

Return to Oz

US : 1985 : dir. Walter Murch : Disney / Silver Screen Partners : 110 min
 prod: Paul Maslansky : scr: Walter Murch & Gill Dennis : dir.ph.: David Watkin
[Fairuza Balk](#)
 Nicol Williamson; Jean Marsh; Piper Laurie; Matt Clark; Emma Ridley; Michael Sundin,
 Tim Rose

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⌘	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
6147	8.5	11	50+	2,496	-	-	-	-	-	No	<i>unseen</i>



The critical response was muted and the public stayed away in droves – but the fact this film confounded audience expectations of the usual Disney confection may stand to its credit. In literature it is usually the darker children's stories that last, but parents seem to bring different criteria to the cinema.

At any rate, the reviews – those which troubled to mention Fairuza Balk at all – spoke very highly of her performance.



Source for all stills: a "Return to Oz" tribute website



Now children, can YOU spot a C3P0 and an R2D2 in this picture? Look carefully... Yes, THERE they are !

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
2001 review:

"Distressingly downbeat sequel to **"THE WIZARD OF OZ"**, with Dorothy fleeing a spooky sanitorium in Kansas to return to her beloved land - only to find evil rulers now in charge. Many colourful characters, but few engender any warmth or feeling. Best moments involve Will Vinton's claymation effects, where rock faces comes to life. Best sequence: final showdown with the Nome King [sic]. Inauspicious directing debut for celebrated sound technician Murch (who co-wrote the script). ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Dorothy has traumas because of her Oz experiences, and suffers further nightmares under shock treatment. A weird way to treat a children's classic, the result being a movie which appealed strongly to nobody except, possibly, the producer. The Disney people should have known better."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"A strange foray into fantasy that takes little Dorothy on adventures that more closely resemble those in Frank Baum's classic children's books. An atmospheric but depressing children's tale that was reportedly worked on by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, who gave pointers to the director when he ran into problems. ** "

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Disney recaptures the dark side of L Frank Baum's Oz stories in this exciting sequel to the 1939 classic. Fairuza Balk is wonderful as Dorothy, who ends up back in a ruined Oz facing the evil Gnome King and Princess Mombi with her friends Pumpkinhead, Tik-Tok the clockwork man and a talking chicken. Sombre in tone it may be, but director Walter Murch's non-musical is imaginative and hugely appealing. Will Vinton's claymation process animates the rock faces as part of the colourful special-effects extravaganza. *** "

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"Anyone with predetermined expectations of this film having anything to do with the 1939 cinema classic can just pack up their



Follow the Yellow Brick... Oops! Like a few other lands one could think of, Oz has failed to invest sensibly in its transport infrastructure. The theme of a cherished way of life in jeopardy or ruin is nothing new. Indeed, it's an archetypal motif of fantasy tales, including "The Lord of the Rings" and "The NeverEnding Story".

predetermined disappointment without bothering to watch. However, those whose expectations go back to an earlier source – the original L Frank Baum stories upon which the Judy Garland version was based – will find a deep satisfaction. This film is based upon two of the later volumes in Baum's "Oz" series, and it is quite true to his conceptions. The ragtag look of the characters and settings and the intensity of some of the villain's scenes may surprise those looking for a lighter interpretation. For parents willing to entrust their children to a wide range of emotions, however, this is a very good family film. Directed by Walter Murch, who is well known for his innovative work as a sound technician. *** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Dorothy (Balk) whiles away Kansas days yearning for her lost wonderland. A traumatic flight from a nightmarish ECT clinic sees her washed up in the otherworld with an irksome talking chicken, but Oz ain't what it used to be. The Yellow Brick Road is rubble, the Emerald

City dilapidated, and its citizens marmarised effigies. Finding allies in a Pumpkinhead and a rotund robot, Dorothy fends off the evil wheelers, eludes the terrifying Princess Mombi (Marsh) and infiltrates the mountain stronghold of the Gnome King (Williamson) before Oz is restored to its former glory. Without musical numbers the narrative seems a perilously thin journey – with no particular purpose. But a shadowy side looms large in the scary clinic scenes, and with such splendidly malevolent creations as Mombi. Not for nervous children, heh heh heh."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"More tales of derring-do along the yellow brick road as the Disney people mix up incidents and characters from L Frank Baum's second and third Oz books in an adventure that has good special effects (notably the rock-men who provide little Dorothy Gale's principal opposition), looks expensive and shows plenty of imagination. Some early bits may prove a little scary for nervous toddlers. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“**RETURN TO OZ**” is an astonishingly sombre, melancholy and, sadly, unengaging trip

back to a favourite land of almost every American’s youth. Straight dramatic telling of little Dorothy’s second voyage to the Emerald City (based on “*The Land of Oz*” and “*Ozma of Oz*” by L Frank Baum) employs an amusement





Does anyone know the root in folk-myth of the Hallowe'en pumpkin-head? No? Let's ignore that then...

park-full of imaginative characters and special effects, but a heaviness of tone and absence of narrative drive prevent the flights of fancy from getting off the ground.

