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**Fiction Reviews**

**A Multifaceted *Emerald* (*City*): the Reinvention of Oz**

**Review by Alison Tedman**

**Arnold, Matthew and Josh Friedman, creators. *Emerald City*. Perf. Adria Arjona, Oliver Jackson-Cohen, Ana Ularu, Gerran Howell, Jordan Loughran, Vincent D’Onofrio. Shaun Cassidy Productions, Oedipus Productions, Mount Moriah, 2017. Television.**

Striking compositions remain in the mind amid the inventive iconography and rich colours of *Emerald City* (2017), the ten-part television series directed by Tarsem Singh for NBC Universal. While this is not the first reimagined version of *The Wizard of Oz*, it creates a distinctive aesthetic. In one sequence, Dorothy (Adria Arjona) enters a tiled courtyard enclosing a pool, and walks across the white, liquid surface to a raised octagonal platform, where she attempts to control the elements.

In a trope well established by earlier reimagined Fantasy television series, the Dorothy who arrives by tornado is an adult, a twenty-year-old nurse. When the cyclone hits Kansas, and transports her to Oz, she finds herself in a police car which provides essential survival items - a gun, a leather jacket, a medical kit - and a dog to accompany her. Thereafter, intertextual references to L. Frank Baum’s 1900 children’s novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and to his other Oz series, in addition to the 1939 film that introduced the ruby slippers - here reinvented - permeate *Emerald City*’s characters, narrative, and *mise-en-scene*.

*Emerald City* was a long time coming to the small screen: a version of the script by creators and Executive Producers Matthew Arnold and Josh Friedman was first approved, then dropped by the NBC network in 2014. Tarsem Singh, whose film credits include *The Cell* (2000) and the fractured Fairy Tale, *Mirror, Mirror* (2012), ensured authorial control by stipulating that the whole ten-episode arc was written in advance. A notable prior example of pre-planning is the Fantasy hybrid *Lost* (2004-2010), which for Jason Mittell in *Complex TV* (2015) exemplifies narrative ‘complexity.’ Yet, while *Emerald City* has an intricate narrative, and there are occasional, subjective flashbacks at key moments, complexity describes its *mise-en-scene* as much as its structure.

The show’s camera-work, supervised by Director of Photography Colin Watkinson lends luminous life to a combination of natural vistas and historical buildings from locations in Hungary, Croatia, and three sites in Spain. The result is visually eclectic, with a tangible, architectural quality that vies with digitally rendered aspects of Fantastika, including a giant statue that looms, spear poised, over the city harbour.

In addition to visual references to the Oz canon, including a re-envisaged yellow road that incorporates the film’s opiate poppies, characters from Baum’s novels are combined or given a fresh slant by *Emerald City*’s creators and by further writers, who include Executive Producers David Shulner and Shaun Cassidy, and Supervising Producer Tracy Bellamo. The series’ design by Dave Warren evokes Medieval Fantasy, including a repositioning of tribalism that is also found in *The 100* (2014-present). A magically organic form of incarceration echoes a more mud-bound version of the labyrinth in Vadim’s 1968 Fantasy, *Barbarella*. A Steampunk style appears in inventive uses of mechanical engineering, in what we assume to be the past successes of the Wizard in bringing science to a pre-industrial Oz.

At key points, the original soundtrack by Trevor Morris includes diegetic music from our world, in a manner reminiscent of the use of music as a link between primary and secondary worlds and old and current technologies in the BBC fantasy series *Life on Mars* (2006-2007). Pink Floyd’s “Breathe” contributes to the ethereal atmosphere of a masked carnival, paper lanterns floating up into the dusk, as it plays through a loudspeaker. This and another song, Bill Withers’s “Ain’t no Sunshine,” which is heard through ear buds linked to Dorothy’s phone, seem to invite meta-textual examination of the lyrics for self-reflexive connotations, while suiting the eclectic style of the series.

This paralleling of the Wizard’s and Dorothy’s music is indicative of the way in which a large part of the series’ power structure is female-centred, from the three cardinal witches, West, East and North; to the Wizard’s medieval nun-like advisers, known as “Glinda’s Girls”; the imperious Lady Ev (Stefanie Martini); a witch named Mombi (Fiona Shaw); and Dorothy herself. In this, the series draws, as many Oz adaptations do, on the off-cited feminist, matriarchal stance located in Baum’s outlook. Female characters are often associated with magic, an exception being the scientist surgeon Jane (Gina McKee).

