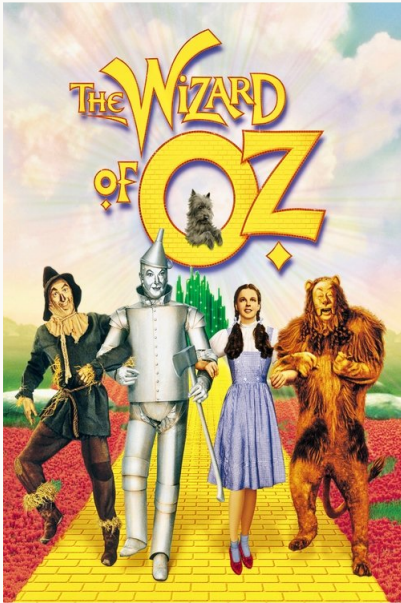




ADVENTURE · FANTASY · FAMILY

The Wizard of Oz

1939 · Directed by Victor Fleming

Classical Hollywood

Musical

Fantasy

A Kansas farm girl is swept far from home and finds herself in a strange, brightly coloured country where she must find her way back. Part musical, part fairy-tale adventure, it is a big studio production built around song, spectacle and a young star.

DIRECTOR Victor Fleming

YEAR 1939

RUNTIME 1h 42m (102 min)

COUNTRY USA

GENRES Adventure, Fantasy, Family

CAST Judy Garland, Ray Bolger, Jack Haley, Bert Lahr, Frank Morgan

MUSIC Harold Arlen

IMDB 8.1 / 10 (464,833 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 98% (critics)

METACRITIC 92 / 100

TMDB SCORE 7.6 / 10 (6,307 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH Stream (US): fuboTV, HBO Max Amazon Channel, HBO Max
Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, Spectrum On Demand
Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 A landmark of Technicolor and studio fantasy

One of the most celebrated uses of three-strip Technicolor in Hollywood's Golden Age, and the film that defined what a big-budget family fantasy could look like. MGM built its whole world on soundstages.

2 Judy Garland and 'Over the Rainbow'

Garland's performance gives the spectacle an emotional centre, and Harold Arlen's songs, especially 'Over the Rainbow', became some of the best-known music in American film.

3 The model for the studio musical-fantasy

Its blend of song, design and storybook adventure shaped later fantasy and family cinema. It is also a clear showcase of what MGM's craftspeople could do in 1939.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of Hollywood's studio era and of the colour musical, it showed how far soundstage artifice, music and special effects could carry a fantasy for a mass audience.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a world built entirely by a studio, where songs, sets and colour do much of the storytelling.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- The artificial look: sets, costumes, make-up and painted backdrops are designed as one controlled, storybook world, with no attempt at realism.
- How the songs work: musical numbers introduce character and desire, and move the story forward rather than pausing it.
- The balance of performance styles: Garland plays sincerely and simply, while the supporting players use broader, stage-trained comic stylisation.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

What makes a place feel like home, and why might someone long to leave it?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Three-strip Technicolor was expensive and used mainly for prestige pictures. It required extremely bright lighting and heavy camera equipment, so colour was a design decision as much as a novelty.
- **Industry:** MGM was the most lavish of the major studios, with huge sets, in-house composers, designers and effects departments. The film was a costly bet in an era when fantasy was not a sure thing.
- **Audience:** Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) had proved that a feature-length fairy tale could be a huge hit, and live-action studios wanted a fantasy of their own.
- **Director's moment:** 1939 was a peak year for Hollywood. Victor Fleming, a seasoned studio director known for adventure and action, worked on this film and on *Gone with the Wind* in the same year.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILMMAKER

L. Frank Baum

His novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* supplied the story and characters, as part of an American tradition of fairy tales.



FILM

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)

Disney's feature-length fairy tale proved audiences would pay for a long, colourful fantasy and encouraged rival studios.



TRADITION

Vaudeville and the Broadway musical

The cast's comic style and the song-and-dance structure come from stage traditions, including Bolger, Lahr and Haley's backgrounds.



