

= The Wiz ( film ) =

The Wiz is a 1978 American musical adventure film produced in collaboration between Universal Pictures and Motown Productions , and released by Universal Pictures on October 24 , 1978 . An urban reimagining of L. Frank Baum 's classic 1900 children 's novel The Wonderful Wizard of Oz featuring an entirely African @-@ American cast , The Wiz was loosely adapted from the 1974 Broadway musical of the same name . The film follows the adventures of Dorothy , a shy twenty @-@ four @-@ year @-@ old Harlem , New York City , schoolteacher who finds herself magically transported to the urban fantasy Land of Oz , which resembles an alternative fantasy version of the Big Apple . Befriended by a Scarecrow , a Tin Man , and a Cowardly Lion , she travels through the city to seek an audience with the mysterious Wiz , who they say is the only one powerful enough to send her home .

Produced by Rob Cohen and directed by Sidney Lumet , The Wiz stars Diana Ross , Michael Jackson , Nipsey Russell , Ted Ross , Mabel King , Theresa Merritt , Thelma Carpenter , Lena Horne , and Richard Pryor . The film 's story was reworked from William F. Brown 's Broadway libretto by Joel Schumacher , and Quincy Jones supervised the adaptation of Charlie Smalls and Luther Vandross 's songs for film . A handful of new songs , written by Jones and the songwriting team of Nickolas Ashford & Valerie Simpson , were added for the film version . Upon its original theatrical release , The Wiz was a critical and commercial failure , and marked the end of the resurgence of African @-@ American films that began with the blaxploitation movement of the early 1970s . Despite its initial failure , the film version of The Wiz became a cult classic , particularly among African @-@ American audiences , Oz enthusiasts , and fans of Michael Jackson . Certain aspects of this film adaptation influenced the The Wiz Live ! , a live television adaptation of the musical .

= = Summary = =

A crowded Thanksgiving dinner brings a host of family together in a small Harlem apartment , where a shy , twenty @-@ four @-@ year @-@ old schoolteacher named Dorothy ( Diana Ross ) lives with her Aunt Em ( Theresa Merritt ) and Uncle Henry ( Stanley Greene ) . Extremely introverted , Dorothy is teased by Aunt Em for never having been south of 125th Street , as she has delayed moving out to start her own , independent life as an adult .

While Dorothy cleans up after the meal , Dorothy 's dog Toto runs out the open kitchen door into a violent snowstorm . She succeeds in retrieving him , but finds herself trapped in the storm . A magical whirlwind made of snow ? the work of Glinda , the Good Witch of the South ? materializes and transports them to the realm of Oz . Released by the snowstorm , Dorothy smashes through an electric " Oz " sky sign as she descends from the atmosphere , and which falls upon and kills Evermean , the Wicked Witch of the East who rules Munchkinland . As a result , Dorothy frees the Munchkins who populate the playground into which she lands ; they had been transformed by Evermean into graffiti for " tagging " the park walls .

Dorothy soon meets the Munchkins ' main benefactress , Miss One , the Good Witch of the North ( Thelma Carpenter ) , a magical " numbers runner " who gives Evermean 's pretty charmed silver slippers to her by teleporting them on Dorothy 's feet . However , Dorothy declares she doesn 't want the shoes and desperately just wants to get home to Aunt Em . Miss One urges her to follow the yellow brick road to the capital Emerald City and seek the help of the mysterious " Wizard " who she believes holds the power to send Dorothy back to Harlem . After telling her to never take the silver shoes off , the good witch and the Munchkins then disappear and Dorothy is left to search for the road on her own .

