

Wicked

Last night was incredible. I admit to a pretty severe case of pre-opening night jitters. Admittedly I had somewhat limited information to work from. All I knew was that I was supposed to be outside the stage door at 6:30pm, that I could do my makeup before I arrived, and that an hour and a half later I would be walking on stage for three brief appearances in *Wicked* the Musical.

Yeah, that's right. *Wicked*. The holy grail of musical theatre. And I was going to get to spend one amazing night with the cast.

I packed a bag filled with enough stuff to get at least three people ready to go on stage. I had a little bit of everything. I wasn't sure if any of my clothing was going to show on stage so I had on the outfit I was wearing (black heels, black pants, and a black t-shirt) and a spare tank top (in case sleeves weren't okay), a black skirt (in case pants weren't okay), a spare bra, and an extra pair of panty hose. And that only covered the things I was pretty sure no one was going to see anyway. In addition to clothing I also had a small arsenal of makeup, hairbrushes, hair clips, and hair ties (in case my appearance was deficient). Also snack food, a water bottle, and a camera.

It turned out the only thing I ever needed was the camera.

I arrived at the stage door a little early. The stage manager I was supposed to meet, Peter (the one who conducted the auction where Mom won this walk-on part) was still at dinner because of the quick turn around from that afternoon's matinee. I could see a little bit of the back stage area from the door but didn't get my real look until later.

I sat outside on the loading dock with my parents, a bundle of nerves. It had been three years since I'd been on a stage of any kind and here I was, about to step onstage for *Wicked*. Yep, that's definitely cause for a few nerves.

Wearing a white t-shirt and biking to work, Peter road up to us and got my parents squared away with their tickets (5th row slightly off center), and they left. Then the big moment: he took me backstage.

The stage door is off the wing space, stage left at the Bob Carr. We wove past the security guard, looped around the women's dressing area, the soundboard (one of them at least), I peeked on stage, and then we were behind the theatre, passing several private dressing rooms and rooms full of makeup and wig artists. Peter introduced me to people as I passed them, introducing me as Dani-the-walk-on. Everyone was very welcoming, and I started to relax.

We went back to Peter's office and he passed me off to Elmo, one of the costume guru's. Peter looked me up and down and told Elmo which costume he thought would fit me (it had a long nonsensical name which I can't remember) and boy was he right. First

time was the charm. I ended up wearing a long ruffled skirt with a purple coat, asymmetrical of course. The coat had a snap over my right shoulder to keep it hanging right; that one was difficult to find in the dark. Then there were four or five more snaps down the front in a diagonal. One sleeve was plain purple, the other was an incredible riot of ruffles. The outfit was topped off with a purple top hat and violet gloves. Suddenly I felt like I was from Oz!



I took the whole getup off and met the dance captain (name?) who walked me through my “part.” I was in the opening number, the train station, and the finale. Lots of names were thrown at me in very quick succession. Basically my job in the opening was to turn and look at the green lights forming the witch, and shield myself from them in slow motion. Then look out at the audience with everyone else. Also, I had to climb and descend the stairs three times to let various people off and up to the platform. Then I would have a handler for the train station, Carla, who would also shepherd me through the finale.

Backstage I had another handler who would come fetch me every time I had to get into costume and who would install me in out of the way places where I could see parts of the show.

I started to get excited.

That's the amazing thing about Theatre. Sure, you have nerves before the show, but once you're on stage, something magical happens and they melt away. Even though I was a one-night-only member of this cast, there were people who had my back and were going to make sure I was successful.

After my quick lesson in my blocking, I was handed off to Kevin, a truly wonderful man (who coincidentally I saw conduct *Behind the Emerald Curtain* in Chicago), and he gave me the complete back stage tour. See my list of things I learned about *Wicked* for some cool trivia.

Then he took me up to the girls' dressing room to meet Carla, who at this point I'd heard a lot about. She was very nice. And she grew up in the Chicago area!

