

What the US can learn from 'Wicked'

Patti Waldmeir :: 11/25/2024



Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande. Released in American cinemas just over a fortnight after the election, it's hard not to see 'Wicked' as a

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Glinda and Elphaba's journey to friendship offers guidance for a fractured America



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The writer is a contributing columnist, based in Chicago

In my small corner of the Midwest, this was the weekend of *Wicked*. The Starbucks in my apartment building sold “Glinda’s pink potion” and “Elphaba’s cold brew”; the local Target showcased Ozdust eyeshadow; Walmart peddled lurid Elphaba-hued macaroni and cheese. *Wicked* was everywhere.

But beyond the merchandising moment is the political moment. Released in US cinemas just over a fortnight after the most emotionally bruising presidential election in my nearly seven decades, it’s hard not to see *Wicked* as a parable for our fractured times. Director Jon Chu thinks we can all learn a thing or two from feuding leads Glinda and Elphaba (one of whom wafts around onscreen in a pink bubble) and the way they learn to listen, and then to love. “Hearing each other means getting out of your bubble a little bit. It takes courage to pop your bubble and to see other things and to hear it and to forgive each other . . . because that’s the spot we’re in right now”, he [said](#).

Chu wants Americans to do what spoiled, privileged Glinda and outcast, green-skinned Elphaba did when thrust together unwillingly as roommates: move beyond the “[unadulterated loathing](#)” they declare for each other in a famous duet — sung movingly by [Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo](#) — and end up declaring themselves friends.



'Wicked'-themed drinks. Beyond the merchandising moment is the political moment © Starbucks

So far, in the heavily Democratic suburb of Chicago where I live, many of my friends and neighbours seem more committed to their bubbles than they did before the election. On the day after November 5, one acquaintance told me she thinks all white male babies should be given vasectomies at birth and have the operation reversed at age 18 “only if they can prove they can use their masculinity wisely”. She blames the Republican party’s [sweeping victory](#) on “toxic masculinity”. That kind of talk won’t have her singing duets with Republicans anytime soon.

Mónica Guzmán hosts [A Braver Way](#), a podcast for Braver Angels, a [grassroots group](#) working to bridge the political divide. She tells me it’s natural that Americans are isolating with like-minded people more than ever right now: “For folks who are really hurting and really afraid . . . the natural reaction is to want to come together and hold each other’s pain . . . and help each other feel less threatened”. The risk of that, she says, is that it could amplify fears that may not be rational.

Fear is indeed a big problem post-election, says the Pew Research Center, which published a [poll](#) last week that found that nearly three quarters of Democrats say they are “fearful” about the state of the country and over half feel “angry”.

“Democrats can’t listen when they are red-alert scared,” says Guzmán. “I don’t think what they need is people telling them they’re wrong, they need people to listen. There is something magical that can happen when people are witnessed”. In other words: it’s no use me quoting [demographic voting statistics](#) to my acquaintance who is so angry at men. I have to find the humility to listen — no matter how convinced I am that extreme views like that helped defeat the Democrats. If they won’t pop their bubble, then I’d better figure out how to escape mine.

Wicked also crossed another frontier: with a rumoured budget of around \$150mn, it marks a milestone as one of only a few major non-Asian blockbusters directed by an Asian-American (Chu also directed the hit film *Crazy Rich Asians*). “Chu is being trusted with huge budgets, he is a director of blockbusters, and he’s not the only one these days. It used to be that nobody Asian-American was entrusted with blockbusters by the studios,” says Frank Wu, an expert on Asian-American history and culture.

Chu recently published a powerful [memoir](#), *Viewfinder*, about growing up Asian-American in the US and succeeding in Hollywood. In it, he talks about raising his director’s “viewfinder” to figure out how to frame a shot. “When you’re lost, it helps you find your way,” he writes. Here’s hoping that *Wicked* can do its little bit to help America find its way: to the bursting of bubbles and the making of friends, even between America’s new politically [popular](#) class, the Republicans, and its new outcasts, the Democrats. If Glinda and Elphaba can do it, why can’t we?