

PERFORMING ARTS

Stage Right crafts brilliant 'Wizard of Oz' at Crighton

It took a lot of wizardry to produce "The Wizard of Oz."

Stage Right of Texas worked six months to mount this extravaganza at Conroe's Crighton Theatre, and every minute shows.

What an undertaking, and what stunning results!

At age 12, young Cossette Czarnopis steps into the role of Dorothy wearing glittery ruby red slippers, which once seemed to be reserved for the late Judy Garland. Cossette's robust voice takes the audience over the rainbow, to Munchkinland, down the yellow brick road, through a menacing forest, to Oz, and back to Kansas where she began (and her little dog Toto, as well).

Cossette garners plenty of support from her co-stars, Stephen Hill as Cowardly Lion, Katt Gilcrease as Tin Woodsman, and particularly from Scarecrow Josh Clark, who demonstrates expertise he acquired all over Houston. Clark continually amazes when he clicks his heels in the air, with watchers expecting that he, too, might land on the other side of the rainbow.

Voices of the four blend in harmony, as does their dancing. They step in perfect synchronization, arm in arm, with Toto in a wicker basket, or teaming up with about 25 little Munchkins and Munchkinettes.

Choreography is outstanding. Well-earned kudos to award-winning



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choreographer Dinah Mahlman, and assistant Isabella Munson, soon to begin her first year of high school in Livingston, Tex., and whose tap-dance solo wowed the opening night crowd.

Particularly impressive are several ballet numbers; everybody loves the cleverly costumed blackbirds who wrest the cornfield from the scarecrow with finely coordinated caw-caws. Later they delight all (except the scarecrow) in yet another scene. The stage surges with lollipops, soldiers, butterflies, poppies, trees, monkeys, and on and on, all adorably costumed.

Actors generally are warned to beware of scene-stealing kids and animals, but these adult actors hold their own against a stage full of kids and one little heart-tugger, Toto. In reality, the pooch is once-homeless Lizzy and her understudy Cosmo, but nobody upstages anybody. Imagine that, and you get the sense of camaraderie and goodwill that help make this show so nearly perfect.

All children in the audience, regardless of age, fall

in love with good witch Glinda (Elizabeth Garret Curtin). She floats above the conflict, beautifully costumed, with beaming countenance and a spectacular voice. Every child who attends will want a photo with her, and she graciously complies following the closing curtain, as do the other characters.

The Crighton Theatre stage is relatively cramped so far as footage goes. Who would suppose that anybody could ride a bicycle all over it? Carolyn Corsano Wong accomplishes this with enough aplomb to convince a willing crowd that she indeed is Miss Gultch, the mean spirited neighbor wanting to dispense with little dog Toto. Disguised in witch's garb in later scenes, and sporting a greenish complexion, Corsano-Wong becomes a wicked witch and manages to zoom above all, cackling with fiendish delight as would any self-respecting witch.

When Amy Sowers appears as Auntie Em in the first scene, she wears a disheveled wig, apron, and shoes sturdy enough for any farmer's wife. So much is Amy into her character that not until she began to speak did I recognize this longtime friend.

Tina Cafeo, who actually studied with Stella Adler years ago in New York, and was a professional actress, directs with a sure hand — obviously she knows what she's doing and is dauntless. But having musical director Penny An-

dros, a pro who's married to storied dancer Randy Bianchi, ups the competence of any team.

Others in the crew are Denise Debold, scenic designer; Reena Desanto for costumes; Darcy Leach, assistant director; Dennis O'Connor, a set making tech wizard; light designer Roger Ormiston; Jim Walker, and so many more that you must read the playbill to realize how many individuals make this show doable. There's also an impressive list of corporate underwriters, plus the Conroe Commission on Arts and Culture. The high flying artistry comes with a price tag from ZFX Flying, Inc.

With characteristic hos-

pitality, Stage Right set a bountiful table of sandwiches and snacks that included cleverly decorated cookies in shapes such as witches' hats. The goodies in the lobby were complimentary to all who attended the opening night show as they chatted with cast and crew after the final curtain.

This is a children's show that entertains adults, too. However, there's one caveat: Before you take little ones under age seven or so, prepare them for a few stage scenes by discussing that this is a make believe happening without any basis in reality. Thus prepared, even the youngest won't be able to get enough of this fantasy.

This production gives a fresh perspective to the oh-so-familiar "Wizard" of the movies, plus a priceless opportunity to see the wide eyes of little ones who may be experiencing live on stage theatre for the first time.

Reserve at 936-441-7469 or www.stage-right.org weekends through July 28. Tickets at \$20 (less for youngsters and groups) cost little more than popcorn at the movies, and this is one wizard you won't soon forget.

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