(I tell you, when people ask where I go to college I don't mean to name drop, but it has an effect. It seems everyone is either from Chicago, knows someone from Chicago, or knows someone who knows someone. Actually, earlier I'd been talking to another stage manager, Ronaldo, and it turned out he had a cousin who used to teach in the theatre department at Northwestern. When I asked who it was it turned out it was Jen Collins, and I'd actually taking 140-3 from her! It's a small world.)

Anyway, I got to absorb some of the real-life pre-show banter, see where they were signing posters (for their Equity Fights Aids fundraiser), and meet my backstage handler.

And then suddenly I heard my name over the speakers backstage and heard Peter welcoming me to the cast, letting them know which numbers I was going to be in. How cool is that?!

The thing that surprised me most about being backstage (although I guess it shouldn't have) was how laid back everyone was. I guess when you do 8 shows a week you know that it really does only take 45 seconds to walk down stairs, 45 more to get your costume on, and that "Places" is always called at least 30 seconds too soon.

We strolled down, Carla still introducing me to people (some of whom I may have been introduced to already, but there were 80 names - I remember maybe 7?). Carla and I got dressed. I heard the pre-show announcement and then the music started and I realized I'd been so busy I'd forgotten to be nervous, but it was too late because I was going on stage... NOW.

I stood on the stage left set of stairs next to Adam Sanford, playing Boq, who was standing next to a guy named Chris. The stairs slid onstage and I followed everyone else's sight line to the back wall, where the Wicked Witch was forming in green light. Following everyone else's arms I did my best slow motion shield and then turned out to look at the audience before Glinda glided in on her bubble. Chris climbed over the side,



followed by Boq. I felt a small tug on the back of my skirt and I climbed down the stairs, letting Carla pass me and followed her back up. Her line was “No one mourns the Wicked!”

I had been encouraged to sing along with everyone during the chorus lines, even though I wasn’t miked (thank goodness!) and since I knew all the words and no one could hear me anyway, I did.

After Glinda descended in her bubble, Carla turned and shepherded me off stage. I stood just in front of those stairs and watched the rest of the number up through “Dear Old Shiz.” Then I shed my costume and was taken to the other side of the stage (where the view is better).

The female stage manager was on that side of the stage. I got a quick lecture of “don’t stand on the power cables connected to the stairs, don’t fall off the stage, avoid the prop books behind you” and then she figured that was enough of a crash course in backstage etiquette because I was very good at standing exactly where I’d been told and not moving.

I stood in front of the stage right stairs to watch *The Wizard and I*, *What Is This Feeling*, *Something Bad*, *Dancing Through Life*, and *Popular*. One of my favorite moments was during *What Is This Feeling*, when Elphaba began to describe Glinda, opened her mouth, closed it, and then finally supplied “Blond.” It got a huge laugh.

Watching the numbers from such a different angle was a real treat. I could see behind the props upstage, and learned a few things I never knew about how some of the effects are accomplished.

It was also incredible how quickly the cast could snap from relaxed back stage banter to focused, on-stage, in-character roles. They’d just be standing beside me, relaxed and casual and then suddenly snap into their character’s body and walk on stage. It was pretty fantastic.

All of the props thrown so casually off stage are actually carefully aimed to land straight in the hands of one of the stage managers or techs. The book Fiyero throws off stage never touches the floor, which is pretty amazing, since he basically lobs it over his shoulder.

Pretty soon I felt a tap on the back of my arm, and I was following my backstage handler up and down the stairs behind the theatre, returning to stage left to change back into my costume for my train station appearance, while Elphaba sang *I'm Not That Girl*.

Carla came and found me, took my arm, as did Chris, and then we wandered on stage toward our "Mother." We waved goodbye to Chris (a murmured instruction in my ear since Carla's mic was off). They turned me to face the audience (yippee!), we chatted for a moment (Mother commented that I was a very tall daughter - she and Carla were about 5' 2"), and then Carla led me off. Life is so simple when you don't have any lines...

