

Performance Review:

The Builders Association's *Elements of Oz*

Three-Legged Dog Center for Art & Technology

December 1 through 18, 2016

Director: Marianne Weems

Writers: Moe Angelos and James Gibbs

Photos: Received courtesy of the photographer and Peak Performances @ Montclair State University

In *Elements of Oz* a middle-aged devotee of MGM's 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, live streams with a selfie stick and narrates both a history of the film's troubled production and an overview of its cultural resonances. A cast of three, switching roles constantly, recreates seminal scenes from the film in extreme close-up detail as a film crew shoots, edits, and broadcasts them for the audience. The narrative roughly follows the movie's plot, and scenes are interspersed with sequences outside the lens of the film, including an imagined fantasy of Judy Garland on her deathbed and a recreated interview between Mike Wallace and Ayn Rand. The production successfully focuses on the relationship between *The Wizard of Oz* and emergent technologies, both in the moment it was made (Technicolor, easily adaptable plastics and asbestos for the flowers and other props, and moving camera tricks) and the present (digital projection, smartphones, and augmented reality).

Narrator Moe Angelos, often wearing Dorothy's iconic blue gingham dress, describes the techniques behind many of the original film's moments of technical wizardry, including the move into color (a swap with Judy Garland's stunt double in a monochromatic grey and white version of the dress) and the Wicked Witch's disappearances and arrivals (theatrical trap doors and fire effects, one of which left actress Margaret Hamilton badly burned in a disastrous take). As the audience learns about these techniques, they also watch the present-day cast and crew deploy their own bag of tricks in the shot-for-shot remakes. A green screen and computer fill in the Kansas scenery behind Sean Donovan as he mimics Garland's movements in "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." A technician wears Dorothy's ruby slippers on his hands to position them for close-up shots. A digital projector rigged beneath the Wicked Witch's crystal ball fills it with swirling light patterns. The Builders Association's most impressive vehicle for recreating movie magic on stage

is a production-specific smartphone app, which audiences download and calibrate in the theatre before the show. While a staff member reassured us that it was completely optional and that we were welcome to turn it off at any time, the app served as a central component of the piece's dramaturgy. Like many of those seated around me, I devoted significant attention to making sure the app was properly synced with the onstage action, splitting my focus between the phone and the stage.



Photo by Gennadi Novash

The app serves two major functions during the film recreation scenes. First, sound effects are piped through phone speakers of specific audience members in locations throughout the theatre. Without additional actors to portray them on stage, the app whimsically allows the Munchkins to voice their individual opinions on Dorothy's arrival, often, it seems, from right next to or behind particular audience members. Second, audiences are directed at specified moments to trace their phone cameras around the performance space to experience "Ozvision," an augmented reality technique which superimposes computer-generated graphics onto the phone

camera's view and digitally realizes many of the film's more spectacular sequences (including the Kansas tornado, snow falling over the field of poppies, and, most strikingly, the ascent of the flying monkeys).

While other companies have fruitfully explored the technique of using live actors to recreate and interact with film onstage, including The Wooster Group, Temporary Distortion, and many others, this production's app introduces new possibilities for audience engagement and potential interactivity. But *Elements of Oz* is fundamentally about process rather than artistic product: the making of the original film, its percolation throughout popular culture, and The Builders Association's own process of live reenactment and reconceptualization. These three strands come together in *Elements of Oz's* most transformative moment: rather than risking copyright infringement by playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in the theatre, the production uses the app to stream many covers and versions of the song from YouTube onto individual phones. The result is a sweet, cacophonous chorus of professional singers in auditoriums and teenagers in their bedrooms from around the globe, offering their own versions of the classic song and practicing the same process of reinvention that guides *Elements of Oz*.