

Over the Rainbow

A Virginia-based dance school shares how it made *The Wizard of Oz* come to life.

Each year, Melissa Dobbs, director of the Metropolitan Fine Arts Center in Northern Virginia, a noncompetitive performing arts studio that serves 900 students in two locations, collaborates with fellow teachers and choreographers to use a story or fairy tale as a loose theme. “Fairy tales are . . . familiar, and we can incorporate a lot of different dances and music,” says Dobbs.

This year, 700 students danced their version of *The Wizard of Oz*. “We added our own twist,” says Dobbs. “It’s not as literal as you would see in a movie. We did something different, so it’s more dance-friendly. Doing a production is so much more valuable than just doing a



Metropolitan Fine Arts Center students (left to right): Erin McNamara, Danielle Frye, Lauren Dalal, Sophia Kleess and Jackie Van Dao

Photography by Enoch Chan

recital,” she adds. “It teaches them that dancing is not just about the steps they do; it’s more about expression, about telling a story.”

MFAC’s budget for *The Wizard of Oz* production was \$100,000, which included the cost of buying, renting and making the costumes, props and scenery, theater rental and technical staff fees. The school also had to obtain the proper music rights for the show. MFAC employs a wardrobe crew, technical crew, a videographer, light and sound

designers and a security team, in addition to 150 parent volunteers. “It takes about 10 or 20 times as much work to put on a production like this, versus a recital,” says Dobbs. Students help out as well. Throughout the year, they participate in costume creation and set building. “It helps them take more ownership,” says Katie Miller, assistant director. “They find a certain sense of pride beyond the technique of dancing.” Read on for details about some of this show’s inspiring numbers.

Music: “Barnyard Boogie,” by Music Works Unlimited

Genre/Level: song and dance (tap with singing), 4-year-olds

These “country kids” re-created Uncle Henry and Auntie Em’s farm on a stage lit in sepia tones to evoke an old-time-movie feel. Dressed in black-and-white checkered petticoat dresses and sunflower hats, they performed tap moves and sang with bright cheery voices, making this an instant audience favorite.

Music: from Cirque du Soleil’s *KÀ*

Genre/Level: modern, intermediate/advanced

To portray Dorothy and Toto being swept away by the chaotic twister, Miller outfitted dancers in simple black unitards draped with long gray skirts. Circular movements and formations traveling laterally across the stage worked well. A Wicked Witch flew above the stage on a fly rig, and flashes of white light helped to portray a lightning effect.

Music: “Munchkinland” musical sequence from *The Wizard of Oz* soundtrack

Genre/Level: Broadway jazz, ages 8–14

In this ensemble piece, dancers (all under five feet tall) performed a show-stopping Broadway number in colorful handmade costumes.

Music: a mix of music from *Cinderella* and by composer Hector Berlioz

Genre/Level: ballet and pointe, multiple (six ballet classes were incorporated)

In a 12-minute ballet suite, dancers performed as beautiful poppy flowers bewitching Dorothy and her friends into a deep sleep. Each dance class or level wore a different colored flowing dress.

Music: “Loompa Land” from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* combined with music from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* soundtrack

Genre/Level: contemporary, multiple levels (ages 11–17)

In the *The Wizard of Oz* movie, the Winkies are seen as a squadron of evil, flying monkeys. MFAC created their version by using blue unitards, military-esque jackets with animalistic accents and Trojan helmets. Linear formations and grounded, syncopated movement built up this dark Wicked Witch battle scene. “It was constantly moving,” says Miller.

For the culminating scene of the show, Dorothy and friends arrive at the Emerald City and jazz, tap and Irish dancing citizens greet them. Music included hits such as “Sing, Sing, Sing,” by Benny Goodman, “New Shoes,” by Paolo Nutini (for a tap dance about Dorothy’s new ruby slippers), “One Short Day,” from the musical *Wicked* and, of course, “The Merry Old Land of Oz,” from the original motion picture soundtrack. The set had five custom-built arches that rotated to reveal the Wizard’s chamber. **DT**

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