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Wickedly Moving on Down the Yellow Brick Road

By Stan Jenson

Since its 2003 debut on Broadway, gay audiences have been strong supporters of the award-winning musical *Wicked*. They relate both to its theme of being different, and its driving pop score. Surely there isn't a gay person alive who hasn't delighted in the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz*. La Garland is practically our patron saint. And most gays of a certain generation packed into the cinemas to see *The Wiz*, an all-black rhythm & blues 1978 film retelling of the Oz legend, which starred Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. What could be better than any of these three iconic productions? Combining all three into one thrill-packed performance! And there is no group better equipped to tackle this challenge than Men Alive, Orange County's Gay Men's Chorus.

Artistic Director Rich Cook explained, "We have created an original story that ties together the best-loved songs from these three beloved musicals. Our summer shows have become known for their light and exciting music with a spectacular visual approach. What could be more spectacular than traveling to both ends of the *Wizard of Oz* spectrum – contemporary music and beloved standards – and mixing them together with lots of visual excitement?"

In this case, Cook's concept of "Lots of visual excitement" has his stage crews running in circles. He has decided that the entire chorus of over 120 men should be fully costumed, with different costumes in the first and second halves of the performance. With additional actors plus singers who perform dance numbers, the costume count exceeds 300. The majority of the costumes and wigs have been purchased, fabricated, or completely overhauled by the crew, and costume mistress Valerie Reed began mapping out the logistics of the numerous quick changes over a month before opening night.

Singer Michael Quintos has created a set design that can change from the gritty-but-glamorous Emerald City from *Wicked* to the whimsical and colorful Land of the Munchkins from *The Wizard of Oz*. Paul E. Doyle's lighting design must constantly balance between the intimacy of two or three characters speaking, and the spectacle of 120 men enthusiastically singing music they love. Stage Manager Stan Jenson first exclaimed to Director Cook, "You want those characters to do what?!?" However, step-by-step, the dreams are becoming realities, and this concert promises some of the most exotic stage effects ever presented by a gay chorus anywhere in the world.

But the bottom line is the music, and Men Alive, in its eighth season, has already established itself as one of the nation's top gay ensembles. Rich Cook is a master showman, but never at the expense of musical excellence. He will re-arrange the show order or add dialogue to keep from losing singers who need to make costume changes, and a driving rock anthem is approached with all the musical integrity that

would be applied to a Beethoven choral classic. Assistant Director Bob Gunn has once again assembled a professional band that can handle the demands of driving pop anthems such as "Defying Gravity," as well as plaintive ballads like "Over The Rainbow."

The completely original summer show will feature witches, wizards, munchkins, flying monkeys, and plenty of special surprise guests. In addition to all the spectacular singing, dazzling dancing, playful props, and super special effects that Men Alive's audiences have come to expect and love, audience members will also recognize all the well-known standards from the classic "The Wizard of Oz," the groovy tunes from "The Wiz," and the contemporary Broadway show-stoppers from "Wicked." But folks will have to attend Men Alive's concert to find out what really happens to Glinda, Elphaba, The Scarecrow, The Tin Man, The Cowardly Lion, The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy - and her little dog too!

Men Alive's summer concerts are among its most popular ones of the season, and ticket sales are already brisk for this special production. Whether you have seen this amazing group before or not, this is a concert you definitely want to see!

"From Wicked to Oz" plays at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine, on Friday, July 17, at 8 pm, and Saturday, July 18 at 3 & 8 p.m. Tickets are \$47.50 - \$25.00, and available on