The Other Side of the Rainbow

rain·bow (ˈrānˌbō/) noun

1. An arch of colors formed in the sky in certain circumstances, caused by the refraction and dispersion of the sun's light by rain or other water droplets in the atmosphere.

As children, we are all given the special ability to be amazed by the many things that the world presents us. It could be the shape of the clouds that day, the dandelions said to hold magical powers of granting wishes, or many of the fairy tales we are told. This ability is the power of believing in things. As we grow older, life tends to chip away at our innocence and it becomes harder to believe. However, deep inside, the affection for these almost “too real to be true” things remains; which is why we catch ourselves day dreaming, wishing and wanting to be amazed. It might be something as juvenile as the spirit of Christmas, delving into the world of a book, or simply spotting a rainbow after a storm.

For me, theater is the closest thing we have to magic. It can take you from your own every day life and transport you to an entirely different world by simply turning down the lights and opening a curtain. However, since it unfortunately is not magic, and I am studying at Montclair State University, not Hogwarts, these magical moments need just a little bit of “prepping” in order to be pulled off correctly. That being said, The Builders Association decided to talk about just that, the “behind the scenes magic”, that went into one of the most well-known escapist American movies our nation knows and loves, the classic Wizard of Oz, with their new show “Elements of Oz”.

As a senior in the Theater & Dance Department, my dream is to one day (hopefully soon after graduating) work with a professional theater company. Once I was given the opportunity to observe and help out a company such as this, I could not help but jump at the chance, and of course, I could not help but be extremely intimidated in the beginning. As
much as the show touches on all of the terrible events that happened on set while filming the original Wizard of Oz, it was quite the opposite “on set” while working on the show itself. Never had I ever met such a welcoming, warm, kind, brilliant and enterprising group of people as “The Builders.” As much as this show focused upon the “behind the scene” life of the film, there were many of our own scenes that were behind the show being presented. The show itself has as much of a life of its own as we as people do, continually changing and growing. Even after the show opened and had an audience in front of it, it continued to change from day to day.

For example, if you came opening night, you might have missed out at the seemingly-impromptu dance scene as the Tin Man was introduced that was added the next day. If you went the first weekend, you might have heard the classic “Over the Rainbow” instead of the new arrangement done the second weekend. Before we opened, there were so many character switches it was hard to keep track. At one point or another, one of the three actors played every single character in the show. It was not merely a matter of who was better for what part (because let’s face it, these ingenious actors are all good enough to play just about any role) but more of finding the right fit to tell the story the way they wanted it to be told.

For example, there was one instance a few days before opening night, where Moe Angelos was not only dressed in the Lion costume, but she was also doing the lion’s voice during the Rushdie interview. A few times later, that scene was also cut and clipped at parts in order to make it more concise and alluring to the audience. Aside from the actual script of the show, there was a lot of work being done on the actual way the show ran and looked to the audience. When working on the “Oz” head, it was decided that the layers over Sean’s face needed to be more terrifying. Another case was the use of the smoke machine. For
example, originally the smoke machine was being used for the Oz Head scene; however, with the thought that it made it feel like a High School Play, (and filled the entire back stage with faux-smoke) it was removed. Luckily, they did find a way to use it in another scene though, the Ayn Rand scene. After a while, they finally got it down perfectly so that they would blow the smoke into a garbage bag off stage, and release it right on time while filming in front of the camera (which you may have seen if you came to the show).

Another big change that was made during “tech week” was the actual run of the show. The first few times we ran through it, it actually was working too smoothly, which as many of us in theater know is astounding; because typically, tech week, also known as Hell Week, did not get its name because things often run too smoothly. However, since the “feel” of the show was to be very life-like, things simply could not run perfectly, because perfect is not always interesting. So, instead of running through the show as if it were a perfected, robotic show, we all were simply going through it as we normally would for any other day of rehearsal. I thought this part was crucial, because it was supposed to reflect the reality of everyday life, as opposed to the movie, which is based on escaping that reality and going somewhere more exciting and vibrant.

Interestingly enough, in the otherwise mainly positive New York Times review of it, the writer states, “It begins to feel a bit too much like a draggy day on the back lot, and you might find yourself tempted to escape the app and fire up the real movie on your phone…”. Now -- to me, that was ironically one of the big themes of the show: The constant use of electronics, especially cell phones today, to escape our reality of everyday life. Almost everything that we come into contact with on our phones is edited in some way to make things seem “better”. Edit your pictures so they look great for Instagram. Edit your status
update so you get the perfect way to get your point across. Edit your Snap Chat so people only see the best or most entertaining part of your day in second’s clips.

