, but solid acting anchors the production. As Dorothy, Lucy Pappas turns in a confident performance that matches the more experienced cast members' energy and intensity, as she does most of the dramatic heavy lifting. She plays the only major character not imbued with outsize or otherworldly quirks, and we look to her to make some sense of the goings-on.

Pappas' performance is all the more impressive when viewed alongside those of stalwart local actors. Rick Homan is credibly irascible as Uncle Henry, but he and Pappas also sell a couple of key moments of tenderness. Other players buoy *Ozma of Oz* with broad-stroked comic relief. Cael Barkman, playing Princess Langwidere, gives a feisty performance as the hotheaded — and multiheaded — villainess who changes her noggin to suit her mood, and holds Dorothy and company hostage for a spell. Kerry Cameron is the princess' frantic handmaiden, Nanda (in addition to playing two other roles).

Seth Jarvis inhabits the villain Roquat in what appear to be David Bowie's castoff duds from his Ziggy Stardust days — a highlight of costume designer Catherine Alston's work — and affects a humorously glam persona. At the other extreme, the preternaturally sunny Ozma, played by Patricia Julien, gets laughs for her irrepressible optimism as she moves about the stage in lithe, fairy-like steps. The direr the circumstances become, the more delighted a heroine Ozma appears. One hears echoes of Billie Burke's Glinda the good witch from *The Wizard of Oz* in her high-pitched, saccharine-sweet voice.

Saints & Poets' signature contribution to local theater since the company's founding in 2010 has been inventively combining puppets and live performance. In *Ozma of Oz*, however, only two puppets make the scene: Bill the

chicken, played by Marianne DiMascio and designed and built by Kevin Christopher; and Tic Toc, played by G. Richard Ames. While DiMascio and Ames are known and respected theatrical talents, their roles in this play come off a bit muted, which deprives the show of elements of spectacle that might appeal to young audiences. In general, *Ozma of Oz* feels slightly underproduced.

Again, a kid may see things differently — and suspend disbelief more readily. At any rate, this production hits a high standard of professionalism through committed performances from a deeply talented cast. Every Saints & Poets show has taken bold creative risks, and *Ozma of Oz* is no exception. The production may be a little hamstrung, as other iterations of this play have been, by a script that even its author felt was rushed to the stage too soon. Even so, theatergoers who attend this *Ozma* will get a taste of the boundless imagination of author Baum, whose body of work extends in all kinds of wacky directions.

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