

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Who are YOU: Scarecrow, Tin Man, or Cowardly Lion?

Eric · Monday, October 29th, 2018

How many times have you watched the movie *Wizard of Oz*? Me? I don't know exactly, but... probably at least eight years in a row, on TV, every year from ages six to fourteen. All in black and white. Not just the beginning of the movie, in Kansas, before the tornado. But the whole thing; naturally, on our black and white TV in New Yawk, the 1950s.



The first time I saw the film in color, I was shocked. I was sure it was some kind of mistake. The Yellow Brick Road was actually yellow? The poppy fields were bright orange? The ruby slippers red? The Emerald City green? In color? Impossible.



By then though, by the time I saw the *Wizard of Oz* the way it was so beautifully filmed and intended to be seen, I was "all grown up". I had already stopped watching the movie every Easter, and I only saw it a few more times as the decades rolled by. Still, those were early, formative years that made indelible impressions on me, and as a result... I've never forgotten it. In fact, I still have black and white publicity photos from the film on my walls in Echo Park today that I bought in Lawrence, Kansas in the 1970s.



I have a pair of red ruby slippers that I bought in an art gallery in Echo Park hanging just above my keyboard. And I make my eleven year old adopted son from Indonesia watch it every year... just about Easter time.

I remember everything about the film... the story, the songs, the art direction, eventually the colors, and especially... the characters: Judy Garland's innocent and wide-eyed Dorothy, Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West, Billie Burke's Glinda the Good Witch, Frank Morgan's spineless Wizard, all the Munchkins, Toto the Dog, and in particular, Dorothy's three magical traveling companions: Ray Bolger's brilliant, rubber-legged Scarecrow in search of a brain, Jack Haley's stoic and creaky Tin Man in search of a heart, and Bert Lahr's stuttering and cowardly Lion in search of some c-c-c-ourage.



I never knew which of the three to identify with. I loved them all. I saw myself in all three. I don't

know about little girls watching the film; maybe they identified with Dorothy. Or the Wicked Witch? But I wouldn't be surprised if they too, identified with one of Dorothy's delinquent and flawed traveling companions. I mean, who wasn't in need of a better brain, a bigger heart, or more c-c-c-ourage.



I think I fell in love with the Scarecrow first. Just the way he moved... Bolger's rubbery legs falling out from under him, too much straw poking out from his neck and ankles, his self-deprecating, goofy, and ever-searching way of talking because he never thought he was smart enough. Sure, *I* was smart, but I'd imitate Bolger for years, having my own legs fall out from under me, as became a comic performer, a modern dancer, a rubber-legged clown myself. Of course, I loved the way Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor tapped their way into our hearts in *Singin' in the Rain*, and I loved anything flawless Fred Astaire ever did on the silver screen, but when it came to character acting and dancing, it was always Ray Bolger's Scarecrow that seared my memory with inspiration and humor. *I was* the Scarecrow. Perhaps... I still am.



The Tin Man? He was too stiff. Not as much fun as the Scarecrow or the Cowardly Lion. But only for... a lack of heart. Every time he cried, he'd lock himself up. He was in perpetual need of his oil can. How was I like him? Well, during those black and white childhood years, I was super *re*-pressed. I never took a dance step, never sang a note. I was too self-conscious. Too afraid of my parents, my grandparents, my sister, my friends... laughing at me. I was locked up inside myself. I was never encouraged to express myself. To know who I was. As a result, I became a volcano waiting to erupt. All through high school and college, I was my own kind of Tin Man. Plastered-down hair until the late 60s, I was a suppressed, parent-pleasing machine, a pre-med, pre-determined wannabe... until I turned on, tuned up in, and... exploded... by becoming an artist, a performer, a producer of my own work, a clown. I didn't cry, so I didn't need an oil can, but seeing Jack Haley trapped inside his tin armor, I knew that I too, needed... out.



The Cowardly Lion? Bert Lahr? Who couldn't identify with him? I loved the way he moved too. Big. Bombastic. Awkward and jumpy. And the way he tawked. "Why'd ya have to go an' hit me? Is my nose bleedin'?" Like a big vaudeville cry baby, via downtown Yiddish New Yawk. One of my all time favorite characters from any movie. "C'mon, get up 'n fight, ya shiverin' junkyard!" "Put ya hands up, ya lop-sided bag o' hay!" Lahr was funny... but vulnerable too. And I think it was the latter... the vulnerability... that most endeared him to me. Along with each of the others. They were *all* vulnerable, had big "holes" in their psyches.... lacking brains, hearts, and c-c-c-ourage.

Or so they thought. And of course, that was the beauty of Frank Baum's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; each of the three "failed", vulnerable characters, *already had* what they claimed they lacked. It just took the defense of their beloved Dorothy to discover it. Ironically, it was, instead, the "great and powerful OZ", the Wizard himself, who was the phony shaman, I mean, salesman.

Sound familiar? A little like our current Wizard, I mean, our current President, the "great and powerful" Trump.



Phony and braggart extraordinaire. You want brains? I mean tax cuts for the middle class? No problem. On their way. Even when Congress isn't even in session. The Honduran caravan heading north to the American border through Mexico? Why of course it's filled with Middle Eastern terrorists threatening good American-born citizens and proudly-claimed, xenophobic "nationalists". Proof? Who needs any? It's all "fake news". The Democratic Party? The State of California? The so-called "free press"? Traitors all! Trying to strip away American health care coverage, tax cuts, 401(k)s, guns, and of course, the charlatan's, I mean, the President's... re-claimed "national greatness". You want more comparisons of Donald Trump to the fake and impotent Wizard of Oz? Not necessary, I know, for the readers of "Cultural Weekly". I'm sure you get my point.



But I guess that's why Hollywood super hero movies... Facebook, Twitter, iPhones, video games, and all the rest of our escapist modern technology – are so popular. Sadly even so... necessary. It's a hard, grim, *real* world out there, amigos. Hard to stomach. Hard to accept. Full of conflict, hatred, and contempt for "the other". And this seems profoundly true, even more sadly, on both sides of the aisle... all over the world.

Far better, far preferable, to watch the *Wizard of Oz*... in all its glorious Technicolor, escapist fantasy... for the ninth, tenth, or maybe even... for the 100th time.

Far easier to identify with the brilliant Scarecrow, the compassionate Tin Man, or the heroic Lion, than to figure out the fake news, the real news, or the painful reality of modern-day political life.

We all better get out there to vote November 6th. The midterm elections DO MATTER! But who do we vote for? Which candidates? Which propositions? It's simple. It's confusing. It's hopeless. It's necessary!

I vote for the Scarecrow with a new Brain. No, make that the Tin Man with a new heart. No, wait. Definitely make that the no-longer Cowardly Lion, with his new-found, hard-earned... c-c-c-c-ourage.

Who do you vote for?

I mean, which one are you?



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