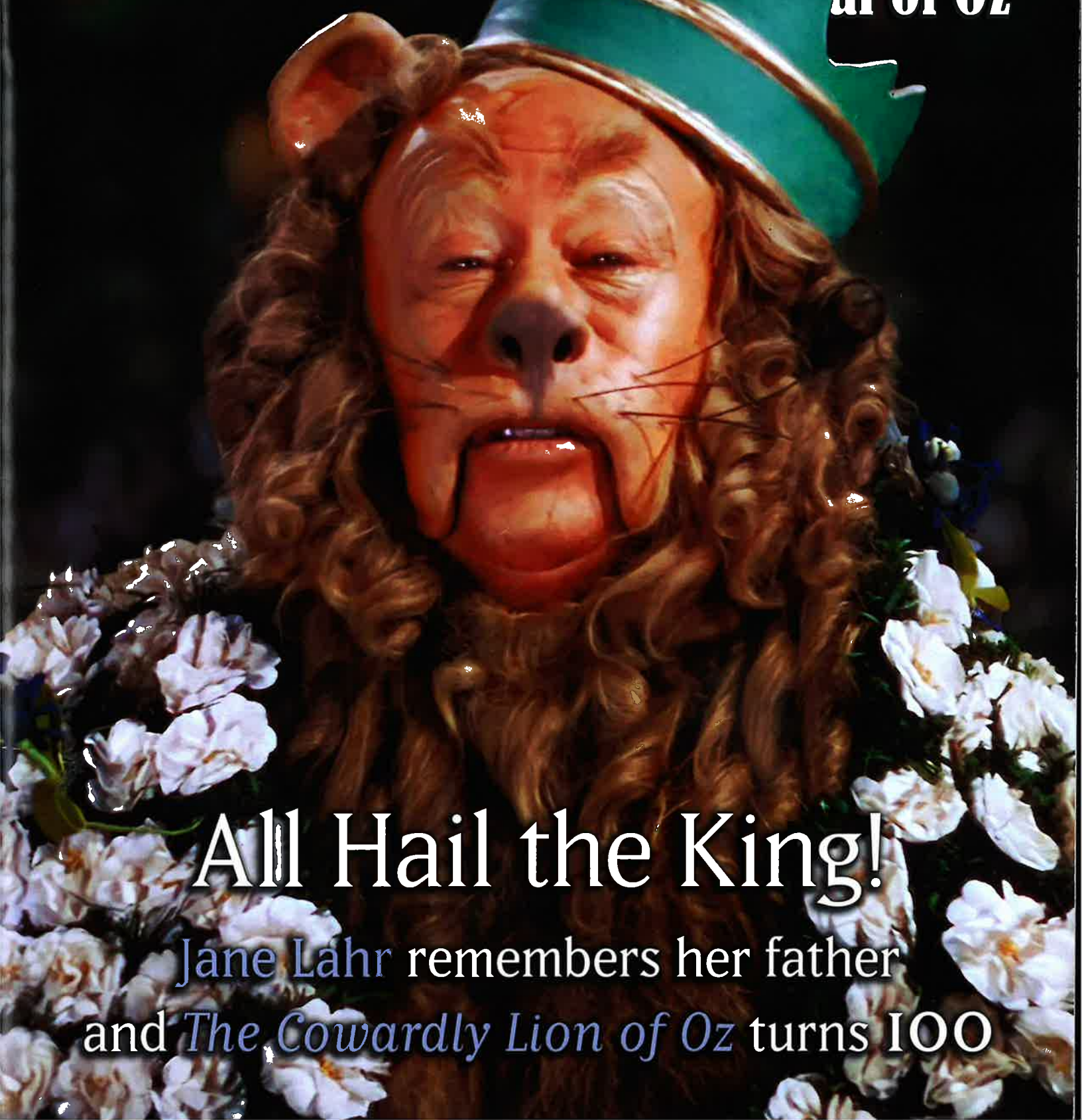


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THE BAUM BUGLE

Journal of Oz



All Hail the King!

Jane Lahr remembers her father
and *The Cowardly Lion of Oz* turns 100

OZ IN THE ARTS

Reports of Oz productions far and wide, from stage to screen.



THEATER

OZ: A NEW MUSICAL

June 2–July 9, 2023

Music by Michael Raabe

Book by Eric Davis

Lyrics by Eric Davis and Michael Raabe

freeFall Theatre Company

St. Petersburg, FL

In *OZ: A New Musical*, Eric Davis and Michael Raabe create a distinct world, a space that embodies the mind of L. Frank Baum as he lives experiences captured in his Author's Notes and the letters from young readers whose "sweet little voices plead to know more about Dorothy."

