

Theater Review: Ease on Down to Kokandy's Sensational 'The Wiz'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 15, 2017 - 6:31am

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CHICAGO – When stage theater can cause outbreaks of elation, celebration and joy, then it must be due to Kokandy Productions' revival of "The Wiz." The urban reinterpretation of "The Wizard of Oz" story – told through tuneful euphoria and jubilant dance – is ecstatically produced, in every morsel of its stagecraft. The show is at the Theater Wit in Chicago on Thursdays through Sundays until April 16th, 2017. [Click here](#) [20] for more details, including ticket information.



Play Rating: **5.0/5.0**

The cast delivers the familiar story by ramping up the comic elements, and giving the characters more high-level personalities. The four main travelers – Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion – have great chemistry, and singing voices to match that chemistry. The chorus/dancers also take on other roles throughout the high energy musical, and entertains at various times with tight and impressive choreography stylings. From the costuming to the orchestration to the use-of-stage, "The Wiz" is a glorious way to just feel good.



Sydney Charles, Gilbert Domally, Chuckie Benson and Steven Perkins Ease on Down in 'The Wiz'

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for Kokandy Productions

"The Wizard of Oz" story is practically in everyone's DNA at birth, but "The Wiz" transplants it into the concrete lawns of the urban jungle – the "Kansas" Projects of the Chicago Housing Authority. Auntie Em (Nicole Michelle Haskins) is selling tee-shirts near the basketball courts, as a summer storm is brewing. Her niece Dorothy (Sydney Charles) is caught in the maelstrom, and is whisked to the Land of Oz, similar to Chicago but somewhat more magical. Dorothy's landing has killed one of Oz's Wicked Witches, and she immediately dons the witch's silver Chuck Taylors. The good witch Addaperle (Angela Alise) gives her two instructions – don't take off her shoes until she gets home, and that she can make that homeward request to The Wiz (Frederick Harris) in Emerald City. Dorothy then eases up the yellow striped road and along the way meets the Scarecrow (Gilbert Domally), Tin Man (Steven Perkins) and Lion (Chuckie Benson).

The rest of the story pretty much follows L. Frank Baum's original source story book (ironically written in Chicago in 1901) and the famous film version, but puts a spin of setting and music that is decidedly more African-American centric. It's hipper, and in a way sweeter, because Dorothy does realize that home is love even if it's a housing project. Sydney Charles as Dorothy is truly kicking it, with a singing voice and stage presence that adds a depth to the character that is perfectly realized. She is almost a ringmaster to a circus, as the stories and characters swirl around her.

The other three travelers also create characters that really play off the action in the story. Gilbert Domally as Scarecrow is a somewhat dim (he's searching a brain, after all) and sincere protector for Dorothy. Steven Perkins as Tin Man fancies himself a stud, but mournfully is without a heart. And Chuckie Benson as the Lion is a subtle scene stealer, milking all the comedy out of cowardice. Frederick Harris as The Wiz is also amazing, portraying him as a fraudulent drag queen of sorts, destined to finally tell the truth to the traveler from "Kansas."



The Wiz (Frederick Harris) Meets the Fellow Travelers in 'The Wiz'

Photo credit: Michael Brosilow for Kokandy Productions

The creative team in the production – director Lili-Anne Brown, music director Jimmy Morehead and choreographer Breon Arzell – bring the show to a life that practically sparkles. The dancing in particular is as entertaining as the songs – anchored by a show-stopping rendition of the familiar "Brand New Day." Arzell mixes the styles of dance so distinctly...the "Ease on Down the Road" number, for example, uses the traditional movement of "The Stroll." Morehead also adds fantastic orchestration to the other songs in "The Wiz," especially the poignant ballad "Believe in Yourself." And director Lili-Anne Brown used the parameters of her simple staging to create a magical effect.

The show originally opened in 1975 on Broadway, and led the way to other all-African-American musicals like "Bubbling Brown Sugar" and "Dreamgirls." The full original title of the show was "The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical 'Wonderful Wizard of Oz'" And that is exactly what Kokandy Productions gave the revival...Super Soul.

Kokandy Productions' "The Wiz" takes place every Thursday through Sunday until April 23rd, 2017, at various times, staged at the Theater Wit, 1229 West Belmont in Chicago. Featuring Sydney Charles, Gilbert Domally, Steven Perkins, Chuckie Benson, Nichole Michelle Haskings, Anna Dauzvardis, Frederick Harris and Angela Alise. Music direction by Jimmy Morehead. Choreography by Breon Arzell. Directed by Lili-Anne Brown. For more information about Kokandy Productions, [click here](#). [21]



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