



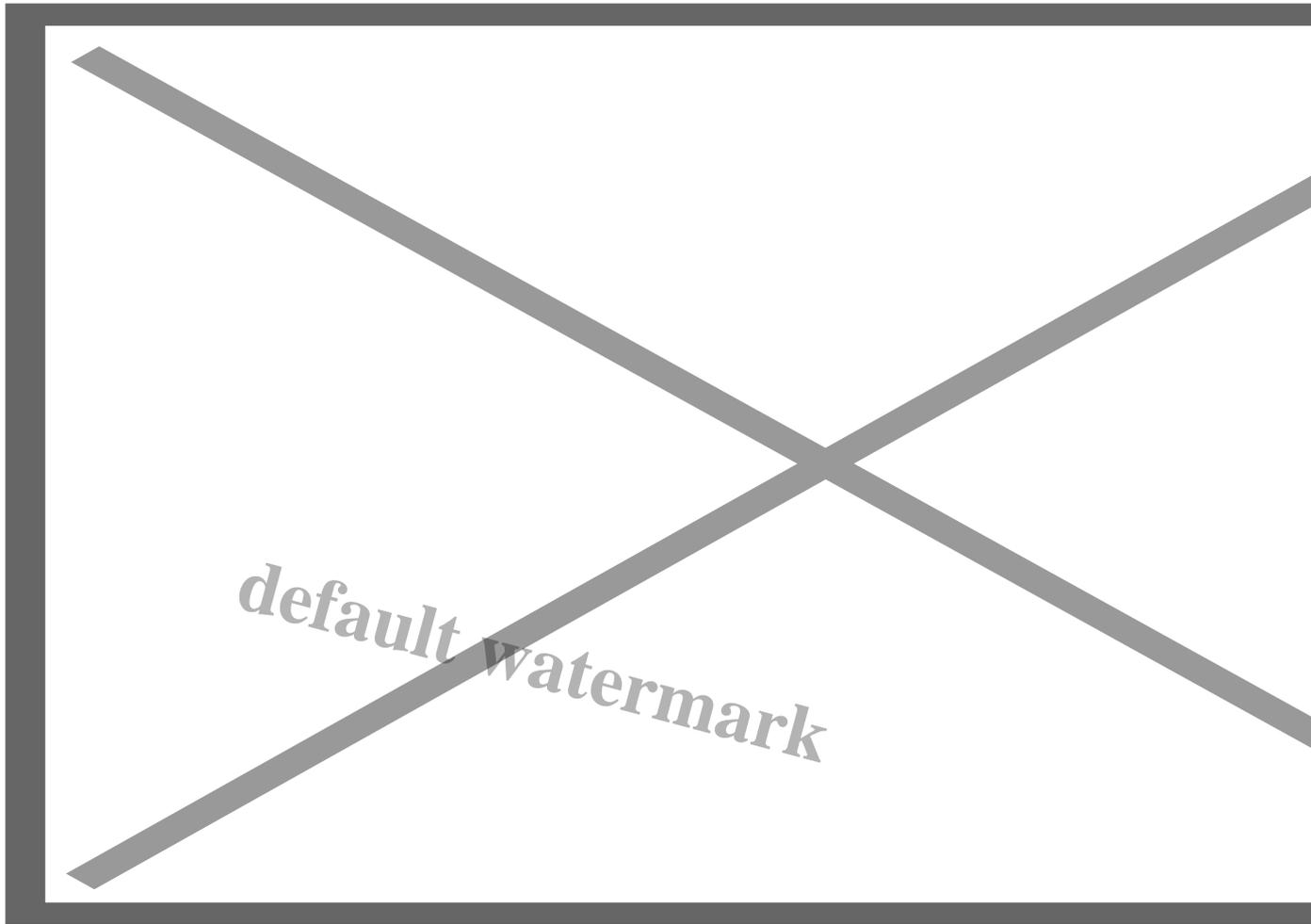
Lions, Tigers, and Stunning Vocals, Oh My! Dorothy Shines in 'The Wiz'

Description

TEMPE, AZ The 1975 Broadway musical *The Wiz* has been revived for a new generation and is currently touring the United States before it eases on down the road to Broadway on March 29, 2024. The Tony Award-winning production featuring music and lyrics by **Charlie Smalls** (and others), a book by **William F. Brown**, and new material by **Amber Ruffin** launched its pre-Broadway tour in Baltimore on September 23, 2023, and has now made its way to Tempe, Arizona. Its next stop is California, where **Wayne Brady** will step into the title role, replacing **Alan Mingo Jr.**, as the production continues its journey toward Broadway.

When *The Wiz* first opened in 1975, it struggled to find an audience but that changed quickly. Among its early champions was [Stephen Sondheim, who reportedly saw the production six times](#), according to the *Wizard of Oz Historians* and the podcast [Down the Yellow Brick Pod](#). By the time the show reached the Tony Awards, *The Wiz* had become a sensation, sweeping seven Tonys and launching the careers of **Stephanie Mills** and **André De Shields**, who famously continued to strut in his Wiz costume for years.

The musical's impact extended well beyond Broadway. Songs like "Ease On Down the Road," "Home," and "A Brand New Day" climbed the R&B charts, and the show even secured a major film adaptation starring **Michael Jackson** and **Diana Ross**.

