

Published in *Big Hollywood*, September 29, 2009

The Wizard of Oz: Seventy Years Later— Still Inspiring, Still Relevant

By Mary Claire Kendall

“That’s the best song ever written,” Judy Garland said of “Over the Rainbow” in an interview with Barbara Walters on March 6, 1967, almost three decades after she captured countless hearts as “Dorothy” in “The Wizard of Oz,” featuring that magical song.



So, too, “The Wizard of Oz”—released 70 years ago today—is, perhaps, the best film ever made.

Or, at least, the most quintessentially American—in terms of our struggles, hopes, aspirations, dreams, and, ultimately, unshakable confidence, that “somewhere over the rainbow... dreams... really do come true.”

<http://www.reelclassics.com/Musicals/Wizoz/rainbow-lyrics.htm>

MGM had purchased this highly popular and imaginative children’s book written by L. Frank Baum, and published in 1900, for \$75,000, specifically for Judy. During development, the silver shoes became ruby, thus undercutting Baum’s apparent allegory to “bimetallism”—currency backed by silver, replacing “the gold standard” and favoring rural farmers; in contrast to the worthless “greenbacks” some say Emerald City represents.

We all know the story.

Dorothy, an orphan, living with her aunt and uncle on their Kansas farm, is always getting into trouble, especially with cantankerous Miss Elmira Gulch, who is trying to destroy her dog, Toto. So, Auntie Em counsels Dorothy to “find a place where you won’t get into any trouble,” which Dorothy envisions in “Over the Rainbow.”

Running away, she encounters Professor Marvel, who perceives Auntie Em’s broken heart in his crystal ball, sending Dorothy scurrying back home but not in time to secure underground shelter safe from the coming

tornado, now sealed shut. Barely making it inside the farmhouse, her bedroom window immediately blows loose, knocking out Dorothy and transporting her to the strange and enchanting Land of Oz—“over the rainbow”—where she meets memorable friends and foes, starting with beautiful Glinda, “Good Witch of the North,” whom the Munchkins have called after Dorothy’s house crushed their nemesis.

The Munchkins, she said, “are happy because you have freed them from the Wicked Witch of the East.” But, Glinda informs Dorothy she has made a “bad enemy” because the “Wicked Witch of the West,” who has no power over Glinda, wants revenge for the death of her sister.

After Glinda reminds the Wicked Witch of the West about her sister’s shoes, she immediately tries to seize them; whereupon they disappear, the dead witch’s feet curling up—and Dorothy suddenly finds herself wearing the prized sparkling ruby slippers.

Glinda counsels Dorothy, “Keep tight inside of them. Their magic must be very powerful. Or she wouldn’t want them so badly.”

She also counsels her to seek out the “the great and wonderful Wizard of Oz” for help returning to Kansas, noting he’s “very good and very mysterious” and lives in Emerald City. To get there, she counsels Dorothy to “start at the beginning” and “just follow the Yellow Brick Road.”



“And, remember,” Glinda says, “never let those ruby slippers off your feet for a moment, or you will be at the mercy of the Wicked Witch of the West.”

So begins her memorable journey down the Yellow Brick Road.

Dorothy soon meets her three traveling companions—the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion—during which they battle all manner of evil forces. Finally meeting the Wizard, he says he will help *only if* they bring him the Wicked Witch of the West’s broom. Incredibly they manage this feat only to discover the Wizard’s powers are limited to wise counsel about the power that resides within oneself—a power that Dorothy channels, at Glinda’s direction, by clicking her ruby shoes three times and repeating “There’s no place like home.”

Of course, “The Wizard of Oz” is more than a fairy tale. For, Baum and his illustrator, WW Denslow—both active in politics in the 1890s—utilized the same long-standing images editorial cartoonists used to portray American politicians. Their work, scholars argue, is a metaphor for political, economic, and social currents of the day, especially bitter management/labor clashes; the hardships of rural life; the debate over the currency standard at the heart of populism; and, the prevailing “power of positive thinking”—Dorothy’s ticket home.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_interpretations_of_The_Wonderful_Wizard_of_Oz

The Tornado of 1939; the Coming Tornado of 2009

Yet, apart from its original allegorical intent, far more fascinating is the meaning “The Wizard of Oz” acquires in the context of world events the year of its release, when Hitler’s stated desire for “annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe” played out.

Parallels that continue, eerily so, in 2009—down to the Empire State Building being lit green during Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit, as part of a “Wizard of Oz” 70th Anniversary celebration.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125357744824229499.html>



Reuters

At the time, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was pursuing a policy of appeasement based on his belief that the Allies had badly treated Germany after its defeat in World War I. This only fueled Hitler's aggression—leading to Germany's occupation of Austria on March 13, 1938, and union with Germany (the Anschluss), explicitly forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles.