THIS FILM

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

NEW AT THE TIME *It merged live-action fantasy, integrated musical numbers and lavish Technicolor design on a scale no American studio had yet attempted for a children's story.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made as America was still emerging from the Great Depression, with war already under way in Europe, and aimed at families wanting wonder and reassurance.

- **Depression-era America:** The story begins in a dust-bowl-era Kansas farm setting. In the 1930s, drought, debt and poverty made farm life precarious. Audiences knew these hardships, and the film's idea of longing for somewhere better spoke to them.

- **Shadow of war:** The film opened in August 1939, weeks before Germany invaded Poland. Many Americans wanted to stay out of European conflicts, and the film's emphasis on home, friendship and courage fit that anxious mood.
- **Family audience and expense:** MGM treated it as a prestige family picture and spent heavily on it. Its first release did not make a large profit. Its reputation grew later through re-releases and television broadcasts from the 1950s.
- **A troubled production:** Victor Fleming took over after several directors and writers had already worked on the film. He then left to direct *Gone with the Wind*, so the film reflects a studio-run, many-handed effort rather than one author's vision.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Brisk and episodic, at about 100 minutes. It moves from song to set piece to encounter without much slack.
- **Style:** Stylised studio fantasy and musical. Painted skies and built landscapes are intentional, not primitive.
- **Colour:** Three-strip Technicolor with saturated, carefully controlled palettes. The look is one of the main attractions.
- **Performance:** Heightened and theatrical, drawing on vaudeville and stage comedy, anchored by Garland's naturalism.
- **Tone:** Warm and family-friendly, but with real menace in places. Some imagery still unsettles young viewers.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

5+ SUGGESTED AGE

Official ratings range from the most lenient (U, FSK 0, G) to PG in some US listings; 5 suits the film's few frightening sequences, which can shake younger children.

Official ratings: US G/PG · UK U · Germany 0 · France TP

- **Good for:** Memorable songs, bright fantasy spectacle, a loyal dog and warm friendships. Children who enjoy fairy tales and musicals will find a lot to love, and the message is gentle and hopeful.
- **May unsettle, scary imagery:** A green-faced witch and her menacing henchmen are the film's most frightening element, and may upset sensitive younger children.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Several chase and threat sequences, including a fiery one, are intense for the youngest viewers, though they are stylised and not graphic.
- **May unsettle, intensity:** A dramatic storm early on and some tense, loud moments with a child in distress can be overwhelming.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Some period details, such as how a few characters are treated, reflect 1939 sensibilities.
- **Explain first:** This is an old film from 1939, so the effects, acting style and singing-heavy storytelling will feel different from modern family films.

- **Explain first:** It is a fantasy, so the scary parts are make-believe. You can offer to pause or sit close during tense moments.

Talk about it after: *Which of the characters would you most like to travel with, and what do you think each of them really needs?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as a story about longing and belonging: a girl who dreams of somewhere beyond her ordinary life learns, through an adventure full of borrowed fears and wishes, what she values about home. Its fantasy is also a way of staging that discovery.

THEMES

- **Home and escape:** Dorothy's song expresses a wish for elsewhere, yet the journey is driven by the wish to return. The film balances both desires.
- **Qualities already possessed:** The three companions believe they lack brains, heart and courage, but their actions repeatedly show otherwise. The Wizard's gifts are really recognition.
- **False authority:** The great and terrible Wizard is a figure of spectacle and bluster. The film is gently sceptical of power built on show.
- **Friendship and found family:** Dorothy's travelling group becomes a substitute family, and loyalty, more than magic, repeatedly saves them.
- **Dream and reality:** The framing leaves open whether Oz was real or imagined, and the film can be read as a child's way of processing her own world.

Key scenes

The arrival in Oz

The shift from the plain Kansas world into saturated colour is the film's signature moment. It turns Technicolor into a storytelling device and marks the crossing from ordinary life into fantasy.

