

*Emerald City* (NBC, 2016-17)

Oz has been re-imagined onscreen many times, the latest production being Matthew Arnold and Josh Friedman's television series for NBC, entitled *Emerald City*. 1939's classic MGM film *The Wizard of Oz* was, of course, a reimagining not only of the books written by L. Frank Baum at the turn of the twentieth century, but also the silent movies he produced about the Land of Oz. With its angry orchard, green-skinned Wicked Witch of the West, her medieval castle and haunted forest teeming with flying monkeys, Victor Fleming's film presented family-friendly gothic elements that ensured audiences would experience Oz as a realm containing danger and frightful inhabitants, but that these could ultimately be overthrown or even become allies. Later rehashings play upon and sometimes enhance these aspects. *The Wiz* (1978) traded the story's pastoral settings for an urban African-American context, transforming the New York City subway and a sweatshop housed in a sewer into regions of peril. Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (1996) and its sequels, both in fiction and on stage, invert the Witch's evil in order to humanise her. Before Maguire, Walter Murch tried to incorporate elements found in the Oz of Baum's books, but omitted in the first film, with *Return to Oz* (1985), a truly scary movie that 1980s children championed in VHS rentals after a rather poor box office showing. Murch's film opens with Dorothy facing electroconvulsive 'shock' therapy in Kansas for telling unbelievable tales of her adventures in Oz, before being transported back there. The film pits her against the truly uncanny Wheelers, Mombi, and the Nome King, all of which are familiar to devotees of Baum's fourteen-book series (1900-19). Also worth mentioning are *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *YellowBrickRoad* (2010), the latter being a low-budget horror film that, while not transporting viewers to Oz, nevertheless riffs off of Baum's creation in largely superficial ways. *Blair Witch* offers a subtler invocation of Oz, less foundational to its story, when the campers discuss which direction to go based on which witch was more evil, the one of the West or the one of the East. As such, *Emerald City* is not the only production in recent memory attempting to repackage Oz in disturbing ways.

This year, NBC broadcast the latest journey back to Oz and, ten episodes later, cancelled it. As such, this review is a post-mortem for *Emerald City*, a series daringly inconsequential in its efforts to update Oz for the twenty-first century; despite its attempt to add meaningfully to the Oz mythos, its failure to connect with viewers means that it is likely to be remembered by few. Trailers teased viewers with a vision of Oz even darker than Murch's — though, as I've been suggesting, fans of the land somewhere over the rainbow

understand that Oz never was safe. As such, director Tarsem Singh's *Emerald City* goes about tarting up Oz with gothic tropes that come off as ham-fisted and, worse, insincere. In our era of nostalgia-driven television shows like *Stranger Things* (2016-present) and the new *Twin Peaks* (2017), *Emerald City* presents an Oz emulating Westeros of *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), muddled up with interludes that evoke *American Horror Story* (2011-present), and costumery reminiscent of that worn by Queen Amidala of the *Star Wars* universe. These costumes, particularly those of Lady Ev (Stefanie Martini), can be quite impressive but, as in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), they cannot be asked to carry the story.

None of this, it should be said, is the fault of the actors. There is a genuine tug of sincerity felt from the cast in the timbre and veracity of their performances, a sense of them giving this show their all. Vincent D'Onofrio's Wizard Frank — named, naturally, after Oz's creator — is thoroughly Trumpian in his aim to defeat magic with guns, guns, guns and his insistence in the third episode that '[a]ll that matters is who you wish to be and how hard you're willing to fight for it'. Unlike President Trump, however, the Wizard errs on the side of science, positioning it against magic throughout the series, presenting the binary upon which the stage is set for a great war coming to Oz. This division, left at the level of 'us-vs-them', is more thoughtfully explored in Maguire's novel; in *Emerald City*, the *Game of Thrones* adage 'winter is coming' is shabbily echoed, via warnings that a vaguely evoked but widely feared foe called 'the Beast' will soon return.