The next morning , Dorothy happens upon a Scarecrow ( Michael Jackson ) made of garbage and rags , and saves him from being viciously teased and picked on by a group of humanoid crows and whom she befriends . The two of them discover the yellow brick road and happily begin to follow it together . The Scarecrow hopes the Wizard might be able to give him the one thing he feels that he lacks ? a brain . Along the way to the Emerald City , Dorothy , Toto , and the Scarecrow meet the

Tin Man ( Nipsey Russell ) , in an abandoned turn @-@ of @-@ the @-@ century amusement park and the Cowardly Lion ( Ted Ross ) , a vain dandy banished from the jungle who hid inside one of the stone lions in front of the New York Public Library . The Tin Man and Lion join them on their quest to find the Wizard , hoping to gain a heart and courage , respectively . Before the five adventurers reach the Emerald City , they must face obstacles such as a deadly subway where they meet a crazy subway peddler ( a homeless man ) who unleashes evil puppets in his control . They narrowly escape the subway and then encounter the " Poppy " Girls ( a reference to the poppy field from the original story ) , flamboyant prostitutes who attempt to put Dorothy , Toto , and the Lion into an eternal sleep with magic poppy perfume .

Finally reaching the Emerald City ( an analogue of the real @-@ life World Trade Center plaza ) , the quintet gains passage into the city because of Dorothy 's ownership of the silver slippers ; they marvel at the spectacle of the city and its sophisticated , fashion forward dancers . They are granted an audience with the Wiz ( Richard Pryor ) , who lives at the very top of the Towers . He appears to them as a giant fire @-@ breathing metallic head . He will only grant their wishes if they kill the sister of the Wicked Witch of the East , Evillene ( Mabel King ) , the Wicked Witch of the West , who runs a sweatshop in the underground sewers of Oz . Before they can reach her domain , Evillene learns of their quest to kill her and sends out the Flying Monkeys ( a motorcycle gang ) to kidnap them .

After a long chase , the Flying Monkeys succeed in capturing their targets and bring them back to Evillene . Vengeful for Dorothy having killed her sister , she dismembers the Scarecrow , flattens the Tin Man , and tortures the Lion in hopes of making Dorothy give her the silver shoes . When she threatens to throw Toto into a fiery cauldron , Dorothy nearly gives in until the Scarecrow hints to her to activate a fire sprinkler switch , which she does . The sprinklers put out the fire but also melt Evillene . She is flushed down into her throne , the lid of which slams shut like a toilet . With Evillene finally gone , her spells lose their power : the Winkies are freed from their permanent costumes ( revealing attractive humans underneath ) and their sweatshop tools disappear . They rejoice in dance and praise Dorothy as their emancipator . The Flying Monkeys give her and her friends a triumphant ride back to the Emerald City .

Upon arriving , the quartet takes a back door into the Wizard 's quarters and discovers that he is a " phony " . The " great and powerful Oz " is actually Herman Smith , a failed politician from Atlantic City , New Jersey , who was transported to Oz when a balloon he was flying to promote his campaign to become the city dogcatcher was lost in a storm . The Scarecrow , Tin Man , and Lion are distraught that they will never receive their respective brain , heart , and courage , but Dorothy makes them realize that they already have had these things all along . Just as it seems as if she will never be able to get home , Glinda the Good Witch of the South ( Lena Horne ) , appears and implores her to find her way home by searching within and using the magic of the silver slippers by clicking the heels together three times . After thanking Glinda and saying goodbye to her friends , she takes Toto in her arms , thinks of home and the things she loves most about it . When Dorothy clicks her heels , she immediately finds herself back in her neighborhood of Harlem . Now a changed woman , Dorothy carries Toto back to their apartment building ; implying she now has the strength to face her fears and move forward with her life .

= = Cast = =

= = Songs = =

All songs written by Charlie Smalls , unless otherwise noted .

