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CHAPTER 16

LANDING IN OZ

Elphaba

It's time to trust my instincts

Close my eyes and leap!

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 ideal calling, especially after one eventful evening in March. He donned his black tuxedo and white 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 kids at home watching the ceremony on television, and 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 and Stephen Schwartz." Applause burst from every direction while the pair made their way to the stage. As Menken spoke about their *Pocahontas* songwriting, Schwartz clutched his golden statuette and grinned, 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 golden statuettes beside his Grammy gramophones in a trophy case converted



Backstage at the Academy Awards ceremony, Menken and Schwartz pose for photos.

from an aquarium that his kids no longer used. That summer, far from the pressures of show business, he swam in his pool, read, played with his little wirehaired terrier, Archie, dined and socialized with Carole, and basically enjoyed his life.

As his financial security had long since been assured, only his creative urges could compel him to agree to a new project. Perhaps a movie song request would come his way if his next project, *The Prince of Egypt*, did well. Why would he want to endure the Broadway scene again? Painful memories lingered from his difficult collaborative journey with *Pippin*, as well as the disappointment of commercially unsuccessful shows.

"I don't like conflict at all," says Schwartz, whose idealism had clashed with Broadway realities. "Shows are struggles. Every one of them is a struggle to get it right, but the sort of 'us against them' or the armed camp way of doing a show is not my game at all. I really don't enjoy it."

But he did love to travel. An upcoming excursion would change everything.

His new journey began that December. 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. Folksinger 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.

"I am *so* there," came Schwartz's answer from L.A., 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. It was the best concept for a musical he'd ever heard.

As soon as he returned to his L.A. 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 want to do this."

From that first "Aha!" moment, visions for a stage musical adaptation of Maguire's *Wicked* swept into Schwartz's mind as readily as a dream. He loved the vision of a green witch-to-be becoming a social outcast when she is labeled as "wicked" in spite of her good intentions. He pictured a theatrical first act climax in which the green witch would fly. He heard ambitious choral numbers and the instrumental sounds of a sizable orchestra.

There was no way around it. This was a Broadway concept, not one for a film or a small-budget nonprofit theatre company. Although he had firmly decided, indeed pledged, never to work on Broadway again, his instincts didn't leave him a choice. He believed it was *his* story to tell.

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

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 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 effort and potential struggle.

For one thing, he loved looking at traditional stories from a new angle. *Godspell* 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 Rameses. Now he was responding to Gregory Maguire's twist on *The Wizard of Oz*. "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 held the attraction of its focus on "Elphaba," the quirky and misunderstood green girl who becomes the Wicked Witch of the West. Maguire named her after the author L. Frank Baum, who penned *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, when he pondered the sound of the initials "eL" "Fa" "Ba." Schwartz recognized in her an emotive power suited to filling a stage with song. "Elphaba is a very musical character with big emotions. She is fantastical. The world is fantastical. Glinda is very musical." He felt confident about musicalizing parts of the story.

Most importantly, Elphaba's story felt close to his own experience. He knew what it's 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.”

Schwartz bought a spiral notebook in which he would catch 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-in writing on the lined pages.

Schwartz knew that converting a 405-page novel into an enchanting evening at the theatre would take months, if not years, of planning. Maguire had created, as the author himself described it, “a dense, almost 19th century type novel that takes place over thirty-eight years and has thirty-eight speaking parts.” Could any group of musical collaborators successfully distill and remix ingredients while still preserving the original flavor?

About adapting the novel *Wicked* to a musical:

It has so much plot; it’s all over the place. It wasn’t simply a matter of cutting. It was a matter of taking the basic idea and re-examining it—of letting go of some of the pieces and yet staying true to the essence.

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ



Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz accept their Academy Awards for the score of *Pocahontas*.

COURTESY OF EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY



Stan and Sheila Schwartz hold their son's *Pocahontas* Oscars.



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.