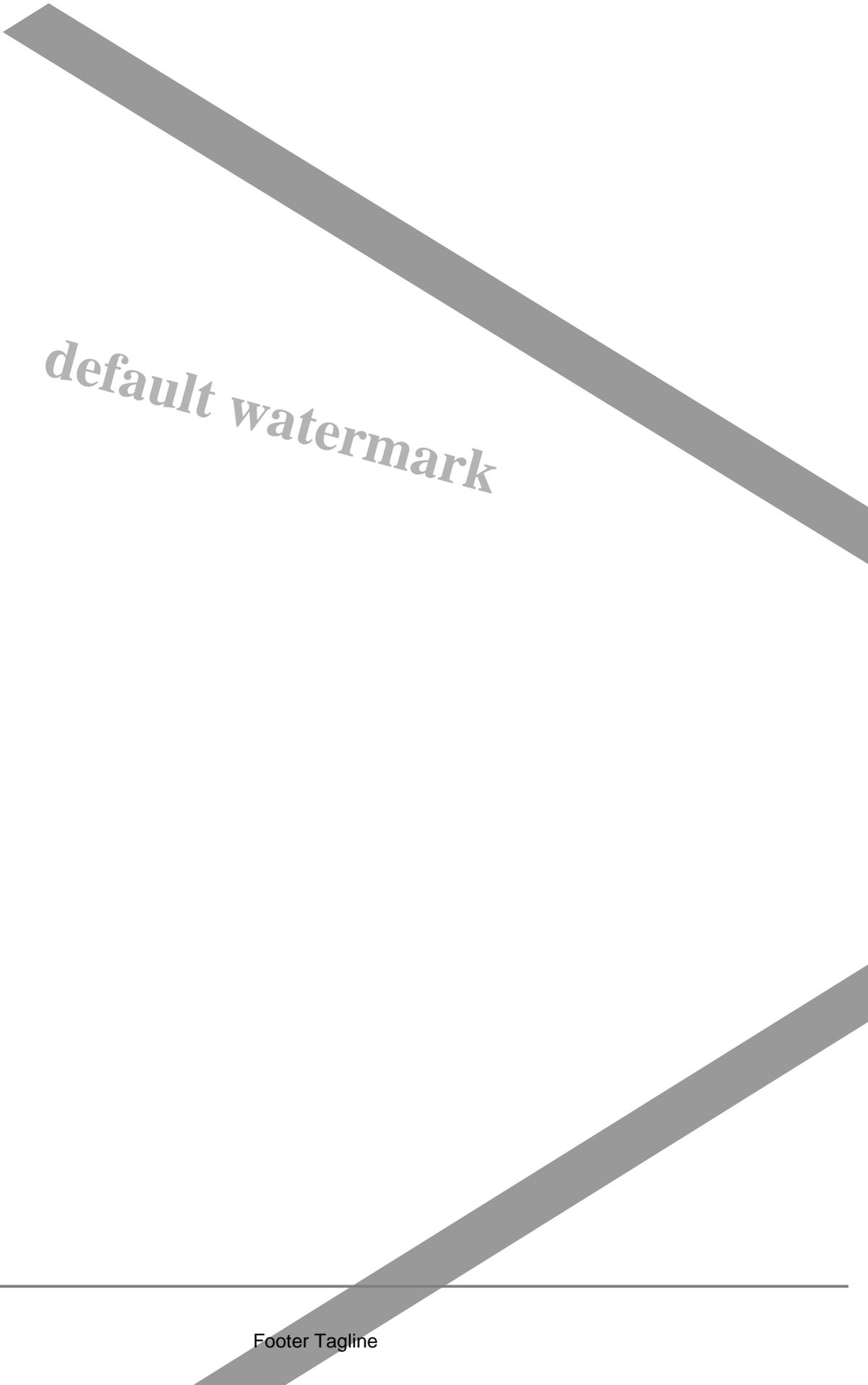


(from left to right) Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Ted Ross, and Nipsey Russel

This isn't the first revival of *The Wiz*, but this new version offers a great deal to longtime fans, especially those who felt underwhelmed by NBC's 2015 live adaptation. While Toto has been removed from the storyline, other revisions make this revival stand out, the most significant being its renewed commitment to centering the Black experience and Dorothy's journey toward belonging.

One of the most welcome changes is the reimagined dynamic between Scarecrow and the crows; instead of tension, they share a warm, humorous friendship. The show is also packed with playful, contemporary nods—from pop-culture winks (*The Lion King*) to Black cultural humor and even some sharply funny political jabs about today's housing market.

Throughout the production, the stories of the four travelers—Dorothy (**Nichelle Lewis**), Scarecrow (**Avery Wilson**), Tinman (**Phillip Johnson Richardson**), and the Lion (**Kyle Ramar Freeman**)—are woven together through the electric presence of the Wicked Witch Evillene, played by [Melody A. Betts](#). Betts may well be the most stunning revelation of this revival; her performance has a force and range big enough to fill all of Kansas—and then some.



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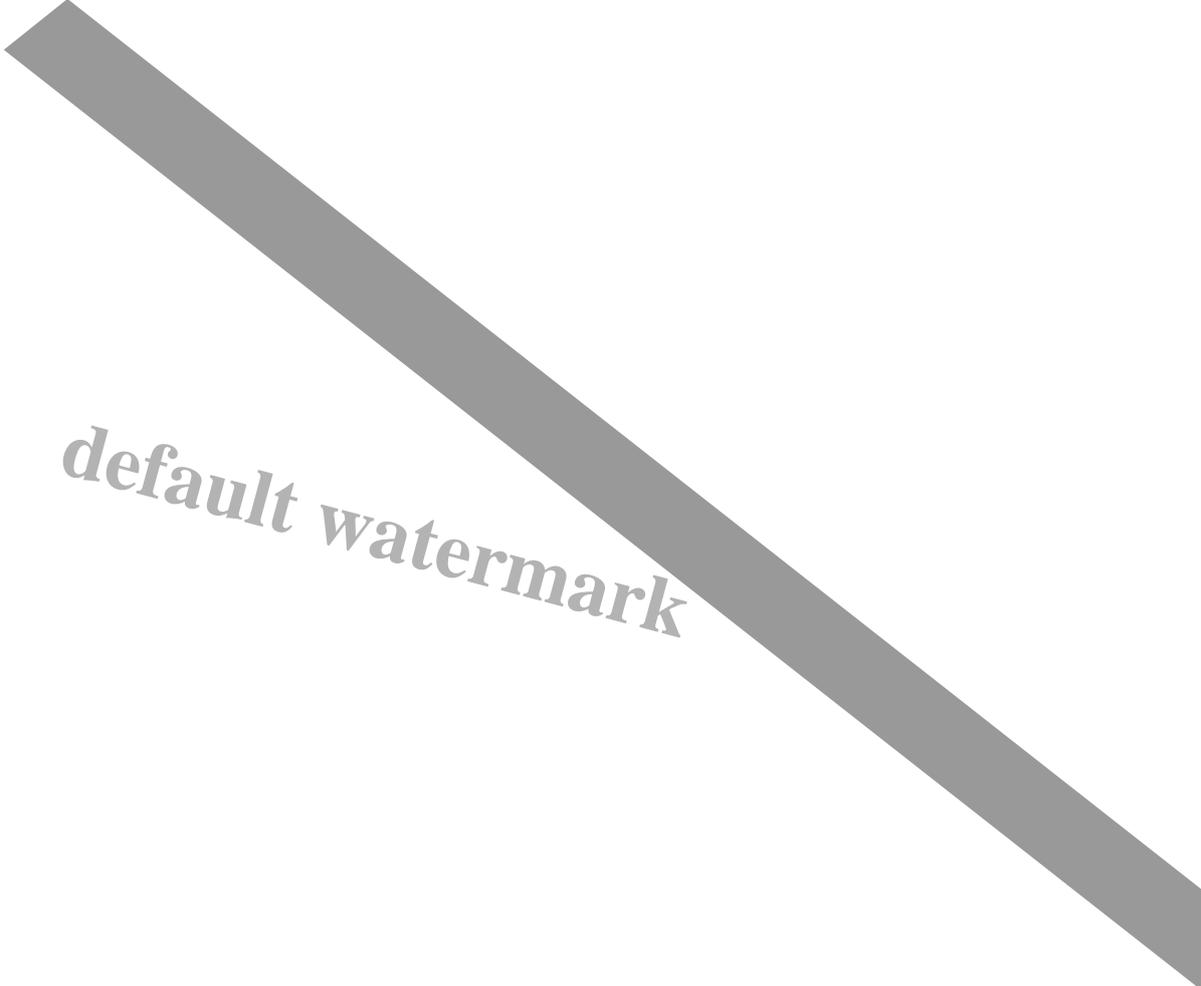
Deborah Cox as Glinda & Nichelle Lewis as Dorothy in *He's The Wiz*. Photo by Jeremy Daniel.