" Overture Part I " ( instrumental )

" Overture Part II " ( instrumental )

" The Feeling That We Had " - Aunt Em and Chorus

" Can I Go On ? " ( Quincy Jones , Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson ) - Dorothy

" Tornado " / " Glinda 's Theme " ( instrumental )

" He 's the Wizard " - Miss One and Chorus  
 " Soon As I Get Home " / " Home " - Dorothy  
 " You Can 't Win , You Can 't Break Even " - Scarecrow and The Four Crows  
 " Ease on Down the Road # 1 " - Dorothy and Scarecrow  
 " What Would I Do If I Could Feel ? " - Tin Man  
 " Slide Some Oil to Me " - Tin Man  
 " Ease on Down the Road # 2 " - Dorothy , Scarecrow , and Tin Man  
 " I 'm a Mean Ole Lion " - Cowardly Lion  
 " Ease on Down the Road # 3 " - Dorothy , Scarecrow , Tin Man , and Cowardly Lion  
 " Poppy Girls Theme " ( Anthony Jackson ) ( instrumental )  
 " Be a Lion " - Dorothy , Scarecrow , Tin Man , and Cowardly Lion  
 " End of the Yellow Brick Road " ( instrumental )  
 " Emerald City Sequence " ( music : Jones , lyrics : Smalls ) - Chorus  
 " Is This What Feeling Gets ? ( Dorothy 's Theme ) " ( music : Jones , lyrics : Ashford & Simpson ) - Dorothy ( vocal version not used in film )  
 " Don 't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News " - Evillene and the Winkies  
 " Everybody Rejoice / A Brand New Day " ( Luther Vandross ) - Dorothy , Scarecrow , Tin Man , Cowardly Lion , and Chorus  
 " Believe in Yourself ( Dorothy ) " - Dorothy  
 " The Good Witch Glinda " ( instrumental )  
 " Believe in Yourself ( Reprise ) " - Glinda the Good Witch  
 " Home ( Finale ) " - Dorothy

== Production ==

=== Pre @-@ production and development ===

The Wiz was the eighth feature film produced by Motown Productions , the film / TV division of Berry Gordy 's Motown Records label . Gordy originally wanted the teenaged future R & B singer Stephanie Mills , who had played the role on Broadway , to be cast as Dorothy . When Motown star Diana Ross asked Gordy if she could be cast as Dorothy , he declined , saying that Ross ? then 33 years old ? was too old for the role . Ross went around Gordy and convinced executive producer Rob Cohen at Universal Pictures to arrange a deal where he would produce the film if Ross was cast as Dorothy . Gordy and Cohen agreed to the deal . Pauline Kael , a film critic , described Ross 's efforts to get the film into production as " perhaps the strongest example of sheer will in film history . "

After film director John Badham learned that Ross was going to play the part of Dorothy , he decided not to direct the film , and Cohen replaced him with Sidney Lumet . Of his decision not to direct The Wiz , John Badham recalled telling Cohen that he thought Ross was " a wonderful singer . She 's a terrific actress and a great dancer , but she 's not this character . She 's not the little six @-@ year @-@ old girl Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz . " Though 20th Century Fox had financially backed the stage musical , they ended up exercising their first refusal rights to the film production , which gave Universal an opening to finance the film . Initially , Universal was so excited about the film 's prospects that they did not set a budget for production .

Joel Schumacher 's script for The Wiz was influenced by Werner Erhard 's teachings and his Erhard Seminars Training ( " est " ) movement , as both Schumacher and Diana Ross were " very enamored of Werner Erhard " . " Before I knew it , " said Rob Cohen , " the movie was becoming an est @-@ ian fable full of est buzzwords about knowing who you are and sharing and all that . I hated the script a lot . But it was hard to argue with [ Ross ] because she was recognizing in this script all of this stuff that she had worked out in est seminars . " Schumacher spoke positively of the results of the est training , stating that he was " eternally grateful for learning that I was responsible for my life . " However , he also complained that " everybody stayed exactly the way they were and went

around spouting all this bull \* \* \* \* . " Of est and Erhard references in the film itself , The Grove Book of Hollywood notes that the speech delivered by Glinda the Good Witch at the end of the film was " a litany of est @-@ like platitudes " , and the book also makes est comparisons to the song " Believe in Yourself " . Although Joel Schumacher had seen the Broadway play before writing the script , none of the Broadway play 's writing was incorporated into the film 's .