Representing the magic faction are Oz's cardinal witches. After Dorothy (Adria Arjona) disposes of the Mistress of the Eastern Wood (Florence Kasumba) by tricking her into shooting herself in the face with a pistol, Dorothy attains all of the powers of a witch by inheriting the Mistress's ruby gauntlets. These fade from visibility and reappear when Dorothy needs to do something big, like blast a pack of wolves with a shockwave. The other witches, familiar from the books and films, play crucial roles, too, with Glinda (Joely Richardson) displaying a fierce propensity for undermining others, and Mistress West (Ana Ularu) repackaged as a brothel keeper addicted to milk of the poppy, sallying forth while displaying the vulnerability of addiction and dispensing her own brand of justice. Diversity is one thing that plays into this group dynamic — something that actually does make this imagining of Oz interesting. The Witch of the East (Kasumba) is played by a Ugandan-German; the Witch of the North (Richardson) (in the books Glinda is in fact Witch of the South — the decision to change her associated cardinal direction is puzzling here) by an Englishwoman; the Witch of the West (Ularu) by a Romanian; and Dorothy is both explicitly

Hispanic and played by a Hispanic actress. With Baum's disgraceful editorial championing of the genocide of the Sioux, such diversity in the casting of those who rule Oz confirms, for me anyway, Oz's ability to encompass more than its creator could imagine.<sup>1</sup>

But where are the creatures? One of the most charming things about Oz is its intermingling of human characters with non-human characters whose existence relies solely on the logic of magic. *Emerald City* falls flat when it comes to the *things* that are, the books and films testify, living within Oz's borders. Yes, we are teased with a guard wearing a menacing lion-skin helmet, another soldier who is reconstructed in tin, and yet another soldier who is found crucified like a scarecrow — but, as mere men, they are clearly not a lion, a tin man, or a scarecrow. The horrific elements of each character's condition seem overplayed for shock value instead of ensuring that the story maintains integrity. In this way, the repackaging of each character distracts, becoming the only measure by which they are made to matter. The familiar cowardice attributed to Eamonn the lion-guard (Mido Hamada) emerges in his willingness to follow orders to kill a royal family; Jack (Gerran Howell), being rebuilt with tin, is figuratively associated with the pain and plight of Frankenstein's monster; Lucas/Roan (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), whose 'if-I-only-had-a-brain' problem manifests in amnesia, is paralleled, through his crucifixion, with Christ. These associations add layers of potential meaning and interest that, unfortunately, go unaddressed and remain confusing. *YellowBrickRoad* heads in this direction, too, when a murder victim (Cassidy Freeman) is posed on a pole in explicit imitation of the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) in Fleming's film. Intended to throw off the other characters' bearings, her arms have been crossed by her killer, with fingers pointing either way, the same as the Scarecrow's are when meeting Dorothy. *YellowBrickRoad* presents a gruesome reference to the earlier film, while *Emerald City* draws an intertextual line between Oz's Scarecrow and Christ. If anything, Lucas/Roan being barbed-wired to a cross potentially sheds light on the figure of the Scarecrow who readers and viewers already love: why has it not been more obvious to us in the past that Dorothy, in each version of Oz, stumbles upon a crucified being?

Those familiar with Baum's books will feel in the know when the familiar characters and geography of Oz are reconfigured: most compelling is the treatment of the boy Tip (Jordan Loughran), who turns out to be Princess Ozma. Originally a plot point in Baum's sequel *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), Tip/Ozma's sex dysphoria in *Emerald City* plays

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<sup>1</sup> See 'L. Frank Baum Advocated Extermination of Native Americans', *NPR*, 27 October 2010 <<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/10/27/130862391/l-frank-baum-advocated-extirmination-of-native-americans>> [accessed 11 August 2017].

out at a time when Americans are debating the rights of transgender members of society. Mixed somewhere in the timeliness of this civil-rights issue is the trope of mistaken or masked sex, a feature of gothic literature traceable back to Matilda/Rosario in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1795). Here, Tip was born Ozma, transformed into the boy Tip for her own protection against would-be assassins, and then restored to Ozma without knowledge of her origins. Her refusal to accept herself as a girl is understandable given her experience as Tip, and plays with some intriguing questions about the nature of identity: what is true about our ideas of ourselves? What is innate? What is performed?

Unfortunately, despite these intriguing moments, *Emerald City* fails to establish and maintain a consistency in tone. Political intrigue is interrupted with incongruous forays into phantasmagoria (most notably the Prison of the Abject, a minimalist mud-hole with a dead tree in it where lost souls writhe around and a flayed man's skin hangs from a branch — it is as if Beckett were doing stage design for the *Divine Comedy*). In the end, the flayed man dons his skin, sprouts wings like Ray Bradbury's eponymous Uncle Einar's, and is seen shadow gliding over Oz. Episode Ten tells us that he is the elusive Beast returned, and that Dorothy is needed to save Oz once again — but thanks to NBC, that story, not one I remember from Baum or any other version, will go untold. And that is just as well.

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