Director **Schele Williams** and **Amber Ruffin** bring a genuinely fresh perspective to this revival of *The Wiz*. One of the most striking changes is the explosion of color that greets the audience from the very beginning. Munchkin Land is reimagined as a vibrant, Mardi Gras-inspired celebration—lush, joyful, and alive with movement. The humor threaded throughout this world, including delightful touches like the self-care poppies, keeps the tone buoyant and contemporary.

This version also rethinks character introductions in meaningful ways. While Glinda typically doesn't appear in *The Wiz* until Dorothy reaches Oz, here she meets Dorothy right in Munchkin Land. Played by Broadway veteran **Deborah Cox**—who absolutely sparkles in the role and even drops a rap verse—Glinda's early appearance adds warmth and guidance to Dorothy's first steps on her journey.

Another standout revision comes through Richardson's Tinman, who delivers a completely reimagined (and entirely successful) interpretation of the character. His dancing in *Slide Some Oil to Me*—combines popping, creaking, and physical comedy in a way that feels both innovative and deeply entertaining.

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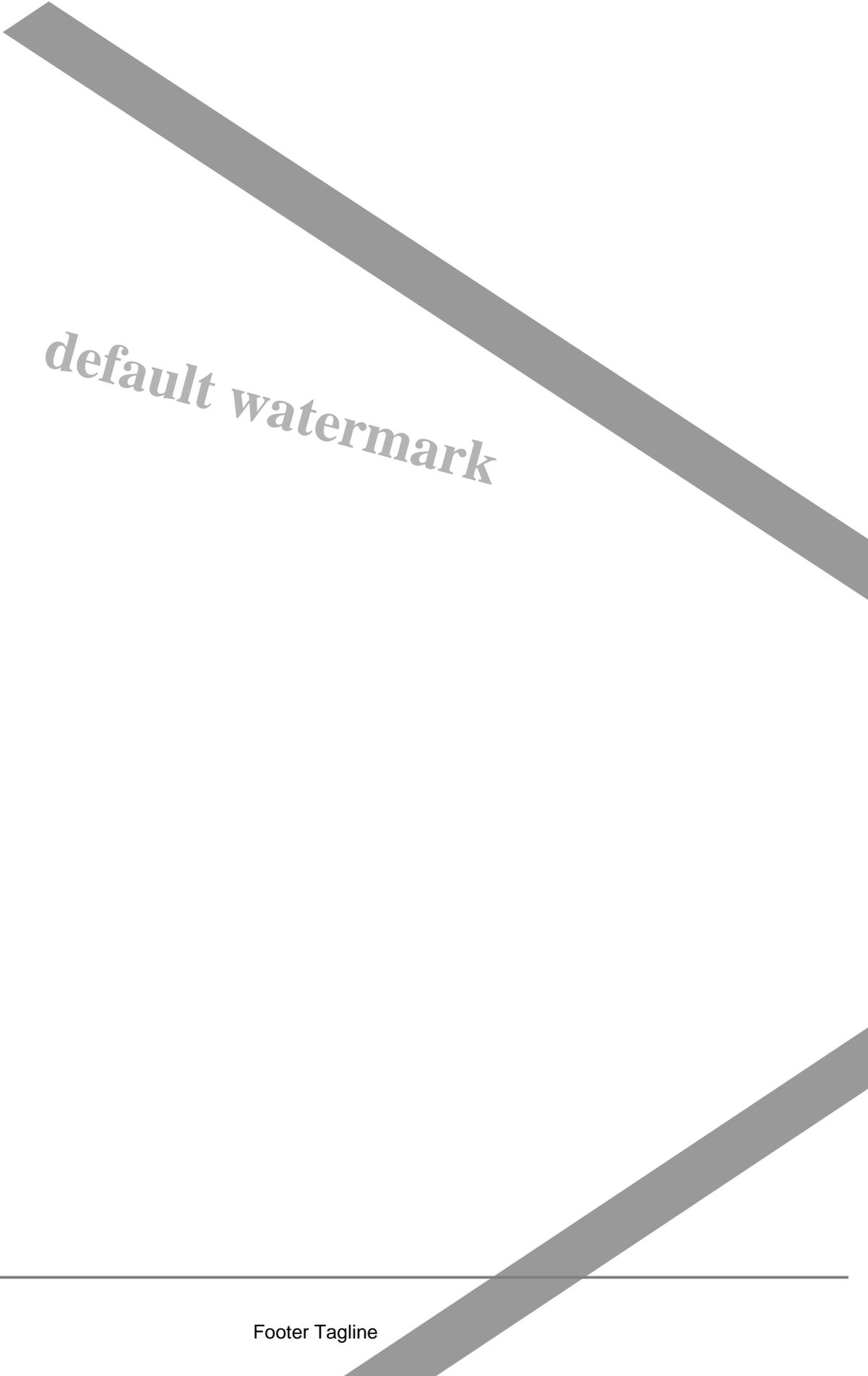
Touring cast in the production of *The Wiz* in Emerald City. Photo by Jeremy Daniel.

Costume designer **Sharen Davis** amplifies these performances with inventive, character-driven designs. Her Tinman costume highlights Richardson's distinctive movement style, while her poppy outfits and 1970s-inspired Emerald City looks create a vibrant aesthetic world that feels fresh yet rooted in the show's history. The makeup design by **Kirk Cambridge-Del Pesche** and the hair and wig design by **Charles G. LaPointe** further elevate these visual choices, making the production's look as memorable as its performances.

The scenic design by **Hannah Beachler**—known for her Oscar-winning work on *Black Panther*—is strikingly picturesque, drawing deeply from the visual language and legacy of Black Broadway. Her world-building feels both mythic and rooted, offering a backdrop that supports and elevates the production's reimagined vision.

The choreography by **JaQuel Knight** (the mastermind behind Beyoncé's *Single Ladies*) is equally impressive, reaching its peak at the top of the second act. The Emerald City number becomes a showstopper as Knight seamlessly weaves together multiple dance genres, creating movement that is electrifying, layered, and utterly captivating.

