

# Look What They've Started...

If you're a fan of Wicked, stop reading because the following post might offend you, by no means am I pulling any punches. I had kind of a stressful day that I can't post about, and then I read this article, so that was the icing on the cake. Think I'll take out my frustrations on pop culture – things that don't really matter in real life.

I just read an offensive (to me) article detailing the no fewer than SIX Wizard of Oz spinoffs currently being developed in Hollywood. Luckily for the world and movie fans abound, most of them won't see the light of day, but unfortunately at least one or even a few will make it through production and be released into mainstream society, poisoning the legacy of Baum's characters and the 1939 MGM cinematic masterpiece we true fans hold dear. Before you think I'm overreacting, read the synopses I included below. If you're still not offended, do a google image search to dredge up the action figures from the Twisted Oz series, but make sure your kids aren't in the room first. What is this world coming to?

I bring Wicked into this because I blame the franchise – once someone decided to write a book imagining their own version of Baum's characters, the door was blown wide open. Sure, there have been uncountable Wizard of Oz spinoffs. The Muppets had one, the Veggie Tales had one, and countless sitcoms from the last 7 decades had their shots at putting their main characters in versions of Munchkinland. But not until Wicked took off in popularity have people really started abusing the integrity of Baum's original characters and, more importantly to me, massacring the sweet and innocent 1939 MGM movie – my favorite movie for many reasons, the main one being how advanced in many ways it truly was for its day. Sure, 1985's debacle Return to Oz was no picnic, but did it really do any significant damage? Not really, it was never really liked nor taken seriously. I like to make this comparison: take

another movie classic, say, *Gone With The Wind*. Now take an “author” (really just some who is literate enough to be able to put words together to make a story) and imagine them creating a “backstory” for the Civil War characters Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara. Let’s make Rhett, oh, let’s say he was an astronaut before he met Scarlett and let’s make her an ER doctor – that’s why she has trouble attaching to people; it’s because she loses them in the ER. Doesn’t make much sense, does it? Probably because *Gone With the Wind* is what it is – an epic story set during the 1800’s when those professions did not exist as we know them today. Do you see my point? *Wicked* has the witches going to school and other ridiculous scenarios – I’m not going to falsely claim to be an expert as I’ve never read the book nor seen the show. Perhaps if I saw the show, I would like it – everyone seems to rave about it, and the costumes are supposed to be amazing. Maybe so, but they should have left my favorite movie alone! They could have started from scratch, wrote their own stories with their own characters, and I would have been perfectly happy to check out *Wicked* the show. But they had to steal Baum’s ideas and MGM’s visions just to put a brand-name on a product to sell, and this my friends, is called “selling out”.

And as a result, we might be faced with the following junk polluting our theaters in the future (taken from [this article](#) from moviefone):

• *‘Surrender Dorothy’*

*Who’s behind it? Drew Barrymore’s production company, Flower Films*

*What’s it about? According to Pajiba, the latest version of the script, by Zach Helm (‘Stranger Than Fiction’) is an ‘Enchanted’-like story that sees the Wicked Witch of the West still alive and threatening to take over our world as well as Oz. It’s up to Dorothy’s great-great-granddaughter to figure out how to use the ruby slippers to defeat her.*

*Status: Barrymore’s been developing this project since way*

back in 1999, when she was still a fresh-faced ingenue who'd just played Cinderella in 'Ever After.' Today, Pajiba says, the 35-year-old is unlikely to star in it, but she would direct it as her follow-up to her directing debut in last year's 'Whip It.' Pajiba imagines she might cast 'Whip It' star Ellen Page, who would indeed make a fine Dorothy. Still, with 11 years having gone by, it doesn't seem like Barrymore's exactly in a hurry to get this off the ground.

- 'Oz the Great and Powerful'

Who's behind it? Disney and 'Alice in Wonderland' producer Joe Roth

What's it about? The script by Mitchell Kapner ('The Whole Nine Yards') tells the backstory of how the wizard went from earthbound carnival mountebank to becoming the fearsome and mysterious sorcerer of the Emerald City.

Status: Given the success of the Roth-produced 'Alice,' Disney is likely to fast-track this movie, which was formerly titled 'Brick' (as in "yellow"?), according to the Los Angeles Times. Now that the next James Bond movie has been postponed and his schedule freed up, Sam Mendes has been approached to direct and Robert Downey Jr. to star, reports FirstShowing. Neither has yet said yes.

- 'Oz'

Who's behind it? Temple Hill, the production company behind the 'Twilight' movies

What's it about? According to the Los Angeles Times, the script by Darren Lemke ('Shrek Forever After') is a faithful retelling of L. Frank Baum's first novel in the saga, 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.' Imagine the Judy Garland movie, but with more action and no music.

Status: Coming from the New Line division of Warner Bros., this has the potential to launch a vast franchise based on the 22 'Oz' books. Which is why it's the most likely of the three competing 'Oz' projects at Warners (see below) to see the light of day.

- *'The Twisted Land of Oz'*

Who's behind it? Comic book gorehound and toymaker Todd McFarlane (*'Spawn'*)

What's it about? Based on McFarlane's own decidedly R-rated *'Twisted Land of Oz'* line of figurines, his Oz includes a Scarecrow who's torn apart by ravenous birds, a Tin Man who's a junkpile of Edward Scissorhands-like limbs, a flesh-eating Lion who's not at all cowardly, a Wizard who's a gas-mask-wearing mad scientist, a carnivorous creature dubbed Toto after it eats Dorothy's dog, and a nubile Dorothy who's bound and molested by depraved Munchkins.