A quick run behind the scrim upstage (much better than all the stairs) and I took my costume off again. I was reinstalled down stage right and watched the rest of the second act, culminating in an utterly amazing *Defying Gravity*. After all these years I finally figured out exactly how Elphaba flies and manages to sing at the same time.

We had a fifteen minute break for intermission. Carla came and collected me, making a quick stop in the wig room to get outfitted for the engagement party at the top of Act Two. I hung out with Carla in the dressing room after that, where she wolfed down a mid-show snack (a pickle? who knew they were in such high demand). I realized I hadn't taken any pictures yet so I asked if everyone would mind taking one. We took it in the dressing room mirror so everyone could be in it. I carefully stowed the camera back in my bag and followed Carla back to the stage for Act Two.



Somehow my handlers got mixed up about who was supposed to have me. The top of Act Two is actually very exciting back stage. A few people sneak around the front of the scrim before it's raised. Everyone is congregating and chatting even though they're only concealed by the scrim, which is a pretty thin barrier between off and on stage. The woman playing Madam Morrible, Randy, and I were chatting right in the middle of the stage while the first strands of music played.

The female stage manager, Amy, was standing in the middle of the stage (concealed by the Oz map) making sure everyone is accounted for and ready to go. I ended up standing right next to her. She said, "Hold my hand and when I run, run with me." She counted down and then we bolted off towards stage right and the curtain opened. So exhilarating!

This Glinda was the understudy, but she's taking over the part in a few weeks and she is excellent. Her voice is a little lower than normal, but she can still do the soprano parts. Her comedic timing is excellent, but she's also just a wonderful dramatic actress and she plays Glinda with a lot of heart. You see the change in her as she becomes friends with Elphaba and starts to question her blissful existence. She also really played all the dramatic moments in "Thank Goodness," as she realizes that maybe this isn't really what she wanted after all.

I got to watch most of Act Two from the same spot in front of the stairs, and had a perfect view of the scene between Elphaba and Nessarose, and also *As Long As You're Mine*. I really enjoyed the scene between Elphaba and Glinda after the house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East.

One thing Kevin told me during my pre-show tour (and I noticed first hand) is how little of the sound makes it back to the stage. The show sounds totally different on stage than it does in the audience. There was a speaker right over my head carrying a strangely electronic-sounding keyboard track, but the cast is not hearing the full mix. None of them wear in-ear monitors, so they're mostly relying on whatever bounces back from the house. It takes lots and lots of practice to stay on key, a very impressive feat.

Having seen *Wicked* as many times as I have, I basically know all the words, and found myself mouthing them along with the actors. I figured it was dark and no one could see me, but I think I may have amused at least one techie.

I only got to see half of *For Good* because I would have been squished by a spiral staircase at the end. As Kevin led me back to stage left for my final costume change, he told me that Glinda (Emily) and Elphaba (Jackie) would take a picture with me right after curtain call. I told him my camera was upstairs, he looked slightly concerned but told me I could get it later, since I had to go on soon.

Carla was of a different opinion, and as soon as I was dressed she sent me running for it. I had less than two minutes to navigate the labyrinthian backstage area, find my camera and get back for the finale. I ran straight to the dressing room on the first try but

when I started rooting through my bag (admittedly hindered by clumsy gloves) I couldn't find the camera! In desperation I just grabbed the whole bag and took it with me, running back to stage left, where I threw it on my changing chair and realized I still had more than 30 seconds to spare. Well, I guess by Touring Company standards I was way early for my cue!

Carla held my hand and took me out on stage for the finale. It was just incredible to stand watching Glinda, being aware of Elphaba and Fiyero, and hear that hush right before the audience applauds.

It didn't hit me right then, but wow, I had just been in a production of *Wicked*. How amazing is that?!

The mystery of my missing camera was solved by Amy, who it turned out was, as always, ten steps ahead, and had already fetched my camera down so she could photograph me with the leads. I love the technical staff!

