

Wicked (2024), by Jon M. Chu³⁵¹

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Directed by Jon M. Chu and distributed by Universal Pictures, *Wicked* (2024) invites the spectator to revisit the Land of Oz, immortalised by the Technicolor classic, MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The film stars Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba Thropp and Ariana Grande as Glinda Upland, and follows their relationship in this fairyland—though less saturated in colour and more politically charged than the iconic film. *Wicked* adapts Act One of Schwartz and Holzman's musical *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (2003), with a sequel, *Wicked: For Good*, scheduled for release in November 2025. Continuing this chain of adaptations, both the musical and the film reinterpret Gregory Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995). Maguire himself reimagines the original fairy tale, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and the 1939 film by telling the story through the eyes of the green-skinned, marginalised witch, Elphaba. But before the broom takes flight along the yellow brick road, a proper introduction to the plot of Chu's *Wicked* is required.

A shot of a wet, pointed black hat resting at the centre of a castle chamber opens the film. This cryptic scene is soon interrupted by a swarm of flying monkeys, which propels the camera away from the castle known as Kiamo Ko and into Munchkinland, the Eastern Quadrant of Oz. There, a communal celebration is already underway, prompted by the long-awaited demise of the Wicked Witch of the West—spoiler: the owner of the abovementioned hat. After the musical number “No One Mourns the Wicked,” led by the soprano vocals of Glinda the Good, the actual plot begins to unfold when a Munchkin girl asks the Good Witch “Why does wickedness happen?”³⁵³ This initiates a flashback that transports the spectator to several years into the past, to Shiz University. At this institution, a young and more superficial G(a)linda meets Elphaba Thropp, a magically gifted individual

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³⁵³ *Wicked*, 00:05:49.

yet socially despised for her unique green skin. Forced to coexist, *Wicked* follows the evolution of their relationship alongside their individual paths towards self-discovery and personal growth. As the plot progresses, their bond is challenged by a series of events that, like a sepia-toned cyclone, sweep away their lives *for good*. This includes the arrival of a handsome prince, the escalating tensions of Oz's sociopolitical climate, and a life-changing invitation to see the Great and Powerful—or Terrible—himself, the Wizard of Oz.

Wicked has received generally favourable reviews from critics while also achieving box office success, surpassing *Mamma Mia!* (2008) to become the highest-grossing film adaptation of a stage musical to date. This accomplishment is no mere trick of magic, despite the wonder that dazzles audiences for the entirety of its 160-minute spectacle. Chu's first full-fledged attempt at the fantasy genre results in a musical extravaganza featuring exceptional musical numbers, richly detailed sets, and standout performances by Erivo and Grande. The final product is a vividly inspiring film that has earned, among other accolades, ten Academy Award nominations—capturing Best Costume Design and Best Production Design. However, beneath this enchanting allure, *Wicked* also engages with significant societal issues that may pass unnoticed by spectators predisposed to dismiss musicals as superficial entertainment.

Among these, the film places at its—tin—heart the issue of ostracisation motivated by physical difference, closely aligning with Maguire's novel and its musical adaptation. From the moment of her birth, Elphaba's anomalous skin colour marks her as Other, according to prevailing societal notions of bodily normalcy. Furthermore, she is rendered ugly by those around her, including her own family, as ugliness is "contingent and relational, taking shape through the comparison and evaluation of bodies."³⁵⁴ This dynamic persists throughout her time at Shiz University, where Elphaba is continually measured against the idealised beauty of Glinda. Her appearance is not merely viewed as ugly or even unusual but rather rendered "uncanny" and "obscene."³⁵⁵ This exaggerated portrayal is driven by the character's singular "flaw"—her green skin—which contrasts with Maguire's Elphaba, whose deformed body deviates from conventional beauty standards. Instead, following the 2003

³⁵⁴ Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues, eds. "Introduction: On the Politics of Ugliness," 14.

³⁵⁵ *Wicked*, 00:07:49.

musical, Elphaba's greenness is characterised by "its universality" and encompasses "all difference."³⁵⁶

In the not-so-merry old Land of Oz, society's reaction to Elphaba's green skin is the complete marginalisation of the individual. *Wicked* intensifies the politics of ugliness by positioning the Witch's physical deviance as the primary catalyst for her subsequent demonisation by the ruling authorities. This dynamic is powerfully encapsulated during the musical sequence "Defying Gravity," in which Madame Morrible—Elphaba's former mentor at Shiz—delivers a propagandistic address: "Citizens of Oz! There is an enemy who must be found and captured! Believe nothing she says! . . . She is evil. . . . This... distortion, this... repulsion, this... Wicked Witch!"³⁵⁷. In this moment, the film exhibits its fairy-tale roots, illustrating the genre's "propensity to externalize all inner states."³⁵⁸ In doing so, Elphaba's bodily otherness is portrayed as the external *manifestorium*—meaning "outward sign or indication of something innate"³⁵⁹—of her presumed wickedness. To the citizens of Oz, she becomes both physically abhorrent and morally corrupt—a transformation that is fully realised through her construction as the conventional *wicked* witch.

To conclude, *Wicked* is more than just a superb spectacle of song, dance, and visual wonder. It is a story layered with complexity, inviting viewers to look beyond its glossy surface and into its deeper themes. Drawing from the grand tradition of the megamusical, the film enchants through its vivid performances and richly imagined world. However, when Glinda's pink bubble bursts, what remains is a critical reflection on identity, bodily difference, and gendered expectations. As audiences await Act Two in *Wicked: For Good*, it is clear that the story has yet more layers to unveil. The magic of Chu's Oz is worth revisiting—not only for its grandeur but for the conversations it provokes. *Wicked*, in all its superficial spectacle, is an invitation to pay attention to that man behind the curtain and discover that beneath monolithic narratives lie a green witch waiting to be heard.

³⁵⁶ Stacy Wolf, "'Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical 'Wicked'," 11.

³⁵⁷ *Wicked*, 02:28:53.

³⁵⁸ Eric S. Rabkin, "Fairy Tales and Science Fiction," 80.

³⁵⁹ Cote David, *Wicked: The Grimmerie, a Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Hit Broadway Musical*, 191.

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