Status: There was confusion in the trade press (including some strewn by McFarlane himself) between this project and Josh Olson's, (see below) since both were pitched to production company Thunder Road, with an eye toward distribution by Warner Bros. Last we heard from McFarlane (via MTV), back in September, he was grumbling over Thunder Road's apparent decision to go with Olsen's more family-friendly script instead of his own. McFarlane also claimed at one point that Michael Bay was interested in directing, but we imagine he's a little too busy making movies based on another line of toys.

- *'Oz: Return to the Emerald City'*

Who's behind it? Screenwriter Josh Olson (*'A History of Violence'*)

What's it about? In a plot that sounds a lot like *'Surrender Dorothy,'* a descendant of Dorothy Gale (this time, her granddaughter) living in contemporary America (she's a young associate at a top Chicago law firm) is called upon to defeat a new witch making trouble in Oz. Aiding the young woman are the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion that she's been hearing her grandmother talk about for years.

Status: Olsen has denied ever being affiliated with the McFarlane *'Oz,'* telling MTV in January that the script he delivered to Thunder Road and Warner Bros. was based on his own original pitch. Dakota Fanning was rumored at one time to

*be up for the younger Dorothy, but that rumor proved false (makes sense, since Olsen's granddaughter character is an adult). Of course, both Olsen's and McFarlane's projects have to compete with Temple Hill's for Warners' favor.*

- *'Wicked'*

*Who's behind it? Universal*

*What's it about? It's a film version of the Broadway smash about what Glinda the Good Witch and the Wicked Witch of the West were like when they were schoolmates, well before Dorothy showed up. (Think 'Mean Girls' with green face paint.) Winnie Holzman, who wrote the book for the musical, has also written the screenplay.*

*Status: Universal is a co-producer of the stage show and has owned the film rights since the play opened seven years ago. Despite an IMDB listing that cites a 2012 release date, there's been no sign of progress beyond script stage. No one has been cast, though let's hope this gets rolling before original stars (and recurring 'Glee' guest players) Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel are too old to reprise their stage roles.*

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## **Believe It...Or Not**

In almost every film made, there are casting issues. The actors seen in the final product are not necessarily the people originally chosen to fill the roles. Well known to most trivia buffs, Shirley Temple possibly would have been Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* had she not been under contract to MGM rival Fox at the time. Buddy Ebsen was cast as the Tin Man until he discovered that he was allergic to makeup used in the costume.

-Imagine how different *Gone with the Wind* would have been if Lucille Ball had been cast as Scarlett O'Hara or Groucho Marx as Rhett Butler.

-Moving forward a few decades, the Bruce Willis starring action movie [Die Hard](#) was originally planned as a sequel to that fine Arnold Schwarzenegger masterpiece, *Commando*. However, after the Governator turned the role down, the film was changed and eventually starred Mr. Willis after four other casting attempts.

-Speaking of Ah-nuld, could you possibly imagine O.J. Simpson as *The Terminator*? Seriously, it could have happened.

-Bill Murray was considered for the role of [Batman](#)/Bruce Wayne in the 1989 film. Has Mr. Murray ever done a non-comedic movie? Or maybe, the movie was originally supposed to be lighter in tone and closer to the ['60s television show](#). Robin Williams was considered for the role of the Joker in both the original Tim Burton directed movie and also for this summer's *The Dark Knight* (which will be Heath Ledger's swan song).

You can view other possible casting choices for your favorite movies at [notstarring.com](http://notstarring.com).



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# Crossing the Big Pond

Planning a trip to London? Let me be your guide to the best the West End has to offer in theatre. Already there are the Broadway hits [Wicked](#), [Phantom of the Opera](#) (ok, ok, it was in London first), and the just opened [Jersey Boys](#). However, there are several productions which have not yet made the leap over to the U.S.

There is the Andrew Lloyd Webber produced revival of *The Sound of Music*. Apparently, Lord Lloyd Webber cannot produce anything new on his own that is capable of making money so he must revive not only his past successes but also breathe new life into other's works as well (whatever happened to his planned sequel to *Phantom*?). There is also a revival of Webber's [Joseph...](#) . In a bit of "American Idol" meets musical theatre, the Joseph for this production was chosen on a reality television show. In 2007, the new Broadway cast of [Grease](#) was chosen in this way on a series called "Grease: You're the One that I Want." Not a very original title.

There is also a new musical version of the classic novel and movie [Gone with the Wind](#). The Trevor Nunn directed production stars [Darius Danesh](#) as Rhett Butler. Darius was seen on "Pop Idol" which is the British phenomenon that inspired "American Idol." I wonder if the judges told him that he was "too theatrical" as Simon Cowell has been known to tell American contestants.

Perhaps the strangest if not the most ambitious show of all is the staging of J.R.R. Tolkien's [Lord of the Rings](#) trilogy. It took three films of nearly three hours each to scratch the surface of the novels. I'm sure Rings purists are left wanting after only one 3 hour musical.

So... if you are in West End or are planning a trip over the Atlantic, consider taking in one or more of these stage hits.

Of course many times, today's hits of London become tomorrow's Broadway blockbusters and vice versa.