

OVER THE RAINBOW

Once upon a time,
The Wizard of Oz
was a populist fable

By Peter Dreier

Many reviewers have criticized *The Wiz* for its appropriation of one of America's most treasured fantasies, *The Wizard of Oz*. Some disapproved of replacing Judy Garland's youthful Kansas farm girl with Diana Ross' 24-year-old New York schoolteacher. *Newsweek*, for example, lamented turning a story about a "child's magic adventures" into a hip ghetto extravaganza about a "grown-up black woman learning to put away childish things and 'face life.'"

But whether we prefer the 1939 Victor Fleming version featuring "Over the Rainbow" or the 1978 Sidney Lumet version with the song "No Bad News," almost all Americans are familiar with the cast of characters as originally written in Lyman Frank Baum's 1900 tale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*: the Tinman, the Lion, the Scarecrow, the Witch, and the Wizard of Oz himself.

What most Americans don't know is the political allegory to be found in Baum's story, about the Populist period in late 19th century history.

Baum was born near Syracuse, N.Y., in 1856 to a wealthy family and enjoyed some success writing plays. In 1887, he moved with his wife and two sons to Aberdeen, S.D., a small prairie town, where he edited the local weekly until it failed in 1891. That year he moved to Chicago, where he continued to write, and where he authored *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900.

Baum's travels and experiences placed him amidst the whirlpool of Populist agitation of the period.

His brief stay in South Dakota spanned the period of the formation of the Populist Party, an attempt by Midwestern farmers to use the ballot to restrain the power of the banks, railroads, and other economic interests that had been squeezing farmers through a combination of low prices, high freight rates, and continued indebtedness. The Populists, an alliance of farmers and some urban workers (many affiliated with the Knights of Labor), advocated government ownership and operation of the railroads, telephone and telegraph industries, a graduated income tax, postal savings banks, secret ballot elections, direct election of senators, and silver coinage. Although their presidential candidate, James B. Weaver of Iowa, lost to Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1892, he did receive about 9 percent of the popular vote and carried Nevada, Idaho, Colorado, North Dakota and (significantly for *Wizard* aficionados) Kansas, a leading Populist state, and the setting of the book's beginning.

Baum's move to Chicago coincided with the 1893 depression and the militant stirrings of the labor movement. The depression of the 1890s was the worst in U.S. history up to that time. Farm prices sank to new lows. Unemployment caused havoc, desperation and union militancy among

the urban working class. In 1894 American Railway Union president and soon-to-be socialist Eugene Debs led the Pullman strike in and around Chicago. The same year Jacob S. Coxey, a lumber dealer from Massillon, Ohio, and a Populist, led a mass march of unemployed workers to Washington to demand a federal public works program.

Populists received 40 percent of the vote in the 1894 congressional elections and looked forward to winning the Presidency—and the silver standard—in 1896. That election, between Republican William McKinley and Populist-Democrat William Jennings Bryan, Congressman from Nebraska, revolved around the issue of gold vs. silver. During that campaign Bryan made the speech that concluded: "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." The election proved a disaster for the Populists. McKinley received 271 electoral votes to Bryan's 176, almost all in the Midwest. Bryan opposed McKinley again in 1900 (when Baum penned *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), but by then the Populists' strength had been dissipated.

Allegory.

Baum viewed these events from up-close in both rural South Dakota and urban Chicago. He mourned the destruction of the fragile alliance between the Midwestern farmers (the Scarecrow) and the urban industrial workers (the Tinman). Along with Bryan (the Cowardly Lion with a loud roar but little bite), they had been taken down the yellow brick road (the gold standard) that leads nowhere. Each journeyed to the Emerald City seeking favors from the Wizard of Oz (the President). Even the name Oz is an abbreviation of the standard measurement of gold, the ounce. Dorothy, the symbol of Everyman, went along with them, in her silver shoes (changed to ruby in the 1939 movie). She was innocent enough to see the truth before the others.

