

# Theater review: A witty and endearing production of 'The Wiz'

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Burning Coal's production opened same night  
NBC aired its live version

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Local 'Wiz' has a more intimate 'let's put on a  
show in the barn' vibe

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Cast projects a palpable joy in their camaraderie

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From left, Carly Jones, Jamaal Anthony and Demetrius Jackson in the Burning Coal Theatre Company production of "The Wiz" by Smalls & Brown. Right Image Photography, Inc.

BY ROY C. DICKS

Correspondent

Last week, Burning Coal Theatre Company opened its production of the Broadway musical "The Wiz" the same night NBC televised its highly touted live presentation. Those who saw that star-studded, visually opulent TV version might think there's no reason now to see Burning Coal's staging, but they'd be wrong.

That's because director Randolph Curtis Rand's intimate concept – the polar opposite of NBC's – entertains on its own terms, offering engaging performers and an imaginative "lets put on a show in the barn" atmosphere.

The scenic design by SNOW employs three white sheets pulled across the stage on a line for shadow play and projections to make Emerald City's wall. Office chairs become Munchkin transport, a rolling ladder turns into the Wiz's throne, and microphones sub for a magic wand and an oilcan.

Kima Baffour's clever costuming combines everyday clothing with accessorizing touches (Tin Man's silver lamé top; Lion's tan lounging pants with a tail), along with some outrageous wigs and humorous masks. Costume changes often take place in full view at a clothes rack.

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Rand uses just eight actors, each playing at least one additional role. Their performances have a loose, almost improvisatory feel, projecting a palpable joy in their camaraderie.

Carly Jones' Dorothy is spunky and wide-eyed, her strong voice easily carrying her several ballads. Jamaal Anthony gives Scarecrow a suitably limber and happy-go-lucky character; Juan Isler makes Lion into a hilariously narcissistic pussycat; and Demetrius Jackson shows off groovy moves and laid-back charm as Tin Man (further impressing by joining the orchestra on guitar for several numbers).

Brittany Nicole Timmons' sophisticated Glinda and Tyanna West's flibbertigibbet Addaperle are just the main parts each plays among a handful of amusing quick-change roles. Emelia "Me-Me" Cowans-Taylor also inhabits a variety of characters, culminating in her "queen of mean" version of Evilene, the Wicked Witch of the West. But it's Aaron Wright's Wiz that amps up the show's energy in all his scenes, glorying in the character's power with showbiz pizzazz and astute comic timing.

Music director Julie Florin's orchestra expertly supports the singers, and Avis HatcherPuzzo's choreography keeps to simple, often repetitive movements that fit the space and concept.

William F. Brown's script and Charlie Smalls' songs have never been considered top drawer, and here, without glitzy visuals and a large cast, the weaknesses of the material are more exposed. The show's momentum gets bogged down with too many songs merely amplifying what we already know.

Still, this production's endearing cast and witty staging made it a hit with Friday's audience

sum, this production's endearing cast and witty staging made it a hit with Friday's audience and likely will do so for the rest of the run.

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## DETAILS

What: "The Wiz"

Where: Burning Coal Theatre Company, 224 Polk St., Raleigh

When: 7:30 p.m. Dec. 10-12, 17-19; 2 p.m. Dec. 12-13, 19-20

Tickets: \$25 (seniors \$20; students, military and Thursday performances \$15)

Info: 919-834-4001 or [burningcoal.org](http://burningcoal.org)