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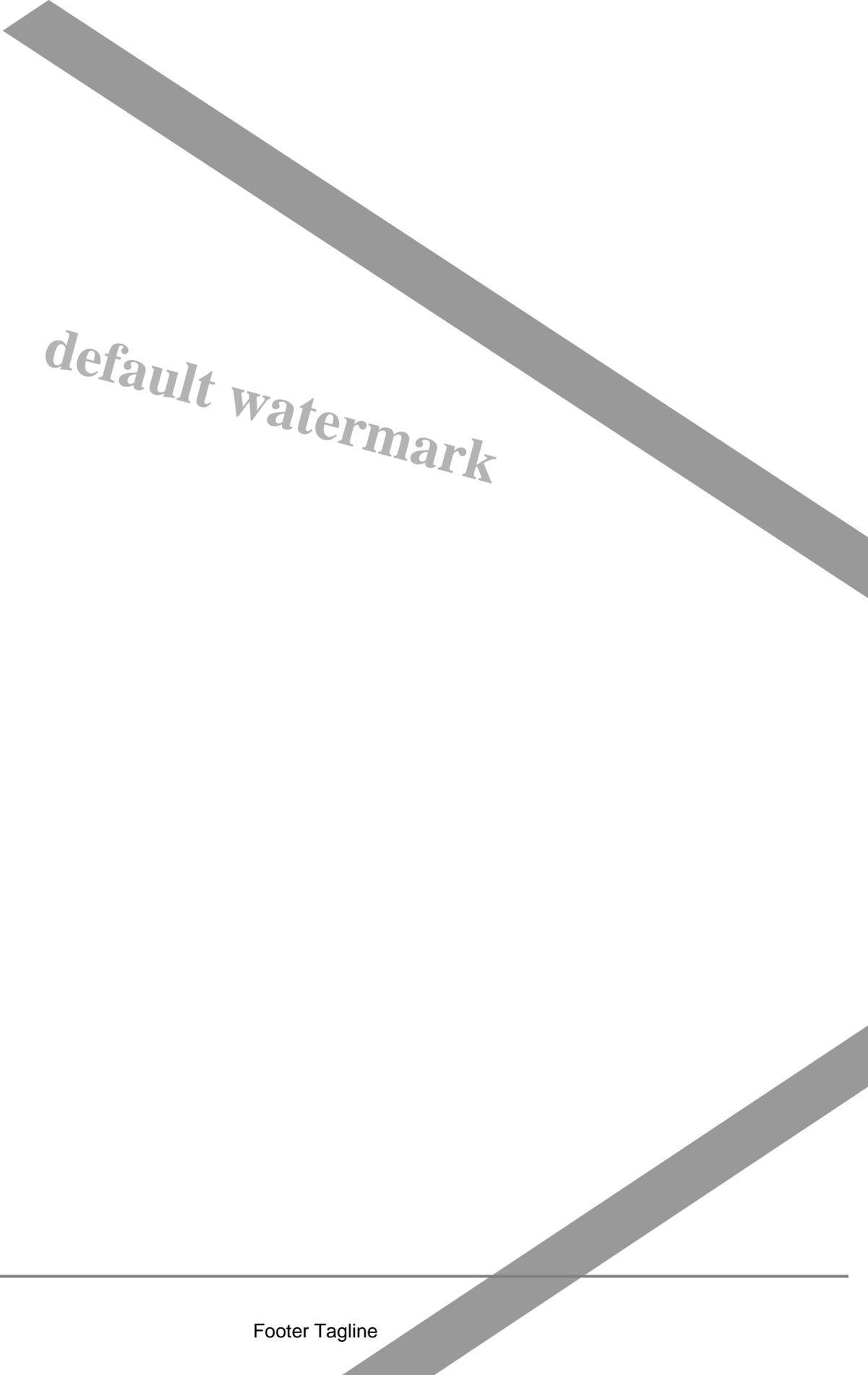
Kyle Ramar Freeman (Lion) , Nichelle Lewis (Dorothy), Phillip Johnson Richardson (Tinman), and Avery Wilson (Scarecrow). Photo by Jeremy Daniel.

Avery Wilson, as the Scarecrow, delivers the Michael Jacksonâ??infused vocals and dance moves audiences hope for, but what truly surprised me was the strength of his acting. Heâ??s the whole packageâ??charismatic, vocally dynamic, and fully present in every scene.

Kyle Ramar Freemanâ??s Lion is equally delightful. He brings an irresistible blend of spunk, humor, and vulnerability to the role. His duet with Lewis, â??Be a Lion,â?• which closes the first act, is one of the productionâ??s most memorable moments. Freemanâ??s voice is rich and lusciousâ??something I could listen to for daysâ??and Lewis meets him note for note, surprising the audience with vocal runs worthy of Mariah Carey.

Nichelle Lewis, simply put, has the voice of an angel. While some have questioned whether she has the acting chops to play Dorothy, her performance of â??Homeâ?• was deeply moving. I have no doubt she has everything it takes to lead this production all the way to Broadwayâ??especially with Freeman, Richardson, and Wilson beside her. Together, the four of them shine with true star power.

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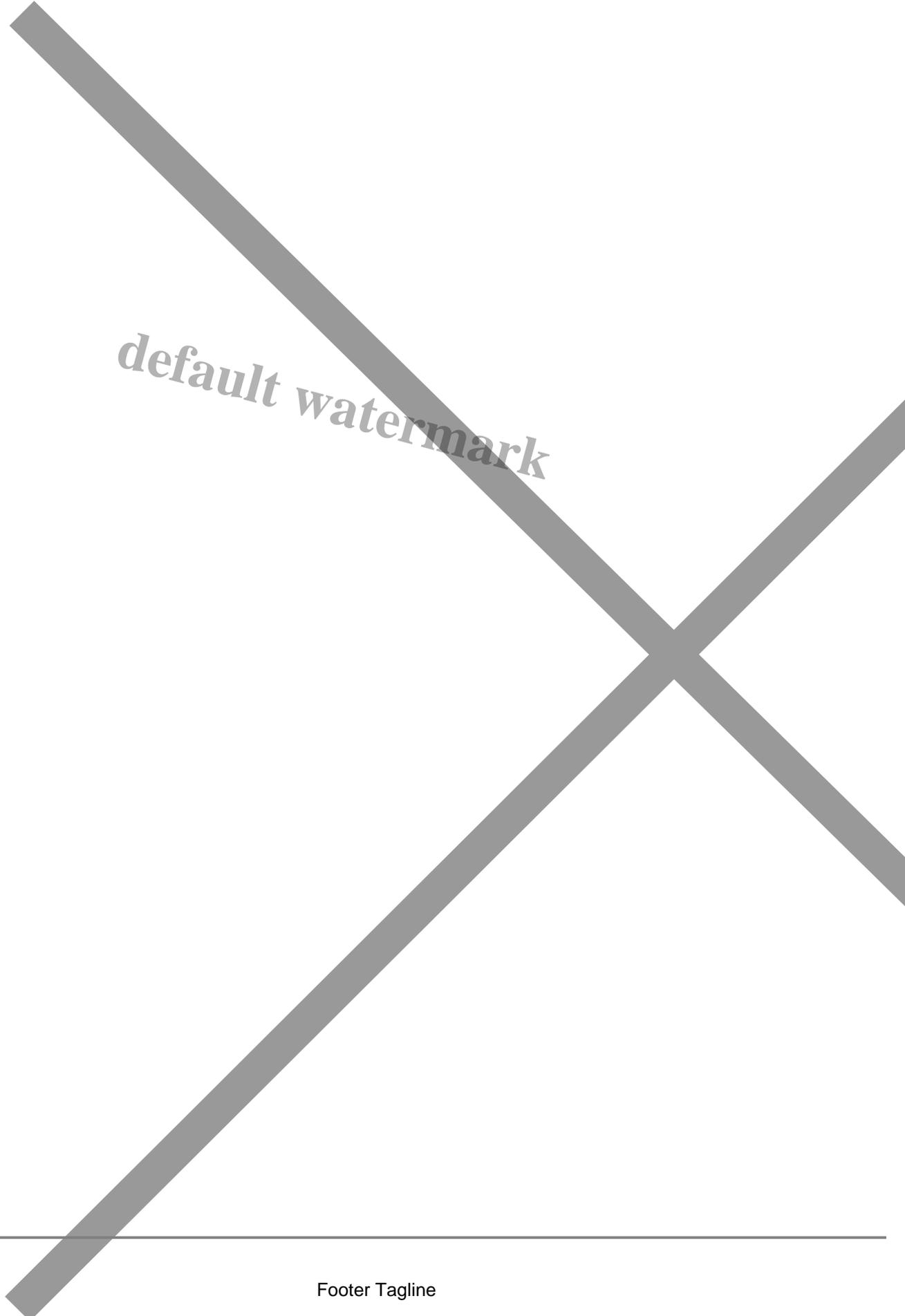
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Avery Wilson as Scarecrow in "You Can't Win." • Photo by Jeremy Daniel.