This show is a theatrical whirlwind spinning through time, in and out of

Baum's inner thoughts and outer life. It's the story of America's myth maker in artistic crisis. The book by Eric Davis, freeFall Theatre's Artistic Director, always finds emotional complexities and surprises in the theatrical toolbox.

According to composer and co-lyricist Michael Raabe, "We used actual letters from children to inspire the lyrics in the song 'Mr. Baum.'" These lyrics are



The full cast of *OZ: A New Musical*. Back row: Melissa Mirnyard (Maud Baum), Roxanne Fay (Matilda Joslyn Gage), and David Foley, Jr. (L. Frank Baum). Front row: Elizabeth Meckler (Dorothy) and Drew H. Wells (Ken). Photo credit: Dalton Hamilton.

stitched with lines from Oz books, animated by Ozma's dust in a snowball of history and imagination.

The song "He Tells Stories" is sung by L. Frank Baum's wife Maud, the show's real star. We discover her dedication and love, and his determination to keep a promise made the moment they met—"Consider yourself loved, Miss Gage"—which draws ire from Maud's suffragist mother Matilda. We learn that Maud is the money manager, so Frank can cavort in mental cyberspace with Dorothy and her lot.

And boy, do we see a lot of the lot! This show has a parade of favorites from the Land of Oz in its many incarnations—several books and even the stage musical—visiting the story through the magic of theater. Dorothy is there talking to Baum all the time, of course. After all, is she not his confidant?

Scarecrow visits, and there is an oil can moment or two. From the 1902 musical, there are singing poppies with dazzling red rhinestone collars, equally exquisitely glittering music and delightfully timed humor, along with Imogene the cow. In Act II, even Miss Cuttenclip shows up for a big dance number. It goes delightfully on and on as the creative mind of Baum opens up on stage and he imagines what these people would say.

Then, Baum ignores them. The audience understands his frustration. Despite fame, money and the affection of children worldwide, he announces in his Author's Notes that Dorothy is to stay in Oz, separated by the Deadly Desert and unable to visit him and give updates any longer.

Baum wants to write grown-up books. Sure, he is a folkloric hero, author of the great American myth, creator of the first franchise, and beloved of children everywhere, but in his heart and mind he is still not the literary success he ought to be. That dilemma is the exquisite artist's dagger upon which this show revolves. Davis and Raabe have the utmost respect for the source material: characters, storylines, Baum family members, and MGM copyrights! This script lovingly provides a new conceptual



David Foley, Jr. as L. Frank Baum in *OZ: A New Musical*. Photo credit: Dalton Hamilton.

venue to interact with the Oz characters. Erudite Oz Club members will recognize the kindness and tenderness given to actual historical people and events.

Raabe, a "proud member of the International Wizard of Oz Club," used all sixty-seven years of *The Baum Bugle* as a resource. The history is right, the lore is spot on, and the music and lyrics take gentle swipes at Hollywood tropes while widely embracing the many Ozian manifestations that danced about in Baum's head—now, here on the stage.

Every member of the cast is as dazzling as the ruby rhinestones of the poppies. David Foley, Jr. could very well be L. Frank Baum reincarnated, although I doubt even the legendary storyteller himself could exude such enthusiasm and pathos. Melissa Minyard as Maud is like a steady ship in the sea of cacophonous characters sloshing across the scenery. She even remains unphased when her mother Matilda is dramatically conjured up in the form of the energetic Roxanne Fay, who thrillingly plays comic and comfort with a dash of otherworldly meddling.

Baum's son Ken, played by Drew H. Wells, is perhaps not so interesting as the Mysterious Artist, Scarecrow, Denslow, or the other characters that he embodies, while Elizabeth Meckler is "the" Dorothy of literary renown, as well as multiple children who keep insisting there is more Oz to tell.

Of course, we all know that Baum went on to write more Oz books. My spouse Steve squealed when the telegraph box appeared. He knew what wonders were to come through that telegraph. It was inevitable: Baum would find a way to contact Dorothy across the Deadly Desert of self-deception, and it is a joyous thing to see as Baum overcomes his doubt and embraces his role as our glorious scribe.

The OZ: A New Musical cast album was recorded for download, streaming, and CDs. For more information, please visit www.ozthemusical.com.

—DEWEY DAVIS-THOMPSON