SOFTWARE & TECH

Making Of The Wizard Of Oz

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The Emerald City Behind the Curtain: The Remarkable Making of The Wizard of Oz

Few films in cinematic history have captured the collective imagination quite like **The Wizard of Oz**. Since its premiere in 1939, this Technicolor marvel has become a timeless classic, enchanting generations with its tale of Dorothy Gale's journey from monochrome Kansas to the vibrant land of Oz. But the magic that audiences see on screen was the result of an extraordinary, often turbulent, and groundbreaking production. **The making of the Wizard of Oz** is a story of immense creativity, daunting challenges, and sheer perseverance—a behind-the-scenes saga as captivating as the film itself. This article delves deep into the trials, triumphs, and technical wizardry that brought L. Frank Baum's beloved story to life, exploring every facet of the production that remains a benchmark of Hollywood's Golden Age.

From Page to Screen: The Long Road to Oz

L. Frank Baum's 1900 children's novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was an instant success, spawning stage adaptations and even a series of silent films. However, the idea of a full-length, live-action, Technicolor feature was considered a monumental risk. By the mid-1930s, Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had proven that animated fantasy could draw massive audiences, but no one had attempted a live-action fairy tale on such a scale. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), the studio behind the project, saw the potential for a spectacular family film that could rival Disney's success. Yet **the making of the Wizard of Oz** was nearly derailed before it began. The script went through numerous drafts by multiple writers, including Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf. They had to balance Baum's original dark and whimsical tone with the studio's desire for a heartwarming musical. The famous song "Over the Rainbow" was almost cut multiple times because studio executives felt it slowed down the opening. Fortunately, producer Arthur Freed and associate producer Mervyn LeRoy fought to keep it, recognizing its emotional resonance.

Casting the Yellow Brick Road: Finding the Perfect Dorothy and Friends

One of the most fascinating chapters in **the making of the Wizard of Oz** involved the casting. The role of Dorothy Gale was fiercely contested. MGM initially considered child star Shirley Temple, but borrowing her from 20th Century Fox proved too costly. Other actresses like Deanna Durbin and Judy Garland's older sister, Mary Jane Gish, were also considered. In the end, sixteen-year-old Judy Garland was chosen—not because she perfectly matched Baum's description of a small, blonde girl, but because her powerful, soulful voice and relatable vulnerability were deemed perfect for the role. To make her look younger and more "childlike," the studio put her on a strict diet, corseted her, and even made her wear a blonde wig (though her natural hair was auburn). The casting of the three farmhands—who would become the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion—was equally inspired. Ray Bolger originally wanted to play the Tin Man, but fellow dancer Buddy Ebsen was cast instead. Bolger then took the role of the Scarecrow. However, Ebsen was soon replaced due to a severe allergic reaction to the aluminum powder used in the Tin Man makeup. Jack Haley stepped in, and the makeup

formula was changed to a safer aluminum paste. The Cowardly Lion was played by Bert Lahr, and the Wicked Witch of the West was immortalized by Margaret Hamilton, whose green makeup would become iconic—though it was toxic and required careful handling.

The Wicked Problem of Color and Special Effects

The most groundbreaking aspect of **the making of the Wizard of Oz** was its use of Technicolor. At the time, Technicolor was a complex and expensive process that required massive cameras and intense lighting—lights so hot that the set temperatures often exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The film famously switches from sepia-toned Kansas to brilliant color when Dorothy steps into Oz. This transition was achieved through a meticulous and grueling process: the Kansas sequences were shot on a soundstage using sepia-toned film, while the Oz sequences were shot in three-strip Technicolor. To make the transition seamless, the crew had to ensure that Dorothy's house landed perfectly in frame, and the color explosion was enhanced with paint and lighting tricks. The special effects, led by A. Arnold Gillespie and Warren Newcombe, were revolutionary for their time. The tornado sequence—a terrifying spectacle—was created using a 35-foot-long muslin stocking that was twisted and manipulated while dust and debris were blown into it. The flying monkeys were a combination of actors in costumes and wire rigs, with miniature models used for long shots. The Wicked Witch's skywriting, the melting scene (which used a trapdoor and steam), and the magical appearance of the Wizard's head were all achieved through a mix of practical effects, rear projection, and matte paintings. Every shot required painstaking coordination—**the making of the Wizard of Oz** was as much a feat of engineering as it was of artistry.