So, why should you support this show? *The Wiz* isn't simply a musical retelling of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. It is, as adaptation scholar Julie Sanders would argue, an "appropriation" a creative act that moves decisively away from the source material to generate a new cultural product with its own artistic and political stakes (Sanders, 2016, p. 35). *The Wiz* does exactly that: it reshapes Baum's narrative into a distinctly Black storyworld, one that speaks directly to belonging, community, and cultural imagination.

More than that, *The Wiz* stands as a groundbreaking example of how popular entertainment can engage, honor, and amplify Black culture. [LA Times journalist Gerrick D. Kennedy](#) describes how the show's score first captivated him, built on musical genres that are unmistakably Black creations—gospel, blues, soul, R&B. These traditions are not just aesthetic choices; they are narrative engines, woven seamlessly into Dorothy's journey in ways that mirror the joys, struggles, and triumphs of the Black experience.

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According to **Mark Kennedy** of the *Associated Press*, “Both Brady and Mingo [the actors who play the Wiz] say the show—featuring Black actors front and center—has a new resonance as it eases on down the road over the coming months. Their reflections underscore how this revival isn’t just revisiting a classic; it is reaffirming the cultural power of seeing Black performers, stories, and aesthetics centered on one of the biggest stages in American musical theatre.

I think of all these people of color on this stage telling the story of a young woman who’s lost and looking for something. She’s disenfranchised, and she happens to meet three other young people who are all looking for something, and they can’t get the answers from the older people around them because the world is in chaos. She has to step up to the plate and find her way—absolutely now is the time. —Bradey and Mingo ([Mark Kennedy, The Associated Press](#))

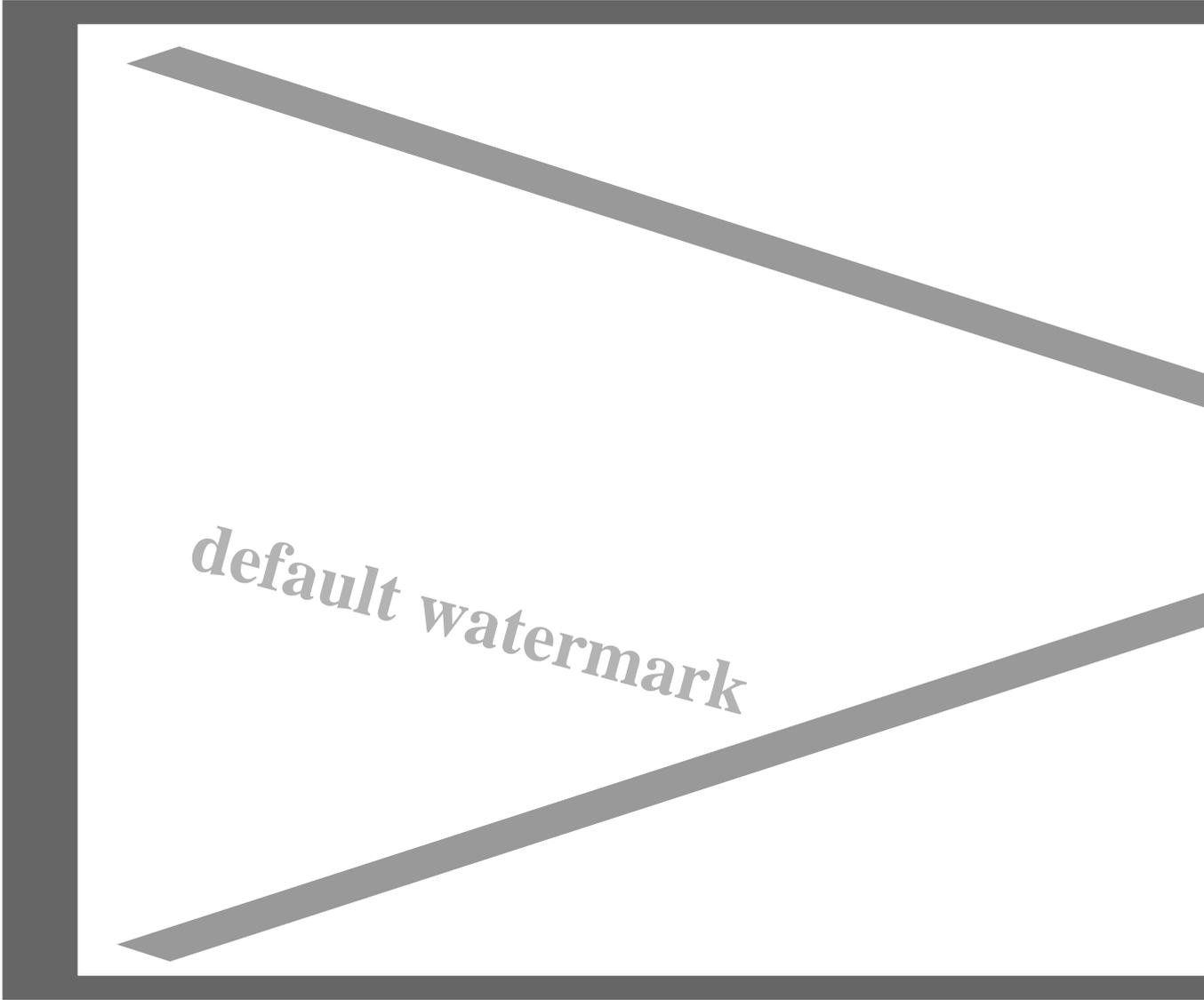
In an [interview](#) conducted by [Clay Cane](#) (Tinman) **Phillip Johnson Richardson** summed it up pretty perfectly when he said,

This show specifically . . . means so much to so many people. Not only in the theater community, it means so much to our people, like Black people specifically. It’s like, yo, we got to do this right. So there’s a lot of pressure. But at the same time, I feel very blessed and happy to be here. The pressure doesn’t really scare me. I’ve worked my whole life to get here. And everyone in the show has also worked super hard to get to here. It’s exciting. And it’s a lot of energy around it, too.