The opening finds Dorothy back at home in Kansas but unable to sleep because of disturbing memories of her recent trip. Reacting harshly, Aunt Em and Uncle Henry decide the girl has become deranged and send her to a clinic to receive electro-shock therapy from sinister nurse Jean Marsh and doctor Nicol Williamson.

After nearly a half-hour of these nightmarish goings-on, Dorothy and her talking chicken Billina are delivered to Oz, but not a very inviting section of it. Landed on the edge of the Deadly Desert, Dorothy soon discovers the Yellow Brick Road in disrepair, the Emerald City in ruins and her companions from the previous trip turned to stone. Along the way, as before, Dorothy accumulates some helpful friends."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"In this semi-sequel to **"THE WIZARD OF OZ"**, viewers will hear no songs nor see any Munchkins.¹ It is a very different, but equally enjoyable, trip down the Yellow Brick Road, with young star Fairuza Balk outstanding as Dorothy. It gets pretty scary at times and isn't all fluff and wonder like the Oz of yore. This is nevertheless a magical film for the child in everyone. Rated "PG" for scary stuff. **** "

Maclean's - July 8 1985, p49 - profile of Fairuza Balk, "A Star in Ruby Slippers":

"Since **"THE WIZARD OF OZ"** first reached the screen in 1939, the trip down the yellow-brick road has been a memorable flight of fancy. But two years ago, when Walt Disney Pictures announced its quest for a Dorothy to star in **"RETURN TO OZ"**, 1,500 little girls stepped into their ruby slippers to try to make the trip a reality.

After an exhaustive 10-month search in eight cities, including New York, Los Angeles and Vancouver, the pivotal role fell to an unknown nine-year old from Vancouver named Fairuza

¹ So much the better

Balk. Said director Walter Murch: "Fairuza had a look that resonated with Judy Garland's. Out of the blue she could snap into what her character would be feeling at any moment." For Balk, whose voice and manner are indeed reminiscent of the late Garland's, the role of Dorothy Gale seemed tailor-made. Added Balk: "We are the same person. We are both brave and like to take chances."

By making her film debut in a role indelibly marked by Garland, Balk, now 11, faces inevitable comparisons. But Balk's Dorothy is seven years younger than Garland's character, and the new Oz is neither a musical nor a remake. With her braids tied with blue bows and wearing a flowered dress, Balk said she is not competing with Garland. She added, "She did what she thought was best, and so did I." Featured in most frames of **"RETURN TO OZ"**, she spent more than seven months in front of the cameras in London, with a tutor on hand for afternoon studies. Said Murch: "She had an uncanny understanding of film acting that no one had taught her."

Balk's odyssey to Oz began at age 8 when she decided to become an actress. Her mother Cathryn, a former flamenco and belly dancer of Dutch extraction and current manager of her daughter's career, enrolled her in acting classes. She soon found commercial work and won a role as Loretta Swift's daughter in **"THE**

BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER", a 1983 ABC-TV movie. Then in May Balk appeared in **"DECEPTION"**, an NBC-TV drama about twin sisters in which she played Stephanie Power's daughter.

Said Cathryn Balk: "I am a little worried about how she will cope with rejection, because she has gotten every part she has tried for."

Clearly, the most challenging change in the life of the young actress is her newfound celebrity. During the filming of the \$25-million Oz sequel, pictures of Balk appeared almost daily in Vancouver newspapers. Said Balk: "At home people stop me in stores and point at me. I just want to be like everyone else."

That may be the one role that Balk cannot win: with her current publicity tour, her wide-eyed looks have been broadcast across the continent and she is already being offered new scripts.

Meanwhile, Cathryn Balk has redecorated her daughter's bedroom with designer curtains and wallpaper, hoping to convince her fledgling star that there is no place like home."

— Diane Solway





People Weekly - June 25 1984, p133 - profile:

"It was as if Fairuza Balk, 10, had clicked her ruby slippers three times and gotten her wish. The blue-eyed, brown-haired youngster answered a 12-city open call last summer and beat out 800 girls to land the lead role in the \$25 million sequel to **"THE WIZARD OF OZ"**. The youngest of the would-be Dorothys, Balk impressed director Walter Murch, because "I feel like I am talking to an equal, a collaborator, rather than a child." Currently filming in London, **"OZ"** has Dorothy returning to the fabled land to find the Emerald City in ruins, the Tin Man and the Cowardly



You want pig-tails? We got 'em.