During production , Lumet felt that the finished film would be " an absolutely unique experience that nobody has ever witnessed before . " When asked about any possible influence from MGM 's popular 1939 film adaptation of The Wizard of Oz , Lumet stated that " there was nothing to be gained from [ the 1939 film ] other than to make certain we didn 't use anything from it . They made a brilliant movie , and even though our concept is different ? they 're Kansas , we 're New York ; they 're white , we 're black , and the score and the books are totally different ? we wanted to make sure that we never overlapped in any area . "

Michael Jackson , a former Motown star who by the start of development on The Wiz in 1977 , had left Motown for Epic Records with his brothers The Jacksons , was cast as the Scarecrow . Jackson was dedicated to the role , and watched videotapes of gazelles , cheetahs , and panthers in order to learn graceful movements for his part . Ted Ross and Mabel King were brought in to reprise their respective roles from the stage musical , while Nipsey Russell was cast as the Tin Man . Lena Horne , mother @-@ in @-@ law to Sidney Lumet during the time of production , was cast as Glinda the Good Witch , and comedian Richard Pryor portrayed The Wiz .

= = = Principal photography = = =

The Wiz was filmed at Astoria Studios in Queens , New York . The decaying New York State Pavilion from the 1964 New York World 's Fair was used as the set for Munchkinland , Astroland at Coney Island was used for the Tinman scene with The Cyclone as a backdrop , while the World Trade Center served as the Emerald City . The scenes filmed at the Emerald City were elaborate , utilizing 650 dancers , 385 crew members and 1 @,@ 200 costumes . Costume designer Tony Walton enlisted the help of high fashion designers in New York City for the Emerald City sequence , and obtained exotic costumes and fabric from designers such as Oscar de la Renta and Norma Kamali . Albert Whitlock created the film 's visual special effects , while Stan Winston served as the head makeup artist .

Quincy Jones was the musical supervisor and music producer for the film . He later wrote that he initially did not want to work on the film , but did it as a favor to Sidney Lumet . The film production marked Jones ' first time working with Michael Jackson , and Jones would later produce three hit albums for Jackson : Off the Wall , Thriller , and Bad . Jones recalled working with Jackson as one of his favorite experiences from The Wiz , and spoke of Jackson 's dedication to his role , comparing his acting style to Sammy Davis , Jr . Jones had a brief cameo during the " Gold " segment of the Emerald City sequence , playing what looks like a fifty @-@ foot grand piano .

= = Commercial reaction = =

The Wiz proved to be a commercial failure , as the \$ 24 million production only earned \$ 13 @.@ 6 million at the box office . Though prerelease television broadcast rights had been sold to CBS for over \$ 10 million , in the end , the film produced a net loss of \$ 10 @.@ 4 million for Motown and Universal . At the time , it was the most expensive film musical ever made . The film 's failure steered Hollywood studios away from producing the all @-@ black film projects that had become popular during the blaxploitation era of the early to mid @-@ 1970s for several years .

The film was released on VHS home video in 1989 by MCA / Universal Home Video ( with a reissue in 1992 ) and was first broadcast on television on CBS on May 5 , 1984 ( edited to 100 minutes ) , to capitalize on Michael Jackson 's massive popularity at the time . It continues to be broadcast periodically on networks such as BET , TVOne , VH1 Soul , and was the inaugural broadcast on the Bounce TV digital broadcast network . The Wiz is often broadcast on Thanksgiving Day ( attributed to the opening scene of Dorothy 's family gathered for a Thanksgiving dinner ) .

The film was released on DVD in 1999 ; a remastered version entitled *The Wiz : 30th Anniversary Edition* was released in 2008 . Extras on both DVD releases include a 1978 featurette about the film's production and the original theatrical trailer . A Blu @-@ ray version was released in 2010 .