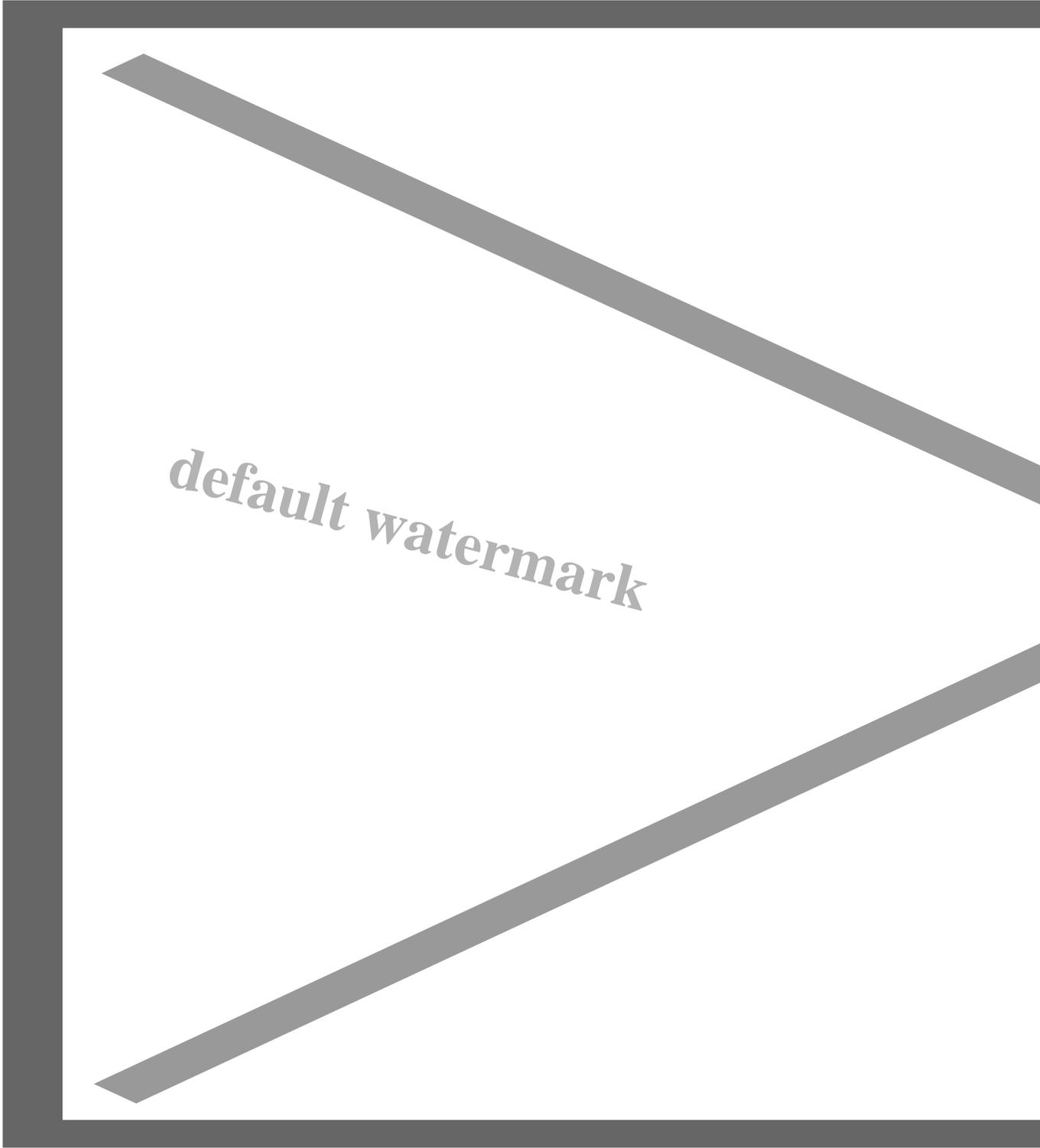
Phillip Johnson Richardson

The quality of this production is evident not only in its final polish but in the love, joy, and reverence each cast member brings to the stage. Their connection to the material is palpable, and it elevates *The Wiz* into something far more meaningful than a revival—it becomes a celebration.

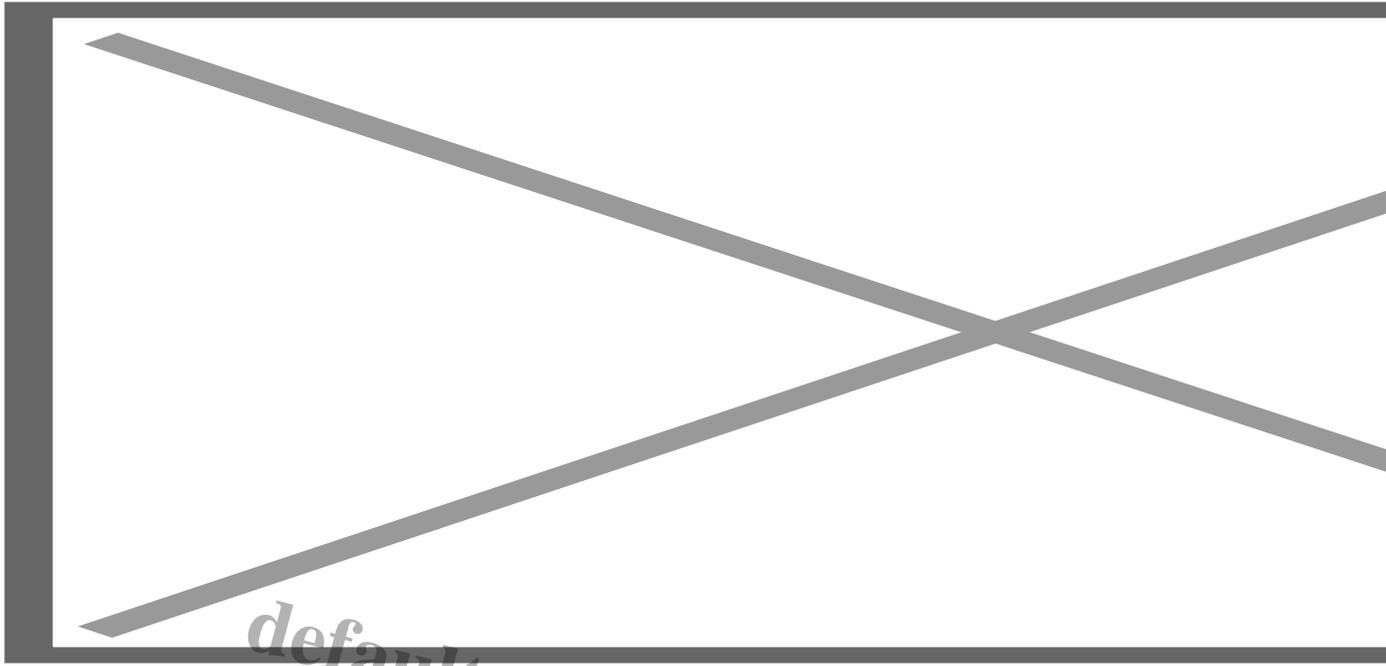
I’m deeply grateful to have experienced *The Wiz* live, and I extend my sincere thanks to **Bond Theatrical Productions** and their team for inviting me to Arizona to review this extraordinary show.