We edit so much of our own lives without even thinking twice about it from day to day, we often forget to appreciate the realness of the life we are actually living, on the other side of these technicolored screens.

-- Kelsey Mulholland

**Elements of Oz**

When I began my journey into Oz with The Builders Association I was very intimidated. Here was this amazing company from New York City-- and me. But I quickly felt right at home, as the people who make up this incredible troupe had kindness to match their insurmountable talent. The stage manager, Emma Sherr-Ziarko, took me under her wing, and I performed whatever tasks needed to be completed -- whether it was spiking the stage, preparing the scripts, filling in for missing cast/crew members, or sewing costumes, whatever could be done to make their lives easier. Surprisingly, there was only one trip for coffee, which inevitably every intern must face.

I was there for the very first read-through of the script, and was able to see day-by-day how it would change, shift, and grow. Elements of Oz is not a show that exists solely on the page; in order to get at its soul it had to be seen on stage with all of its various elements -- the video, music, lighting, and augmented reality. It was carefully decided what exact moments music and AR were to be implemented, so they would not be too much or too little. Lighting was articulated to help the audience understand the world; the lighting grid was visible and mostly provided bright “colorless” light to show that we are present on a sound stage, and a red recording light was added to the screen during the filming process. In
order to prevent the audience from feeling like there was too much repetition by seeing the film shots on the screen during the actual filming, a second camera was added as an attachment to the screen during tech that showed the “backstage” action, the view from the other side of the filmmakers and crew rather than the actors. Colorful and fanciful lighting and projections were incorporated in the three interview scenes to set them apart from everything else.

There were several changes throughout the show, in terms of script, which actor was playing what characters, costuming, or design. When the script was originally presented, Moe Angelos, (who in addition to being one of the three actors was also a co-writer) was two separate characters, a Wizard of Oz fanatic (insider info: she was referred to as “Abby”), who was the one feeding the audience facts about the film; and a “performer”, where all of the filming that was occurring was inside of her mind and she was putting herself in the action. To solidify this narrative they tried to structure it so Moe would appear only as Dorothy in the final scenes of the movie, showing that her dreams were coming true and she could finally be the star. They tried to shift around who else could be Dorothy instead of Moe in the other scenes, but on the last day of tech it was concluded that, instead, Moe was not two separate entities, but rather, a “fanatic” who was making her dreams a reality by putting on this production and taking everyone along for the ride, creating a very “meta” type of experience.

The scenes I saw having the most changes to them structurally were the three interview scenes. Originally, the Ayn Rand and Mike Wallace scene was a realistic interview, but they wanted to make it less naturalistic and tie in with the fantasy of the rest of the piece, so Moe was added off to the side filming her Glinda lines and Sean Donovan conducted the interview as Mike Wallace while still dressed as Dorothy. Hannah Heller as Ayn Rand integrated her other character of the Wicked Witch into some of her line readings, and in the screen her face was manipulated to resemble the Witch, drawing comparisons between the two figures and their different worlds.

The Judy Garland scene went through several variations; it started off with Sean as Judy and Moe as the voice, alternating between obsessive fan and an interviewer. Then Moe and Hannah split the
“voice” lines, with Moe tackling the fan-girl bits and Hannah being the interviewer. This set up was tested on stage with Sean entering as Dorothy and removing his costume to become Judy and lying in bed before reverting back. As the scene continued to be looked at, it changed to Hannah who played Judy, Moe taking back all of the other lines, but becoming a bit more mysterious as her inner voice. She was then featured upstage at a table with headphones, as if she was listening to Judy speak on a reel-to-reel, but this then shifted so Moe would be off stage, as an ominous mysterious voice. Hannah as Judy was then also to enter the filming action as the Wicked Witch of the East's feet with the ruby slippers.