Dorothy sings 'Over the Rainbow'

A quiet song in a plain setting establishes Dorothy's yearning, the emotional engine of the story. It shows that the musical numbers carry character, not just decoration.

The Wizard's throne room

Fire, smoke and a booming voice create overwhelming spectacle. The scene sets up the film's gentle critique of authority and its central payoff about what the characters really need.

The Witch's castle and the rescue

This is the film's main stretch of danger. The Witch's makeup, the guards' chant and the hourglass give the climax real tension, and Dorothy acts rather than waiting to be rescued.

Filmmaking

- **Colour and design:** Cinematographer Harold Rosson and the art department made colour part of the world: the yellow road, the emerald city and the witch's green skin all stand out as designed contrasts, not natural tones.
- **Music:** Harold Arlen's melodies and E. Y. Harburg's lyrics are woven into character and plot. Herbert Stothart's score extends the songs into the underscore throughout.
- **Effects:** The tornado, the Witch's flights and her fiery exits combine miniatures, rear projection, matte paintings and stagecraft. Many still hold up because they are treated as part of the fantasy design.
- **Performance:** Garland's earnest, unforced acting anchors the film, while Bolger, Haley and Lahr use physical comedy and Hamilton delivers a villain who is both comic and frightening.
- **Structure:** A framing story, an episodic quest and a final recognition give the film the clean shape of a fairy tale, with each stop on the road adding a companion or an obstacle.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Dorothy Gale, a young girl on a Kansas farm, is frustrated that no one will listen when her dog Toto is threatened by a bad-tempered neighbour, Miss Gulch. She runs away, but a travelling fortune-teller, Professor Marvel, sends her home just as a tornado approaches. Struck by debris in the storm, she is carried away with her house.

She lands in Oz, a world of colour and Munchkins. Her house has killed the Wicked Witch of the East, and Glinda, a good witch, tells her that only the Wizard in the Emerald City can send her home. Dorothy takes the dead witch's ruby slippers and sets off along the yellow brick road. On the way she meets a Scarecrow who wants a brain, a Tin Man who wants a heart and a Cowardly Lion who wants courage.

The Wicked Witch of the West, sister of the dead witch, wants the slippers and pursues them. The Wizard agrees to help only if they bring him the Witch's broomstick. Dorothy is captured, and she accidentally destroys the Witch by throwing water on her. The friends return to the Wizard and discover he is an ordinary man hiding behind a machine. He gives each of the three a token that names the quality they already showed.

Glinda tells Dorothy the slippers could take her home all along. Dorothy clicks her heels and wakes in Kansas, surrounded by her family and the farmhands who resemble her Oz companions. She insists the place was real, and affirms there is no place like home.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A troubled production:** Directors changed several times. Richard Thorpe began the shoot and was replaced; George Cukor briefly advised on makeup and costume; Victor Fleming took over, then left for *Gone with the Wind*, and King Vidor completed the Kansas scenes.
- **The first Tin Man:** Buddy Ebsen was originally cast as the Tin Man but became seriously ill from the aluminium powder in his makeup. Jack Haley replaced him, and the makeup was changed to a paste.

- **Margaret Hamilton's injury:** During the Munchkinland exit, a trapdoor effect with fire burned Hamilton's face and hand, and she was away from filming for several weeks. She later refused to do scenes involving fire.
- **Garland and the Rainbow song:** Garland was about 16 during filming and was made to look younger. The song 'Over the Rainbow' became so closely identified with her that it became a lifelong signature piece.
- **Myth:** A Munchkin actor is seen hanging himself in the background of the forest scene. **Reality:** The shape is generally identified as a large bird, such as a crane or emu, spreading its wings on the set. The story is a persistent urban legend, not anything on screen.
- **Myth:** The film was a huge financial hit on release. **Reality:** It was popular and well reviewed, but its very high cost meant that its first run barely made a profit. Its enormous reputation grew through later reissues and, from 1956, regular television broadcasts.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILMMAKER

L. Frank Baum

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FILM

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TRADITION

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THIS FILM

The Wizard of Oz (1939)



MOVEMENT

The MGM musical

Producer Arthur Freed, who worked on *Oz*, went on to lead MGM's celebrated musicals, with Garland as an early star.



