



SAMPLE CHAPTER

"Landing in Oz"

This chapter on the origins of *Wicked* as a musical
is a sample from author Carol de Gier's

**Revised and Updated Second Edition of
Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz,
from Godspell to Wicked.**

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Wicked and other Stephen Schwartz musicals,
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CHAPTER 16

LANDING IN OZ

*It's time to trust my instincts
Close my eyes and leap!*

—WICKED

At the start of 1996, Stephen Schwartz never imagined he would end the year envisioning his next Broadway musical, *Wicked*. Movie songwriting seemed to be his future, especially after one eventful evening in March. He donned his newly-purchased black tuxedo and white silk dress shirt, strode across the red carpet, and met up with his *Pocahontas* writing partner Alan Menken at Los Angeles' Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. For forty-eight-year-old Schwartz, being nominated for an Academy Award was a welcome twist on his childhood dream of writing musicals for the stage. With his parents and wife in the audience, he waited for the announcement.

"And the Oscar for Best Original Musical or Comedy Score goes to..." An expectant silence settled in the hall while presenter Quincy Jones opened the envelope.

"Alan Menken, musical and orchestral score, and Stephen Schwartz, lyrics, for *Pocahontas*." Applause burst out while the pair made their way to the stage. As Menken thanked their *Pocahontas* music team, Schwartz clutched his golden statuette and smiled, looking down at Mel Gibson in the front row making funny faces at him and soaking in the acknowledgment from Hollywood. That evening he and Menken also stepped up to accept the award for Best Original Song, "Colors of the Wind."

Back home in Connecticut, he placed his gold-plated statuettes beside his Grammy gramophones in a trophy case converted from an aquarium that his kids no longer used.

The rest of the year was a busy one, with the premiere of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and early work on *The Prince of Egypt* involving meetings with the DreamWorks team and the writing

and demo-ing of songs. He was also working on an early production of a revue musical *Snapshots* in Seattle, confident that when finally finished, the show would go direct to stock and amateur licensing rather than to a commercial production. The one thing he was emphatically not doing was planning anything new for Broadway.

Then towards the end of the year, a phone call came that would change everything. He was in Los Angeles finishing some work on *The Prince of Egypt* when his long-time buddy, songwriter John Bucchino, called him from the island of Maui in Hawaii. Singer-songwriter Holly Near had hired Bucchino as a piano accompanist for her performances at a conference at the tropical getaway. Once on Maui, Bucchino decided it was too good not to share. His room included an extra bed, and he had a car and free food. "If you can cash in some frequent flyer miles and come for the weekend, you'll have a free vacation in Hawaii," Bucchino offered.

"Why not?" thought Schwartz. He had the weekend free, and after all, it was Hawaii. "I am *so* there," came Schwartz's answer from LA, and by December 16th, he was.

When Bucchino and Near had a block of time away from the stage, they organized a snorkeling adventure with Schwartz and Near's friend, Pat Hunt. A small boat sped them over to Molikini, a mostly submerged volcanic crater popular for its rainbow spread of sea creatures that delight snorkelers.

On the trip back, Holly casually mentioned to Stephen, "I'm reading this really interesting book called *Wicked*, by Gregory Maguire."

The novel's title sounded intriguing. "I think I've heard of it. What's it about?" he inquired.

"It's the Oz story from the Wicked Witch of the West's point of view."

In an instant, Schwartz's imagination flashed through the implications of a backstory for *The Wizard of Oz* told from the perspective of the unpopular witch. His reaction was visceral: "All the hairs on my arms stood on end," he recalls. "I thought it was the best idea for a musical I had ever heard."

As soon as he returned to his LA apartment, he called his attorney in New York, inquiring about Maguire's 1995 novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. "Okay, this book has been out for a while, so somebody has the rights. I need you to find out who has them. Meanwhile, I'm going to get the book and read it, because I think I have to do this."

There was no way around it. This was a Broadway concept not suited to a small-budget theater company. And he knew it was a highly theatrical idea, not one meant for film or television. Although he had firmly decided, indeed pledged, never to work on Broadway again, his instincts didn't leave him a choice.

But with such a popular novel, surely someone in Hollywood was converting it to the silver screen. Schwartz would have to stop them, and somehow inspire the rights holders to consider instead the risky, expensive, and time-consuming venture of producing a musical in New York City.

While his attorney, Nancy Rose, followed clues on the rights trail, *Wicked's* prospective composer-lyricist read the novel and confirmed that his hunch had been right: musicalizing the Wicked Witch's story seemed "quintessentially an idea for me," meaningful enough to be worth the potential struggle.

For one thing, he loved looking at traditional stories from a new angle. When he was in college he saw *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard's play in which two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are made the central characters. "It was a revelation to me," he recalls. "From that point on, the idea of looking at familiar material from an unfamiliar point of view became a goal for my own work." *Godspell* had approached the New Testament in a fresh way, *Children of Eden* reworked Genesis for a new take on family life, and *The Prince of Egypt* explored the Exodus story from the standpoint of the brother relationship between Moses and Ramses. But Gregory Maguire's twist on *The Wizard of Oz* was a chance to do something more directly like the *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* concept. "I recognized immediately that this was a genius idea and that it was an idea for me: the way it took a familiar subject and spun it," Schwartz recalls.

Wicked also felt inherently musical to him. “Elphaba is a very musical character with big emotions. She is fantastical. The world is fantastical. Glinda is very musical.” To him it was clear that the world of musical theater was where the story belonged.

And then there was the character Maguire’s vision had moved to the center of the story: Elphaba, the quirky and misunderstood green girl who becomes the Wicked Witch of the West. Maguire named her after L. Frank Baum, who penned *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, when he pondered the sound of the author’s initials “eL” “Fa” “Ba.” Elphaba’s story seemed close to Schwartz’s own emotional experience. He knew what it felt like to be “green” and what inner resources are needed to carry on with life. “The idea of the story created a sympathetic resonance in me,” Schwartz affirms, “and I know that I’m not alone. Anyone who is an artist in our society is going to identify with Elphaba. Anyone who is of an ethnic minority, who is black or Jewish or gay, or a woman feeling she grew up in a man’s world, or anyone who grew up feeling a dissonance between who they are inside and the world around them, will identify with Elphaba. Since that’s so many of us, I think there will be a lot of people who will.”

There were things that I knew right away. I knew how it was going to begin, I knew how it was going to end, I knew who Elphaba was, and I knew why—on some strange level—this was autobiographical even though it was about a green girl in Oz.

—Stephen Schwartz

Schwartz bought a spiral notebook in which he would capture all his story and lyric ideas—snatches of inspiration, research notes, lists of rhyming words, first drafts of lyric lines, and later drafts. On the black cover, the manufacturer’s slogan, “Five Star—In a Class By Itself,” hinted at what would become of the musical that began as penciled scrawls on the lined pages.

Maguire had created, as the author himself described it, a dense, almost nineteenth-century-type novel that takes place

over thirty-eight years and has thirty-eight speaking parts. Could any group of musical collaborators successfully distill these ingredients into a viable evening of theater?



Stan and Sheila Schwartz join their son at the 1996 Academy Awards.



The Fateful Moment: Stephen Schwartz and Holly Near discuss Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked* on a boat ride in Hawaii.



Friends John Bucchino and Stephen Schwartz relax on a snorkeling trip off the coast of Maui.