= = Critical reception = =

Critics panned *The Wiz* upon its October 1978 release . Many reviewers directed their criticism at Diana Ross , who they believed was far too old to play Dorothy . Most agreed that what had worked so successfully on stage simply did not translate well to the screen . Hirsch's *Through the Screen Door : What Happened to the Broadway Musical When It Went to Hollywood* criticized " Joel Schumacher 's cockamammy screenplay " , and called " Believe in Yourself " the score 's weakest song . He described Diana Ross 's portrayal of Dorothy as : " cold , neurotic and oddly unattractive " ; and noted that the film was " a critical and box office bust " . In his work *History of the American Cinema* , Harpole characterized the film as " one of the decade 's biggest failures " , and , " the year 's biggest musical flop " . The *Grove Book of Hollywood* noted that " the picture finished off Diana Ross 's screen career " , as the film was Ross 's final theatrical feature . In his book *Blockbuster* , Tom Shone referred to *The Wiz* as " expensive crud " . In the book *Mr. and Mrs. Hollywood* , the author criticized the script , noting , " *The Wiz* was too scary for children , and too silly for adults . " Ray Bolger , who played the Scarecrow in the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* film , did not think highly of *The Wiz* , stating " *The Wiz* is overblown and will never have the universal appeal that the classic MGM musical has obtained . "

Michael Jackson 's performance as the Scarecrow was one of the only positively reviewed elements of the film , with critics noting that Jackson possessed " genuine acting talent " and " provided the only genuinely memorable moments . " Of the results of the film , Jackson stated : " I don 't think it could have been any better , I really don 't . " In 1980 , Jackson stated that his time working on *The Wiz* was " my greatest experience so far . . . I 'll never forget that . " The film received a positive critique for its elaborate set design , and the book *American Jewish Filmmakers* noted that it " features some of the most imaginative adaptations of New York locales since the glory days of the Astaire @-@ Rogers films . " In a 2004 review of the film , Christopher Null wrote positively of Ted Ross and Richard Pryor 's performances . However , Null 's overall review of the film was critical , and he wrote that other than the song " Ease on Down the Road " , " the rest is an acid trip of bad dancing , garish sets , and a Joel Schumacher @-@ scripted mess that runs 135 agonizing minutes . " A 2005 piece by Hank Stuever in *The Washington Post* described the film as " a rather appreciable delight , even when it 's a mess " , and felt that the singing ? especially Diana Ross 's ? was " a marvel " .

The *New York Times* analyzed the film within a discussion of the genre of blaxploitation : " As the audience for blaxploitation dwindled , it seemed as if *Car Wash* and *The Wiz* might be the last gasp of what had been a steadily expanding black presence in mainstream filmmaking . " The *St. Petersburg Times* noted , " Of course , it only took one flop like *The Wiz* ( 1978 ) to give Hollywood an excuse to retreat to safer ( i.e. , whiter ) creative ground until John Singleton and Spike Lee came along . Yet , without blaxploitation there might not have been another generation of black filmmakers , no Denzel Washington or Angela Bassett , or they might have taken longer to emerge . " The *Boston Globe* commented , " the term ' black film ' should be struck from the critical vocabulary . To appreciate just how outmoded , deceptive and limiting it is , consider the following , all of which have been described as black films , . . . " and characterized *The Wiz* in a list which also featured 1970s films *Shaft* , *Blacula* , and *Super Fly* .

Despite its lack of critical or commercial success in its original release , *The Wiz* became a cult classic , especially because it features Michael Jackson 's only starring theatrical film role .

= = Nominations = =

*The Wiz* was nominated for four Academy Awards : Best Art Direction ( Tony Walton , Philip Rosenberg , Edward Stewart , Robert Drumheller ) , Best Costume Design , Best Original Music

Score and Best Cinematography , but did not win any of them .