FILM

The Wiz (1978)

A later musical reimagining of the story, with a Black cast and a contemporary urban setting.



FILM

Return to Oz (1985)

A darker, sequel-style return to Baum's world that draws on later books and deliberately revisits the 1939 film's imagery.

Reception and reputation

Reviews were largely warm, with praise for its imagination, spectacle and Garland, though a few critics found it overly childish. It did good business, but the production's high cost kept its initial profit small. It was nominated for Best Picture but lost to *Gone with the Wind*.

Annual television broadcasts beginning in the 1950s turned it into a shared childhood experience for generations of Americans, and its reputation grew far beyond its first run. It is now seen as one of the most familiar films ever made, as well as a serious achievement in design and musical craft.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 6 nominations, 2 wins (Best Original Song for 'Over the Rainbow'; Best Original Score). Nominated for Best Picture, Best Cinematography (Color), Best Art Direction and Best Special Effects.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Judy Garland icon:** Garland's performance as Dorothy became inseparable from her public image, and "Over the Rainbow" turned into her signature song. It remains one of the most widely covered and recognised standards of the 20th century.
- **LGBTQ+ resonance:** The film has long held a special place in many LGBTQ+ communities, often linked to Garland's iconic status among gay audiences. "Friend of Dorothy" became a coded phrase for gay men, and the rainbow is often connected with the later pride flag, though that link is more associative than documented.
- **Everyday phrases:** Lines such as "There's no place like home," "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" and "Follow the yellow brick road" are now common idioms.
- **The man behind the curtain:** "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" became a standard image for the hidden figure who pulls the strings. It is used in politics, business, journalism and other films and shows whenever someone unseen is running the illusion and keeping out of sight.
- **Television tradition:** Annual US television broadcasts, which began in the 1950s and became a regular event, made the film a shared childhood ritual for generations. It is also widely parodied and referenced, from *The Simpsons* to countless sketches and music videos.

Its lasting influence

Its templates, the ensemble quest, the dream-world adventure and the song-led fantasy, shaped later family films and musical fantasies, including the 1978 adaptation *The Wiz*. The ruby slippers, yellow brick road and the Witch have become lasting references across popular culture.

Reviews, video analysis and documentaries

Reviews

[The Wizard of Oz Review](#)

Sean Pultz · 10.5K views · 6 min

[The Wizard of OZ 1939 Movie Review w/ Spoilers - Retro Nerd Girl](#)

Retro Nerd Girl · 5.4K views · 31 min

[THE WIZARD OF OZ \(1939\) - A New Old Movie? 80th Anniversary Review](#)

Hilarity by Default · 1.4K views · 31 min

Documentaries

[The Making of The Wizard of Oz was a Sh*t Show](#)

It Was A Sh*t Show · 2.6M views · 31 min

WHAT NEXT?

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Singin' in the Rain (1952)

The peak of the MGM musical, made by the same studio system. It shows where Oz's integrated songs and sets led.

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Gone with the Wind (1939)

Fleming's other great 1939 film, also in Technicolor, shows the same director and studio on a very different, epic scale.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Metropolis (1927)

Another fully studio-built world, created in the silent era. Comparing the two shows how design carries entire fantasies.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

Another American fantasy about home, belonging and what a person is worth, told in a quieter, realist register.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Stagecoach (1939)

Released in the same extraordinary Hollywood year, it shows the studio system's strength in a completely different genre.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Victor Fleming
DIRECTOR



Judy Garland
ACTOR
as Dorothy



Ray Bolger
ACTOR
as Scarecrow / Hunk



Jack Haley
ACTOR
as Tin Man / Hickory



Bert Lahr
ACTOR
as Cowardly Lion / Zeke

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