Lion turned to stone and the Scarecrow being held captive by a gnome king.

Fairuza (whose name means "turquoise" in Turkish) has enjoyed the filming, except the time she had to "lie in the cold mud when I was suffering from a virus." Balk's only previous acting credit was 1983's ABC special **"THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER"**. Her divorced parents have floated on the fringes of show business - her mother, Cathryn, teaches Mid-Eastern and flamenco dance, and her father, Solomon, is a folk musician. A native Californian who has been living in Vancouver, British Columbia, for six years, Fairuza will spend the next six months in England. She lives in Hampstead with her mother, who makes sure her daughter doesn't put on airs. "I tell her she may be the leading

lady," notes Cathryn, "but she's not yet a star." Give her time, Mom."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Cast:

Dorothy GaleFairuza Balk
Dr. J.B. Worley / Gnome King
.....Nicol Williamson
Nurse Wilson / MombiJean Marsh
Aunt EmPiper Laurie
Uncle Henry Matt Clark
Tik-TokMichael Sundin
.....Tim Rose
Tik-Tok (voice)Sean Barrett
BillinaMak Wilson
Billina (voice)Denise Bryer
Jack PumpkinheadBrian Henson
.....Stewart Larange
GumpSteve Norrington
Gump (voice)Lyle Conway
ScarecrowJustin Case
Cowardly Lion/WheelerJohn Alexander
Tin ManDeep Roy
Supporting puppeteersSusan Dacre
.....Swee Lim
OzmaEmma Ridley
Mombi IISophie Ward
Mombi IIIFiona Victory
Lead Wheeler / Gnome Messenger
.....Pons Maar
WheelerRachel Ashton
.....Robbie Barnett
.....Ailsa Berk
PolicemanBruce Boa





As one of those god-cursed wretches who found the original film a tacky camp pantomime, devoid of charm or vision, I would be less prone to disappointment by a sequel striking a pointedly different tone. However, I'd also be far less inclined to watch it in the first place, particularly from the fell hand of Disney. To be fair to them, however, It seems they didn't so much misjudge the tone of the source books on this occasion – something they've always been prone to do – as misjudge the mood of the times. A darker "**WIZARD OF OZ**" could well have made a hit, but not riding so closely on the shirt-tails of "**THE NEVERENDING STORY**" (84), which this seems in many ways to resemble (the animated rock characters, the motif of a fantasy world in ruins). Audiences were not greatly thrilled in 1978 by the musical blaxploitation version "**THE WIZ**" either, notwithstanding the talent recruited to play in it.

Casting Nicol Williamson as Dorothy's nemesis was always going to be something of a gamble. Williamson, a fine character actor when working from a subtle script, has also been known to deliver monstrously ham performances as lead actor – for example in "**EXCALIBUR**" and "**THE SEVEN PERCENT SOLUTION**" (as Merlin and Sherlock Holmes respectively). Perhaps Max Von Sydow would have been a better choice. And the producers, even given that George Lucas had a hand in the genesis of the project, should have resisted any temptation to replace the Tin Man with a feeble and obvious R2D2 clone: "Tik-Tok". These were appearing left right and centre in the wake of the "**STAR WARS**" phenomenon, and Disney had already tried one in its clumsy SF misfire "**THE BLACK HOLE**" (79).

It's often forgotten now that "**THE WIZARD OF OZ**" was first made as a silent in 1925 (with a grown woman cast as Dorothy, like virtually every screen incarnation of Alice.) There was also, outside the remit of this archive, a 1964 animated feature, "**JOURNEY BACK TO OZ**", featuring the voice of Liza Minnelli as Dorothy. It lay on the shelf for ten years, which should have served as some kind of warning to the producers of this \$25 million refit. In 1986 another



studio tried to tread the same ground more successfully with "**LABYRINTH**", this time featuring David Bowie as the "Nome King" and Jennifer Connelly in the "Dorothy" role. It did not fare any better. Disney, meanwhile, retrenched to safer vehicles with a higher guarantee of return, such as "**HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS**" (89), and continued its relentless bombardment of the world with heterosexual courtship tales disguised as feature animations for the pre-teens.

See also "**THE WIZARD OF OZ**" (two versions) and "**THE WIZ**", and subject index under [DISNEY](#) and [FANTASY / FOLK TALES / FAIRY TALES](#).

[The archive holds far too many stills from this title to embed in a single document. See the supplementary file for more, and refer to the archive stills section to view them all.]