

REVIEW

'Wiz' kids take a spirited musical journey to Oz

By Jeff Favre

No one could have known that the Belasco Theatre Company's revival of "The Wiz" would open the same day pop icon Michael Jackson, who starred in the 1978 film version, would die.

But instead of casting a pall on the Hermosa Beach Playhouse, it has been the opposite.

The Southern California branch of Belasco Theatre — thanks to founder Shanti Belasco Glynn — has in five years earned a strong reputation for professional-caliber productions starring children. And this spirited, tightly directed and entertaining production happily echoes Jackson's uplifting performance as the brainy and caring Scarecrow.

It's also a reminder that the lesser-known Charlie Smalls, lyricist and composer for "The Wiz," also died young, at age 43 in 1987. Smalls, who never penned another

major musical, filled this score with one catchy or emotionally moving song after another.

Glynn, also serving as director, has cast a half-dozen highly skilled performers in the featured roles (there are two casts splitting the performances). By editing a few songs and scenes to get to a two-hour running time with intermission, the show never slows down. And no meaning is lost because everyone knows the gist of William F. Brown's script, which is based on L. Frank Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

The general story is identical, featuring a little girl named Dorothy (Julia McDermott headlines Cast B), who leaves Kansas and her Aunt Em (Amber VanBuskirk) and meets the Oz inhabitants, Scarecrow (Marissa Koeller), Tinman (Jacob Parisse) and Lion (Cole Wagner).

There's also the good witches —

The Wiz

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday through July 12 (no shows Saturday).

Where: Hermosa Beach Playhouse, 710 Pier Ave.

Tickets: \$15.

Information: 310-796-7952 or www.belasco.org.

Our rating: ★★★

Addaperle (Kira Bowen) and Glenda (Christie Lindsey) — and the bad one, Evillene (Ariana Serrano).

Anyone who hasn't seen a Belasco production and fears the nightmare of children missing entrances, muddling lines and warbling off-key will

be put at ease in the first few minutes when VanBuskirk delivers a powerful opening number, "The Feeling We Once Had."

And the second scene, the Tornado Ballet, is a clear indication that co-choreographers Glynn and Jessica Guess hold high expectations for their dance corps. While there are a few rough spots, the dancers pull off this complex ballet, complete with lifts and acrobatics.

"The Wiz" has several bits of humor, and Wagner, as Lion, along with Serrano, as the evil Evillene, grab most of the laughs. Both have an apparent innate knack for comic timing.

Koeller, one of the oldest performers at 16, who appeared as Tinman in Belasco's 2005 production, displays a pleasing voice as the Scarecrow, particularly with the song "I Was Born on the Day Before Yesterday," which she handles in unison with a highly physical dance.

The standout, however, is McDermott. As Dorothy she displays a vocal maturity way beyond her 12 years. McDermott's soaring rendition of the finale, "Home," brings the show to a satisfying conclusion.

What may be most impressive is how Glynn directs a cast of more than 30 without there being any significant miscues. Entrances and exits are smooth and quiet, and the ensemble dances are sharply executed.

Most professional productions of "The Wiz" follow the original's lead of having an all-African-American cast. But Belasco Theatre proves that the spirit of the story and its memorable songs can be conveyed by a multicultural group, provided there's talent and energy. And Belasco has plenty of both.

Jeff Favre is a freelance entertainment writer based in North Hollywood.