I hadn't really gotten to talk to Emily or Jackie but they were both very nice and posed with me for a couple of pictures. I told them how incredible it was, and how amazing their performances were.

I had a few more pictures taken in costume, and then disrobed for the last time and turned in my purple top hat.

Kevin was so nice, and went with me to meet my parents at the stage door. He gave them an abbreviated version of the same tour he gave me at the beginning.



Things I learned about *Wicked*:

1. Elphaba has 4 hats, one of which has a built in microphone.
2. There are two touring companies, only one of which travels with an 8in high deck for motorized props.
3. The Emerald City Scrim, the large proscenium arch (in the middle), and the dragon all have duplicates which are loaded onto two trucks that go ahead of the rest of the cast to the next location.
4. Sunday the show will start at 6:30pm; The actors will be done by 10pm and the load out will be finished by 4am.
5. The actors get two (TWO!) days off during a city transition. Otherwise they work six days a week (dark on Mondays) doing four shows on the weekends.

6. The costumes are not packed away during moves. They live in pod like structures which turn into their carrying cases.
7. The prop cases all have wheels and compartments which open. When moving they are packed with special foam but are just basically closed and shipped.
8. Every theatre is different and must be navigated differently back stage
9. No one speaks in a whisper back stage.
10. There are three stage managers in different spots every night.
11. The same woman drives the wheelchair and manipulates the huge levers that move the Wizard of Oz's head.
12. Both Elphaba and a Tin Man ride out in the wardrobe.
13. EVERYTHING backstage is choreographed so people don't run into each other.
14. One of the stage managers stands onstage before the scrim rises starting act two, making sure everyone is checked off and in position for the engagement party.
15. Everyone has A LOT of costumes.
16. There is an entire room back stage devoted to wigs.
17. The traveling crew is 80 people.
18. The show usually picks up 40 more local employes (musicians etc.) when they get to town.
19. Actors must arrange their own housing in each city.
20. The tour I was part of is the larger of the two traveling companies, they get longer engagements in bigger cities.
21. The flame in the scone is real.
22. The most expensive costumes are the black and white dresses. (?)
23. No one starts getting ready to go on until "5 minutes" is called. The Places call is more like a guideline than a rule ;-)
24. Snack food is permitted in the dressing rooms (where there are no costumes).
25. No prop is ever left unattended. They go straight from the actors hands to a tech (Stage Manager's) hands and are then put away.
26. There is detail work everywhere! There are cogs and gears sewn into lots of hats and costumes, the fabrics are rich and beautiful even on the inside (even on costumes worn for less than one minute).
27. Elphaba stands on a cherry picker to fly. She snaps a "hoop" shut around her, which acts as a safety guard. It also holds a long black piece of fabric like a skirt, so you can't see her feet.
28. When the theatre does not have a trapdoor, the "well" is used. Elphaba crouches behind the well. It's designed so that when Fiyero lifts the trapdoor the audience can't see the connection between the well and the trapdoor and Elphaba scoots over and stands up.
29. At the Bob Carr the only way from one side of the stage to the other without using stairs is when the rear scrim is down, and then there's only room for one person at a time.

At the end of the tour, I looked out over the empty theatre and saw how big it was for the first time. Have I mentioned how much I love the stage?



Everyone in the cast was just so nice. They all asked me if I'd had a good time and I couldn't keep the grin off my face. Theatre people are amazing.

I was just so amazed how choreographed everything was off stage and back stage. Everyone had to be standing in exactly the right spot at the right time, whether it was to page a curtain for a group of actors to exit, get a set piece into its track so it could move on, or be ready with a flashlight so an actor could see the foot of the staircase, it was flawless. Technically this show is just astounding. I can't think of another show that has as many costumes, as many technical personnel, or so many props flown into the air for storage! And the amazing thing is that the layout is a little bit different in every single theatre! This cast and crew is simply amazing, that they can so flawlessly transition between locations and bring such wonder and joy to audience after audience.

And to know they've succeeded, all you have to do is listen to the applause.