Finally, the Salmon Rushdie scene similarly went through shifts in actors and “characters”. It began with Moe dressed in the Lion costume as Rushdie, while a recording of his voice played, and the stage manager posed as the interviewer and asked the questions. Then Moe became the interviewer (still as Lion) and Sean filled in as Rushdie, originally still with the voice over and then with him really speaking the lines. A lot was tested with which sides of the desk each should be on and what should be projected on the globe stage left -- a globe, space, the Moon landing? -- they wanted something a little otherworldly and trippy. Even still there were more changes, as lines were added in, and taken away from Moe trying to impersonate the Cowardly Lion to simply being an interviewer in the Lion costume (showing that Rushdie is having this conversation with a fictional character), to Rushdie’s half bald cap with gray hair wig being scrapped for Sean simply gelling his hair.

The most tragic change along the way for the crew was the loss of Slothie, a stuffed animal sloth that was originally Toto, which the stage manager put as “a very Builders thing to do… we just had a sloth so we used it.” I found this so intriguing and charming, Slothie representing that things didn’t need to be exactly perfect, just get the point across and be in good/fun spirit. However, a stuffed animal of a Cairn Terrier was purchased as a “test,” and Slothie was ultimately replaced, in order to be more clear to the audience and not add something else for them to be confused about. He stayed with us in spirit though, and was always watching the show from various points on the stage.
It was back and forth for a little while if I was going to be involved during the performances, as the company has hopes to bring the production on tour, and it would be difficult to lose an integral piece. However, I was eventually incorporated into the show as a dresser, helping the actors with their costume changes and making sure wardrobe was ready to go.

Being a production assistant, I also had access to the production notes sessions. One of my favorite moments I got to listen to was during one of the last notes before the show opened. Director Marianne Weems stated, “[The audience] need[s] to know not to take this seriously. Because we’re not taking this seriously,” which I thought spoke to the entire spirit of the company that I had witnessed in the previous weeks. They were extremely professional, talented, and precise in the work they were doing, but at the end of the day they set out to create a fun piece (they said this was their goal since their previous few shows were on the more dramatic side) and were clearly doing what they loved and having a good time.

Marianne continued on to say that she wanted the crew to be on stage and a part of the action as much as possible: “If you’re doing nothing, do it [actively] on stage.” This allowed everyone involved in the show to be involved in the action constantly, no matter if they were directly involved; this elicited genuine moments during the show, like the film crew laughing together, me as dresser rushing to fix a hat or close a button, chatting about a messed up line, or all of us convening at the craft services table upstage to enjoy some coffee and M&Ms. This infused a new energy into everything, allowing us all to exist in the same place rather than in two separate worlds.

During the run, I encountered something I never had in all my years of performing, something that comes with the territory of working on a new piece: After we opened, we still were rehearsing, and making changes before the performance. Every day there was something being altered, as the team took audience reactions into consideration and shortened some scenes while adding others. This included trimming down the Tin Man scene, having only Sean play him rather than Hannah switching into it, and cutting the Scarecrow scene down so much it only consisted of two lines exchanged between him and
Dorothy. Originally upstage in between the video center and music station was “Moe’s Zone”, what was meant to be the fan’s basement where she housed all of her *Wizard of Oz* paraphernalia. During the second weekend this was transformed into a crafts services area for the cast and crew to enjoy snacks and drinks and interact with one another. The memorabilia was relocated to the green room where offstage we all worked together to create the puzzles of Dorothy and her pals.

The most significant change was “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”. During the first two performances, Sean sang his heart out on film, while the audience watched YouTube singers on their phones, and then it was played back. However, the second weekend we could no longer use the song, and the search for a public domain substitute was on. “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” was decided on as the alternative, and the scene was restructured so that during filming Sean would be lip-syncing to the song, and during playback came out with a stand up microphone and headphones to “record” it as he then sang it live for the audience. It was disheartening to lose such an iconic piece of the film, but the Builders quickly adapted and were able to create something just as beautiful.

My favorite change came after the first weekend, when a "disco dance party" was added as the Tin Man made his entrance. This brief moment injected a lot of fun and hilarity, and let the cast and crew really let loose for a moment. During the final performance, all of the crewmembers joined the actors in front of the camera during the dance party as glitter was thrown down on us and we all celebrating our last day together. It was a priceless moment I won’t forget, being surrounded by wonderful artists as we poured our hearts out on the stage and got to share it with the audiences.

My time with the Builders Association on *The Elements of Oz* was truly something I’ll never forget. From seeing how an original piece shifts in every way, shape, and form, at all stages throughout the process, to working with a group of theatre artists who have opened my mind to what is possible with their talent and ingenuity, my month with them was nothing short of wonderful.

-- April Sigler