Along the way they meet the Wicked Witch of the East who, Baum tells us, had kept the little Munchkin people "in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day." If we have any doubt as to whom the witch represents, Baum soon tells us. The Tin Woodsman, once an independent and hard-working man, had been put under a spell by the witch so that each time he swung his axe it chopped off a different part of his body. Lacking another trade, he "worked harder than ever." The worker becomes like a machine, incapable of love. (Recall the Tinman singing: "If I only had a heart.") The Scarecrow (farmer) wants the Wizard to give him a brain. The Wicked Witch of the East symbolizes the large industrial corporations and eastern finance.



Clockwise, from left: William Jennings Bryan; Richard Pryor as The Wiz, 1978; Dorothy (Judy Garland) and friends, 1939.

The original Yellow Brick Road was the gold standard; the Cowardly Lion was William Jennings Bryan.

Like Coxey's Army, the small group heads toward the Emerald City where the Wizard, hiding behind a papier-mache facade, rules. As they enter the throne room, each member of the group sees something different in the Wizard—like all good politicians, he can be all things to all people.

Later, however, they confront the Wizard directly. They see he is nothing more than "a little man, with a bald head and a wrinkled face."

"I thought Oz was a great Head," Dorothy said. "And I thought Oz was a terrible Beast," said the Tin Woodman. "And I thought Oz was a Ball of Fire," the Lion said. The Scarecrow thinks he sees a gossamer fairy.

"No, you are all wrong," the man said. "I have been making believe." When Dorothy asks him who he is, really, he replies, "I'm just a common man." The Scarecrow adds, "You're more than that...You're a humbug."

The Wizard admits: "It was a great mistake my ever letting you into the Throne Room. Usually I will not see even my subjects, and so they believe I am something terrible." Those were the days before presidential candidates cam-

paign among the people. They stayed home and "received" delegations. Bryan broke the tradition in 1896—he traveled through the country and roared. This was Baum's Populist message. The powers-that-be can only remain at the throne through deception, people's ignorance and credulity allow the powerful to manipulate and control them.

The Wizard—a former ventriloquist and circus balloonist, a common man from Omaha—is disarmed. Dorothy returns to Kansas with the magical help of her Silver Shoes, but when she gets to Kansas she realizes her shoes "had fallen off in her flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert." She didn't need the shoes after all to find happiness, safe at home with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, simple farmers.

(Baum even displayed an early sympathy for native Americans of the plains, symbolized in the story by the Winged Monkeys in the West, whose leader tells Dorothy, "Once...we were a free people, living happily in the great forest, flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit and doing just as we pleased without calling any-

body master.... This was many years ago, before Oz came out of the clouds to rule over this land.")

Baum realized perhaps that the silver issue had been lost, but that silver was not the crucial issue anyway. The real question was that of power. With the Wizard of Oz dethroned, the Scarecrow (the farmer) rules Emerald City, the Tin Woodman (the industrial worker) rules in the West and the Lion (Bryan) protects smaller beasts in "a small old forest." In Baum's vision, farm interests gain political power, industry moves West, and Bryan, perhaps, returns to Congress. Baum's *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is at once a children's fantasy and an angry political statement.

In both film versions, the story remains intact, but the message is gone. And a 1977 book, *The Making of the Wizard of Oz* by Aljean Harmetz, spends 329 pages on the history of the film and a psychological portrait of Baum, never mentioning Baum's political sympathies or the social context of the time.

Did Ray Bolger realize he represented America's small farmers? Could Bert Lahr imagine playing William Jennings Bryan? How might Judy Garland have reacted if someone asked her about Populists, nationalized railroads, or silver coinage? *The Wizard of Oz* was made in 1939, during the next major depression, when business was once again challenged by farmers, industrial workers, and progressive politicians; but the story's political references were lost.

The same pattern holds in the 1978 version. Also made during a period of economic hardship. It's ironic that of all people Richard Pryor should play "The Wiz." Among today's black film stars, Pryor has avoided the worst black exploitation films to play roles in social "message" films. He has portrayed an industrial worker (*Blue Collar*), a farmworker (*Which Way Is Up?*), a Father-Divine-like religion flim-flam man (*Car Wash*), and a member of a black worker-owned baseball team trying to survive in the racist South (*Bingo Long and the Traveling All-Stars*).

The Wizards of Hollywood have led American film-goers down another Yellow Brick Road, cashing in on the fantasy and leaving the political allegory behind. ■

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