Several Members of Parliament including Anthony Eden, who had resigned as Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary, and Winston Churchill, now called on Chamberlain to take action against Hitler and his Nazi government.

Next, Hitler demanded the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia for Germany, a crisis heads of Germany, Britain, France and Italy "solved" while meeting in Munich, exactly a year before the "Wizard of Oz's release," on September 29, 1938, leading to the "Munich Agreement," which transferred to Germany this fortified frontier region that contained a large German-speaking population. Czechoslovakia's head of state, protesting this decision, was told Britain would be unwilling to go to war over the issue of the Sudetenland.

Churchill and Eden likewise attacked the otherwise popular agreement asserting the British government behaved dishonorably and had lost the support of Czech Army, one of Europe's best.

It was only in March, 1939, when the German Army seized the rest of Czechoslovakia, breaking the Munich Agreement, that British Prime Minister Chamberlain finally realized Hitler could not be trusted.

Sound familiar?

On September 1, 1939, the month "The Wizard of Oz" was released, Hitler invaded Poland with over 2 million troops from Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Slovakia (a small contingent)—marking the beginning of World War II.

The "Polish September Campaign" began one week after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Germany-Soviet agreement pledging non-aggression if either was attacked by a third party), and ended October 6, 1939, with Germany and the Soviet Union dividing and annexing the whole of Poland.

Poland, 10% of which was Jewish, subsequently became the Nazi's dumping ground for European Jews whom Hitler isolated in urban ghettos, the largest being the Warsaw Ghetto—where 300,000-400,000 people were densely packed, many of whom died due to rampant disease and starvation under the Nazi SS; many dying at Treblinka extermination camp—254,000-300,000 alone during a two months-long operation in 1942; tens of thousands more dying during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, protesting deportations to Treblinka—the largest single revolt by the Jews during the Holocaust.

By the end of the World War II about three million Polish Jews had died; only 50,000-70,000 survived.

Now, seventy years after the release of "The Wizard of Oz," a parallel global situation is playing out where dishonest, or perhaps hopelessly deluded, Islamic extremist leaders are singling out the Jewish people, seeking, for now, to exterminate their memory by denying the Holocaust, most notably in the case of the Iranian President; or asserting, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Jews have no history in the city of Jerusalem: They have never lived there, the Temple never existed, and Israeli archaeologists have admitted as

much. Those who deny this are simply liars. Or so says Sheik Tayseer Rajab Tamimi, chief Islamic judge of the Palestinian Authority.”



Associated Press

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vigorously protested the United Nation’s giving a forum to the Iranian Holocaust-denying President, saying it was “a disgrace of the U.N. charter.” (The Iranian delegation did not bother to attend the Israeli leader’s speech presenting the historical record.)

Mr. Netanyahu held up copies of minutes of the meeting of Nazi officials in 1942 planning the extermination of the Jews at Treblinka, as well as construction plans for Nazi concentration camps—documents he obtained on a recent visit to Berlin, including to a villa, called Wannsee, where the extermination plans were drawn up.



Villa in Wannsee where “Final Solution” conference was held on January 20, 1942

“Are these protocols lies?” he said, holding them up. “Are the successive German governments that have kept these documents for posterity all liars?”

Mr. Ahmadinejad had told a rally in Tehran, the week prior, that, “After the Second World War, [Jews] created the story of Holocaust... and then they made hundreds of films and wrote hundreds of books to argue they have suffered and need a home.... This is a myth, and Zionists are criminals.”

Mr. Netanyahu, while praising those who had walked out or had stayed away, castigated delegates who had remained in the General Assembly Hall to listen to Mr. Ahmadinejad, saying “... to those who gave this Holocaust denier a hearing, I say on behalf of my people, the Jewish people, and decent people everywhere: Have you no shame? Have you no decency?”

“Yesterday the president of Iran stood at this very podium and spewed his anti-Semitic rants,” he said. “Just a few days earlier he claimed that the Holocaust was a lie. Perhaps some of you think this man and his odious regime only threaten the Jews. Well, if you think that, you are wrong, dead wrong. What starts as attacks on Jews always ends up engulfing others. ... This regime embodies the extremes of Islamic fundamentalism.”

Drawing exact parallels to World War II’s carnage, Mr. Netanyahu said the “assault on truth” threatens a repeat of this bloody war and cited Winston Churchill’s warnings about metastasizing threats in the war’s run-up. “The question facing the international community,” he said, “is whether it is prepared to confront these forces or just accommodate them.”

Indeed, will the world community have the confidence to reach within itself, like Dorothy, to confront the evil that threatens its arrival in a place where “dreams... really do come true”—where the peoples of the Middle East finally learn to live in peace by embracing and respecting each other’s differences.

9/28/09

1699 words