Behind the Emerald Curtain: The Human Cost

Despite its cheerful appearance, **the making of the Wizard of Oz** was a grueling experience for its cast and crew. Judy Garland, just 16, was subjected to grueling 18-hour days, strict dieting, and constant criticism from studio executives who called her "my little hunchback" and pressured her to lose weight. She was given amphetamines to keep her energy up and sleeping pills to help her rest, setting a pattern of substance abuse that would haunt her for life. The physical challenges were immense. Ray Bolger's Scarecrow costume required heavy padding and makeup that made his face sweat profusely. Jack Haley's Tin Man makeup caused severe eye irritation and skin reactions. Margaret Hamilton's green makeup (based on copper-based pigments) had to be applied with great care, as it was highly toxic—she even suffered a second-degree burn during a scene where her broomstick exploded during a fiery exit. The Cowardly Lion's costume weighed over 60 pounds and was made of real lion fur, requiring Bert Lahr to endure intense heat and limited mobility. The emotional and physical toll on the cast is a sobering reminder that the path to creating a masterpiece is rarely paved with rainbows.

Musical Magic: The Songs That Defined a Generation

No discussion of **the making of the Wizard of Oz** would be complete without acknowledging the incredible music. Composer Harold Arlen and lyricist E.Y. "Yip" Harburg crafted a score that is both timeless and integral to the story. "Over the Rainbow" has become one of the most beloved songs in film history, but its creation was fraught with doubt. Arlen wrote the melody while driving through Hollywood, and Harburg captured the longing for a place "where troubles melt like lemon drops." The song was almost cut after test screenings because it was considered too slow and "too sad" for a children's film. However, it was eventually kept and became an emotional anchor for Dorothy's journey. Other songs like "Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead," "We're Off to See the Wizard," and "If I Only Had a Brain/Heart/Nerve" were seamlessly woven into the narrative, advancing character arcs while providing memorable performances. The music was pre-recorded by the cast, and they lip-synced during filming—a common practice for musicals of the era. The sound mixing and orchestration, overseen by MGM's music department, were done with painstaking precision, ensuring that every note complemented the visual spectacle.

The Making of the Wizard of Oz: A Legacy of Technical Innovation

From a technical standpoint, **the making of the Wizard of Oz** pushed every boundary of 1930s filmmaking. The use of forced perspective, particularly in the scenes where the Witch's castle appears enormous, involved detailed miniature models and careful camera placement. The yellow brick road? It was built in segments, with actual bricks painted yellow, laid over a long stretch of the soundstage, and then replicated with painted canvas for the exterior shots. The poppy field scene, where Dorothy and her friends fall asleep, was achieved by pumping sleeping gas (ethylene) into the room—a dangerous practice that would never be allowed today. The Munchkinland sequences required over 100 little people (dwarf actors) and were shot on a specially constructed miniature set to increase the height difference between them and Dorothy. The "horse of a different color" sequence was created by dying white horses with colored Jell-O powder, a technique that was messy but effective. Every department—from set design to cinematography to costume—worked in concert to create an integrated world of fantasy. Cinematographer Harold Rosson's use of bold colors and dramatic lighting helped establish the visual language of fantasy films for decades to come.

Critical Reception and Rediscovery

Upon its release in August 1939, **The Wizard of Oz** was a moderate box office success but was not the immediate sensation one might expect. It earned $3 million in its initial run—impressive, but not enough to recoup its $2.8 million budget (which would be over $50 million today) until a re-release in 1949. Critics praised its technical achievements and Garland's performance, but some found it too long and uneven. It lost the Best Picture Oscar to *Gone with the Wind*, another 1939 classic. However, annual television broadcasts beginning in 1956 introduced the film to a new generation, cementing its status as a cultural touchstone. Over the decades, **the making of the Wizard of Oz** has been meticulously studied by film historians, who have explored its deeper themes of home, friendship, and self-identity. It has inspired countless parodies, homages, and even academic studies on the "Kansas-Oz" duality.

Conclusion: The Enduring Magic of a Grueling Creation

The story behind **the making of the Wizard of Oz** is one of triumph against overwhelming odds. It is a testament to the power of collaborative artistry, where a gifted cast and crew overcame toxic makeup, punishing schedules, corporate interference, and technical hurdles to produce a film that has inspired wonder for over eight decades. While the on-screen magic is pure joy, the off-screen reality was often painful and demanding. Yet perhaps that is what makes the film so resonant: we see hope, courage, and heart in Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion, and we know that those virtues were required in abundance to bring their story to life. The yellow brick road was long and winding, but the destination—the Emerald City of cinema—was worth every step. Today, when we hear "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," we are reminded not only of a girl's dream but of the real dreamers who built that rainbow from sweat, tears, and incredible ingenuity. That is the true legacy of this landmark film.

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