While female characters are linked to magic or science, males tend to be associated with magic only as its subjects. The use of the Oz canon as source material enables a spectrum of often vulnerable masculinities, as in other televisual and film reimagined versions of *The Wizard of Oz*, which include *The Wiz* (1978), the mini-series *Tin Man* (2007), and *The Witches of Oz* (2011). Such characters range from the amnesiac soldier Lucas (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), rescued by Dorothy in a sequence visually configured as part crucifixion, part scarecrow; to a sensitive, clockwork cyborg; to the larger-than-life but insecure Wizard (Vincent D’Onofrio), whose flawed character precipitates his entry into Oz. A book on Orson Welles - briefly shown in a flashback - underlines his showmanship, rather than any claim to magic.

Posters extolling science under the auspices of the Wizard are visible on walls in the city. The Wizard forces Oz’s central schism between science and magic. Surveillance drones fall on the side of technology as Oz’s winged monkeys are reimagined as clockwork cameras: one is hand-cranked to replay a long shot of the tornado in a scratched, sepia rendition of primitive cinema, its ‘eyes’ rotating to function as camera and projector lenses. Similar Steampunk imagery is found in the earlier, multiple-Emmy nominated *Tin Man* (2007), in which Cain (Neal McDonaugh) is encountered in a metal suit, from which he is forced to re - watch a looped hologram of his family’s capture.

*Emerald City* enters into more adult, romantic territories in its relationships than *Tin Man*, the final focus of which is on the power of sisterly and family bonds. In Emerald City, emotional drama, jealousy, and angst further the narrative. This aligns the series with what are defined as Woman’s film and television genres, although such tropes compete with postfeminist and Fourth Wave discourses in the series’ focus on older and younger female power. The series draws on Action genres, in addition to series about contemporary witches and female bonding, with recognisable tropes that range from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) to contemporary action heroism. Dorothy fights using believable skills, creating a sense of genuine female agency that some critical work suggests is problematised by superhuman action heroines. Minor injuries from her struggles are foregrounded through her performance, as reminders of her bravery.

*Emerald City* eschews objectification of female characters, partly through the costumes designed by *Star Wars Episodes I-III*’s (1999-2005) costumier Trisha Biggar. Lady Ev’s multitude of masks, many of jewelled filigree work, were hand-made for the series, and are part of a discourse relating to masked identity. Several characters’ true selves are revealed to have been obscured through enchantment or technology. The body itself may become part of this concealment, yet revelations create tensions between new identities and appropriate clothing.

Lady Ev’s masks and the silver ice hair, gowns, and castle of Mistress North (Joely Richardson); the rock-Goth high-necked black dresses worn by her palace madam sister, Mistress of the Western Fields (Ana Ularu); the blood red clothes worn by The Mistress of the Eastern Wood (Florence Kasumba) all have a striking individuality. The use of clothing not only for characterisation but also to create sublime visual compositions, re-emphasises the complexly resistant potential of costume explicated by feminist film theorists such as Pam Cook, Stella Bruzzi, Jane Gaines, and Tamar Jeffers McDonald. The series offers an alternative to the physicality by which some post-feminist fantasy series paradoxically conform to the masculinised spectatorship paradigm of Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey, of course, used Freudian and Lacanian concepts to deconstruct classical Hollywood’s female image, as passive focus of a masculinised system of looks. While theoretical developments ensued, evidence for this paradigm lingers in Fantasy media, although feminine spectacle is displaced onto dynamic roles, and re-assessed in postfeminist analysis.

Dorothy briefly glamorises her own image in *Emerald City* when she dons a ceremonial gown to perform the weather ritual described earlier, eliciting a shot of Lucas’s admiring response. However, after dominating the ensuing magical action, she strides away across a field, oblivious to the dress and returns to her practical outfit.

Magical televisual reimaginings of well-known Fairy Tales and Fantasy Literature abounded in the first decade of the twenty-first century, including *The 10th* *Kingdom* (2000), from Executive Producers Robert Halmi, Sr and Robert Halmi, Jr. Nick Willing, who directed *Tin Man*, wrote and directed a dystopian version of *Alice* (2009) that included a likeable rogue called Hatter and a hit man with a white china rabbit head. There are fewer high-profile reimagined shows today, and *Emerald City*’s inventiveness harks back agreeably to that cycle while replacing some of the earlier shows’ quirkier excesses with elaborate visual staging.

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**Bionote**

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