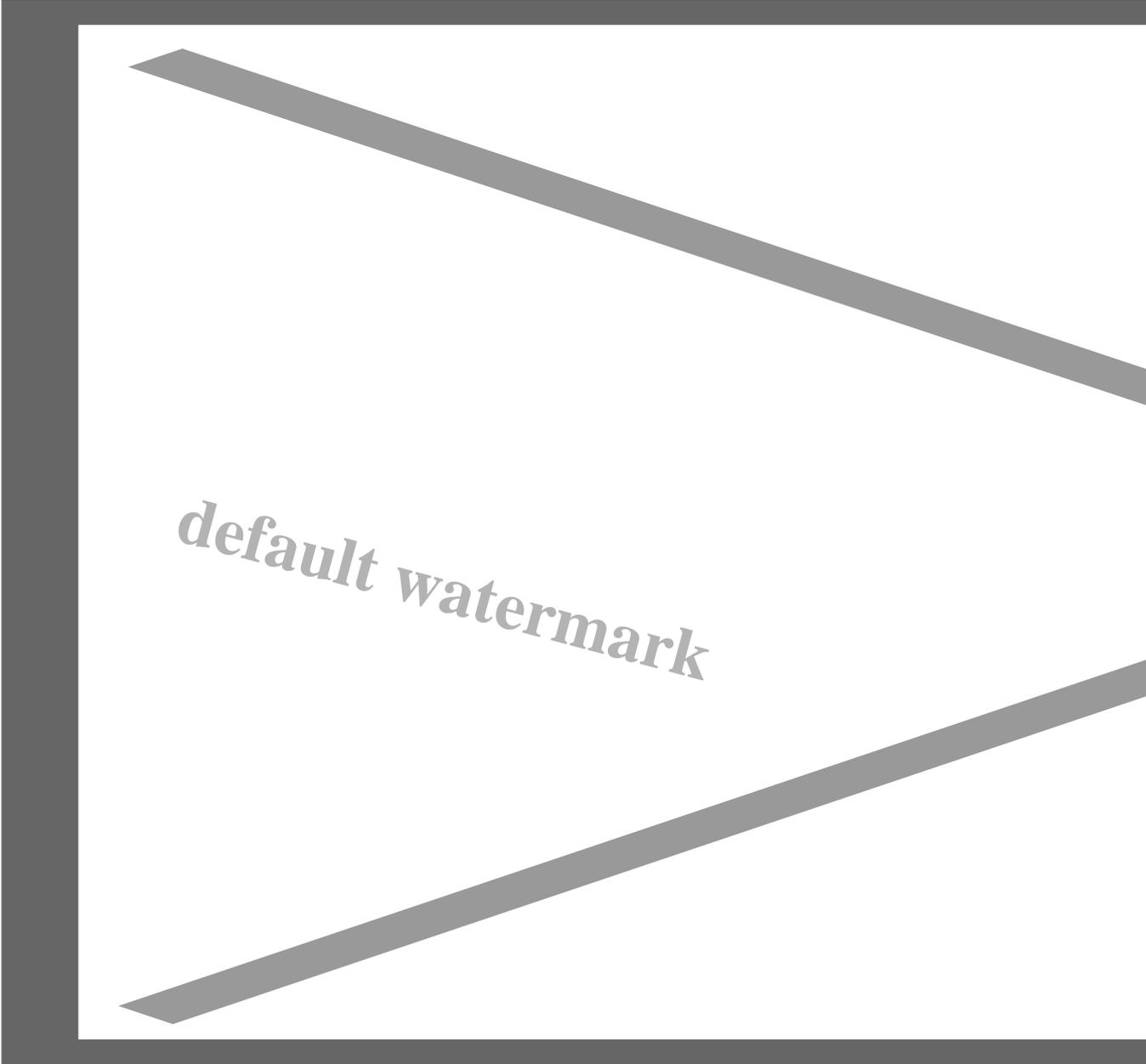
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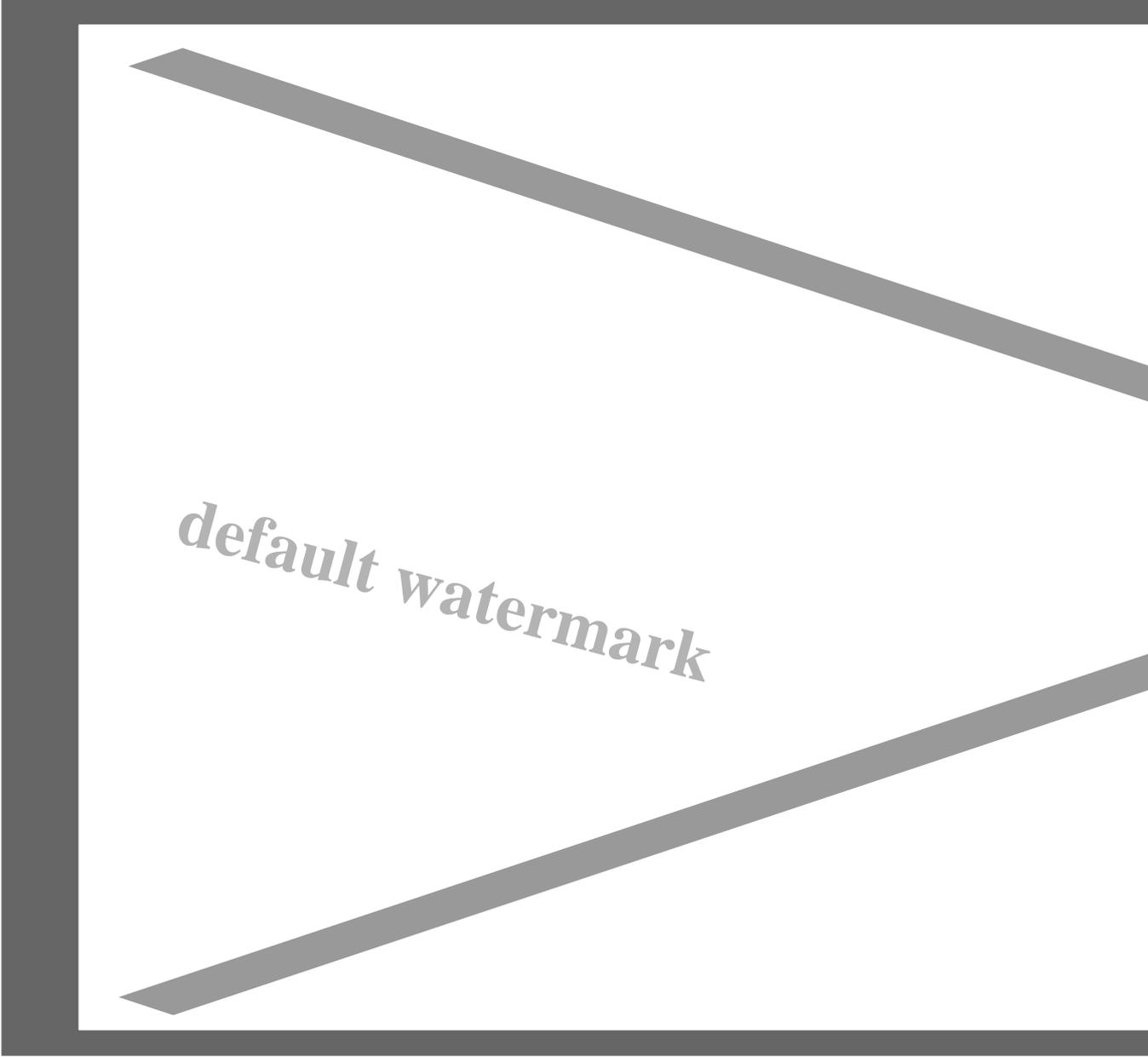
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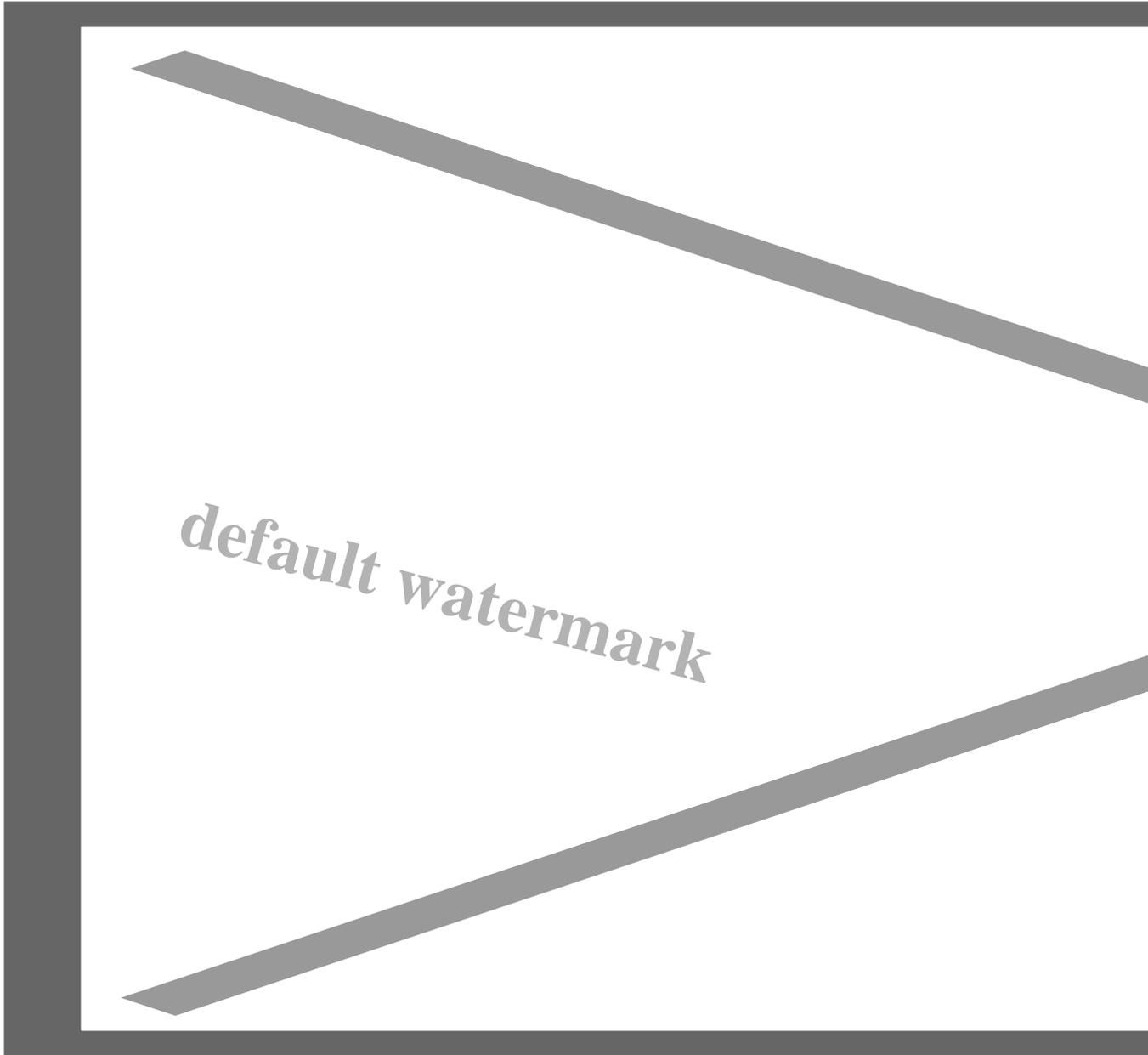
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Show Details

Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes

The Tony® Award-winning Best Musical that took the world by storm is back.

The Wiz returns home to stages across America in an all-new Broadway-bound tour, the first one in 40 years.

This groundbreaking twist on The Wizard of Oz changed the face of Broadway from its iconic score packed with soul, gospel, rock, and finger-snapping 70s funk to its stirring tale of Dorothy's journey to find her place in a contemporary world.

Direction by Schele Williams (The Notebook, revival of Disney's Aida), choreography by JaQuel Knight (Beyoncé's "Single Ladies," "Black is King"), and additional material by Tony-nominated and Emmy-nominated writer and TV host Amber Ruffin ("The Amber Ruffin Show," "Late Night With Seth Meyers") bring a whole new groove to easing on down the road. So everybody rejoice!

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Tickets: \$55-\$195

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Original 1975 The Wiz Broadway Commercial

Sources:

Sanders, J. (2016). *Adaptation and appropriation* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
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[Cast Album of the Wiz](#)

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