

Ballet Memphis

'The Wizard of Oz': There's No Place Like Home

by **Carmel Morgan**

April 29, 2007 -- Germantown Performing Arts Center, Memphis, Tennessee

Fresh from a successful run at the Joyce Theater in New York City, Ballet Memphis premiered "The Wizard of Oz" on April 29, 2007, at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre in Memphis, Tennessee. Young Scottish choreographer and company member Steven McMahon brought to life an entertaining adaptation of this popular American tale.

Based on the movie version of the L. Frank Baum story, "The Wizard of Oz" begins with three farm men at work, plus Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. The star of the production, the broadly smiling Dorothy (Virginia Pilgrim), comes springing onto the stage later.

She is dressed in a predictable blue and white checked pinafore and hair ribbons, toting a basket.

A sense of foreboding overtakes Dorothy's happy farm life when Miss Gulch appears, gesticulating angrily. The sky soon darkens and the legendary tornado bears down upon the farm. A whirling wind revolves on the scrim as the simple wheeled set spins around.

When Dorothy awakens to the aftermath of this disaster, she sees a spiraling yellow road before her. She also discovers a pair of feet clad in red shoes sticking out from beneath the moveable set. Glinda, the good witch (Crystal Brothers), in beautiful pink tulle, gracefully swishes about introducing the Munchkins, a gang of child dancers who skip out from the wings in whimsical multicolored dresses. The Munchkins hide their eyes when the green-skinned Wicked Witch (Dawn Fay) comes into view. Dorothy puts on the dead witch's magical shoes and begins her journey.

Dorothy meets the Scarecrow (Travis Bradley), the Tin Man (Garrett Ammon), and the Lion (Kendall Britt, Jr.) along the yellow brick road. These beloved roles beg to be danced. In a trio of charming solos, the Scarecrow flops, the Tin Man stiffens, and the Lion cries after Dorothy taps him on the nose. There is great humor in these antics.

Before Dorothy and her new friends reach the Emerald City, they encounter the Poppy corps. The Poppies are clothed in moss green, with vibrant gold tulle skirts. Dorothy suddenly becomes sleepy, as does the Lion (who sleeps with his four limbs in the air).

Glinda and the Wicked Witch battle as they direct the dancers. Glinda saves the day by summoning the all-male Snow corps to the stage. Silver confetti falls from above, awakening the sleepers.

Act II begins with the arrival of Dorothy and her friends at the Emerald City. The group is turned back, however, and they next encounter menacing winged monkeys. McMahon's choreography captures simian movement brilliantly. The dancing monkeys move in ways so non-human that they are a bit disturbing. Indeed, a child in the audience whispered, "I don't want to watch them any more. They're scary."

The monkeys bring Dorothy to the Wicked Witch, who shows the girl an hourglass and a huge crystal ball into which she stares. A worried Auntie Em reappears on stage. Dorothy, enraged by the witch's taunting of the Scarecrow, tosses a bucket of water onto her, and the Wicked Witch dissolves into nothingness beneath a huge black cape.

Rid of their nemesis, Dorothy and her friends once again approach the Emerald City where they finally meet the Wizard. He is able to grant her friends' special requests. What about Dorothy's wish to go home? An image of sparkly red shoes shows up on the scrim. Unfortunately, we do not have the opportunity to see Dorothy actually perform the famous heel clicks prescribed by Glinda. The ballet comes to an end when Dorothy awakens to find that her farm life has returned to normal.

"The Wizard of Oz" has the potential to become a new classic for this innovative ballet company. Virginia Pilgrim is a perfect Dorothy, evoking flashes of the enchanting Judy Garland. The costumes by Bruce Bui were dazzling. Though one yearned for some tweaking of the timing and perhaps the addition of some more challenging choreography, Steven McMahon's first full-length work is something to celebrate.