

“The Good, The Bad, The Wicked: Lessons from Oz”

by Dr. Brian Howell
Assistant Professor of Anthropology , Wheaton College

What could be a more unambiguous, self-identified portrait of evil than a green faced Witch surrounded by creepy flying monkeys? Her very name, the Wicked Witch of the West, sets the tone pretty clearly. She's Bad; Glinda is Good; the wizard is a bumbler but a well-intentioned guy and Dorothy is haplessly caught in the middle. But the hottest ticket on Broadway says, “Not so fast.” Perhaps having a green face and wearing unfashionable black hats is not enough to make you Wicked. In fact, perhaps “goodness” and “wickedness” are not such clear-cut categories at all. In a musical “prequel” to the film “The Wizard of Oz,” the audience is challenged to re-evaluate the judgements of good and evil, tapping into the powerful cultural theme of authenticity at the same time.

The Broadway musical “Wicked” is based on a book of the same name that tells the story of Elphaba (nee The Wicked Witch of the West) and her early history in the land of Oz. Born an unnatural shade of green due to the dalliances of her mother, Elphaba is misunderstood and ostracized, particularly when enrolling in a boarding school for aspiring Witches and Wizards (Shiz Academy). There she finds herself rooming with Galinda (later to become Glinda, The Good Witch), who inspires her to travel to the Emerald City in order to meet the Wizard. Elphaba, you see, has true magical gifts, and her only dream has been to meet and work with the Wizard, the Great and Powerful Oz. In one show-stopping tune (among many from the score by Stephen Schwartz, composer of *Godspell* and *Pippin*), Elphaba sings of how happy she would be if she could just meet the Wizard to finally realize her true calling at his side. Of course, as we already know, the Wizard is not quite so great and powerful. He is, in fact, a phony, which turns out to be the most insidious sort of evil there is.

And herein lies the heart of the message from this production: Goodness and Wickedness are largely perceptions; true goodness is found in being true to oneself. It is a beguiling message that reflects some of the deepest yearnings of the (post)modern person. The turning point in the show (and the end of Act I) occurs at the moment that Elphaba, who earlier in the show discovers that the talking animals of Oz are being forced into silence and conventional animality, brings this concern to the Wizard to discover that he's actually behind the oppression of the talking animals. Glinda and Elphaba, in this moment of discovery, are both forced to choose: will they go along with the Wizard's plans, thus gaining his favor and prestigious positions in the Land of Oz, or will they reject him and all he stands for, striking out on their own? Glinda wavers, her friendship with Elphaba almost winning her over, but in the end chooses the self-serving route of convention. Elphaba chooses the other way, singing the climax of the show in her song “Defying Gravity,”

"I'm through accepting limits/Cuz someone says they're so/Some things I cannot change/But till I try, I'll never know! Too long I've been afraid of/Losing love I guess I've lost/Well, if that's love/It comes at much too high a cost!/I'd sooner buy/Defying gravity/Kiss me goodbye I'm defying gravity/And you can't pull me down"

Of course, people do try to pull her down. She is declared wicked by the people of Oz; her story is mythologized and retold, casting Glinda into the role of heroine and Elphaba as evil incarnate. Yet Glinda knows the truth and continues a clandestine relationship with her friend, hoping she'll "come to her senses" and rejoin the charade. Throughout this time, Glinda begins to question her own choice. At the beginning of the second Act, Glinda appears Evita Peron-like, absorbing the adulation of the crowd that had just pronounced Elphaba wicked. In a song entitled "Thank Goodness," Glinda admits that while her dreams have come true, she feels she lost something in the process. Yet she resolves it all with the line that she must be happy "Because happy is what happens/When all your dreams come true!"

The "goodness" being thanked in the song has a double meaning, suggesting both the colloquial "What a relief" as well as a thank you to the idea of "goodness," as in "We're thankful that we have 'goodness' around so we can label this other thing/person as Wicked!" Playing with the meaning of "wicked," "good" and "goodness" occurs throughout the show, from the lines the first song "*And Goodness knows/We know what Goodness is/Goodness knows/The Wicked die alone*" to Glinda's song "Thank Goodness" to the most powerful example, the final song between Glinda and Elphaba entitled "For Good." Here, just before the crowd finally closes in on Elphaba, Glinda and Elphaba reconcile, declaring that that while they cannot know if they have influenced each other "for the better," they know they have changed one another's lives "for good," meaning with permanence and reality.

This is a profound song that leaves many in the audience reaching for a hanky. Elphaba and Glinda, after an early start of high school cliquish conflict, a superficial friendship and even boy troubles, come to see each other in a true way, with real respect and affection. "*Who can say if I've been changed for the better/because I knew you, I have been changed for Good.*"

What makes this musical notable is not only its blockbuster success in the face of initially mediocre reviews (it later racked up several Tony awards), but that it has drawn its success from a particular audience, 10-18 year-old girls. That it would appeal to females more than males is not surprising – female heroes, relationships, singing and dancing. But the age suggests that the show is tapping into something in this group that is culturally resonant with a young crowd.

Of course, the emphasis on authenticity over Black and White absolutism is a theme that has appeared in a lot of popular work for a long time. Being “True to Yourself” is an enduring American theme. But can “goodness” be so conflated with authenticity? Or does that trample on the absolutes of Scripture? Can Christians embrace a show like *Wicked*, or do we need to stand resolutely against such confusions?

Some Christians have certainly embraced the call to authenticity. The so-called Emergent Church movement (typified in the writings of Brian McClaren and Donald Miller) has drawn on this theme to be Real, and faced some criticism for doing so. To the extent that this could represent a complete relativizing of morality in favor of a if-it’s-real-it’s-good ethic, then I think all Christians would reject such thinking. But perhaps authenticity has an important place in Christian life that can be under emphasized as well. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is often taken as elevating the standards of moral behavior (“You have heard it said...”), and there is no doubt in terms of his teaching on divorce and retribution, he is doing just that. But in his teaching on oath taking, prayer, giving to the needy and even, I believe, adultery/lust and murder, the point is less about being more morally strict as it is about being morally authentic. When Jesus rebukes the Pharisees (Mark 7, Matt. 15), he points to their hypocrisy and inauthentic faith as the root of their sin. Yet churches everywhere remain plagued by the perception, if not the reality, of their being places where people put up masks of perfection, hide their faults, and pursue outward signs of righteousness without an equal, or even greater emphasis, on authenticity.

Perhaps we can learn something from the Wicked Witch of the West. The greater sin is not in being declared Wicked, but in accepting appearances of Goodness.