A 'Wicked' success

Long-awaited musical casts a spell on Upstate for a three-week run

By Ann Hicks
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"Wicked" the musical arrives Wednesday at the Peace Center to cast its spell with gravity-defying witches, monkeys, levitating brooms and so much more that it takes 14 trucks to haul it all.

The show, whose green heroine, Elphaba, inspires with her profound transformation, oozes green in another way, too. Nationwide, the show earns $1.4 million per week, according to Hollywood trade publication Variety.

And it continues to generate income for the local communities where it plays. While total revenue figures for Greenville will come later, for its three-week run here at least nine local musicians will play at all performances.

Currently, tickets are still available for performances on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday nights. Robert Gilbert, Peace Center public relations manager, advises those seeking tickets to call the box office directly rather than going through ticket resellers. The Peace Center Web site also warns that tickets purchased from resellers may not be valid at the door.

The mega hit's co-producer, David Stone, says he's been in love with "Wicked" since he heard the first reading.

"There's pure magic onstage," he says. Its vivid acrobatics enthrall children in the audience. Teen girls flock to it for its story of friendship between two young girls, a bond wrought with hurts and profound implications. And all ages seem to respond to its moral lessons, Stone says. "It wears its heart on its sleeve."

That old black magic

You understand how "Wicked" can be love at first sight as Stone recounts falling under its spell.

In 2001, at the invitation of friend Marc Platt, with whom Stone later co-produced the show, Stone flew to Los Angeles to attend "Wicked's" first reading. The reading was just that — actors going through their lines — and the show's music. Also present were Winnie Holzman and Stephen Schwartz, who had wrestled Gregory Marguires' 400-page prequel novel of the same title into a script. By 2001, the trio had been working on the project for three years.

"I had been friends with Marc and Stephen," Stone says, "and was excited to see the show. I was thinking I would have lots of fun being delighted by the backstory of the 'Wizard of Oz.' "

The main reference point, Platt has said, was the 1939 film. "Wicked's" action takes place before Dorothy arrives in Emerald City.

Stone says he was totally smitten with the musical about the early lives of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, and Glinda, the Good Witch, who were classmates in sorcery at Shiz University, the female version of Hogwarth School.

What Stone didn't expect, he says, was to be deeply moved by the show's message of how friendship can change one's life. "I immediately knew I wanted to work with this project," he says.

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YOU CAN GO

- What: "Wicked"
- When: 7:30 p.m. Jan. 27; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Jan. 28; 8 p.m. Jan. 29; 2 and 8 p.m. Jan. 30; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Jan. 31; 7:30 p.m. Feb. 2-4; 8 p.m. Feb. 5; 2 and 8 p.m. Feb. 6; 2 and 7:30 Feb. 7; 7:30 p.m. Feb. 9-11; 8 p.m. Feb. 12; 2 and 8 p.m. Feb. 13; 2 and 7:30 p.m. Feb. 14.
- Where: Peace Concert Hall
- Ticket information: 467-3000 or www.peacecenter.org

'WICKED'

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A little green in everyone

Stone says he is bringing the authentic Broadway show and not some "downsized version of the real thing." However, with each new production — be it London's West End or the Los Angeles tour — "we've refined things as we found something new in the rehearsal or design process," he says. "And we included it in all the touring companies, to keep the shows uniform."

When did they know they had a mega-hit on their hands?

Stone says it happened after "Wicked's" 2003, San Francisco tryout, a few months before the show opened on Broadway and then capturing Tony awards for its leading actress (Indina Menzel as Elphaba), costumes and scenic design.

Stone says that he, Platt, Schwartz and director Joe Mantello were standing at the back of the theater at the show's San Francisco preview, and the response was "not anything we've ever seen." It was a Wednesday night, Stone adds, and by Friday there was a long line at the box office, "out the door and down the block. This show, more than any other I've known, sells by word-of-mouth."



Courtesy photo

As the story goes, good witch Glinda (Helene Yorke) and wicked witch Elphaba (Marcie Dodd) were once friends.

Stone's love of theater goes back to age 5 when he went with his mother to see "Man of La Mancha" on Broadway. By 26, he'd produced his first off-Broadway hit, "Family Secrets," and today, at 44, he can look back on successes including not only "Wicked," but also "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," the "Vagina Monologues" and "The Diary of Anne Frank."

Ask who Stone's favorite character is and there's no surprise. It is Elphaba, who is most transformed in the story.

"I think we all see ourselves as a little misunderstood, and that's who I identify with," he says. "Not to mention, all of us have a little green in us somewhere."

'WICKED' FACTS

- "Wicked" uses 200 pounds of dry ice per show.
- Its electronics department uses enough power to supply approximately 12 houses and uses 4-5 miles of cable on the tour.
- The dragon eyes are red LED bulbs that never burn out, and the dragon's wingspan is the same as a Cessna 172.
- The 70 wigs the show uses at every performance are human hair, individually made for each actor using his or her own hairline in front.
- "Wicked" has won 26 major awards, including the Grammy, Tony and Drama Desk, including Best Musical.