



- Speaker 1: 00:03 This is the Thank You, 72 podcast, brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. This podcast salutes outstanding Badgers from every one of Wisconsin’s 72 counties. Here’s your host, Tod Pritchard.
- Tod Pritchard: 00:15 Thank you, Jefferson County, for Meinhardt Raabe, University of Wisconsin–Madison, class of 1937. Many of you are probably asking, “Who’s Meinhardt Raabe?” Chances are you’ve seen the Watertown native’s performance in one of the greatest films in cinema history.
- Speaker 3: 00:31 (singing)
- Tod Pritchard: 00:40 The Wizard of Oz premiered 80 years ago. It was test-marketed in Kenosha and Oconomowoc on August 11th and 12th, 1939, opening nationwide on August 25th, 1939. We’ll take a deeper dive into the movie in just a few minutes.
- Tod Pritchard: 00:58 First, more about Meinhardt Raabe. He was the Munchkin coroner who pronounced the Wicked Witch of the East dead, crushed by Dorothy’s house, which flew out of the Kansas sky and landed in the middle of Munchkinland.
- Speaker 4: 01:21 (singing)
- Tod Pritchard: 01:24 To start and stop the story of Raabe’s life with The Wizard of Oz would be a crime because, really, he led a fascinating and unique life.
- Tod Pritchard: 01:33 Born on September 2nd, 1915, he was homeschooled as a young child, and he spoke fluent German, thanks to his immigrant grandparents. Raabe didn’t think there were any other little people like him until 1933. That’s when he visited Chicago’s Century of Progress World’s Fair and discovered he was not alone. An exhibit at the fair, which would seem shocking to us today, was called Midget Village. It was filled with other little people. He took a summer job at the village the next year, and several summer fairs after that across the country. He told a reporter for the Watertown Daily Times, “I

earned enough money to pay my boarding room at the college, and that's more than I could have done if I had stayed home."

- Tod Pritchard: 02:15 After graduating from the University of Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree in accounting, he was turned down for job after job because of his size. During one job interview he was told he should just join a carnival sideshow. Raabe was eventually hired by the Oscar Mayer Company as a spokesperson and salesman. He played the role of Little Oscar, the world's smallest chef. He traveled the country in the company's first Wienermobile for 30 years.
- Tod Pritchard: 02:42 Raabe took a leave of absence from Oscar Mayer to audition for The Wizard of Oz role. After making the film, Raabe returned to Oscar Mayer. He helped develop canned sausages, which came just in time, as the Army needed a product to help feed American soldiers in the field during World War II.
- Tod Pritchard: 03:00 Raabe was also a pilot and a ground instructor for other pilots. He tried to join the military, but was designated as 4F because of his size. However, he did his part. He joined the Civil Air Patrol in upper Michigan, flying search and rescue missions in place of the Coast Guard, which was involved in the war effort.
- Tod Pritchard: 03:19 In 1946, he married Marie Hartline, who was also a little person. They met on one of Raabe's Wienermobile tours through Ohio. They were together for 50 years, until her death in a car accident in 1997, which Raabe was also injured.
- Tod Pritchard: 03:34 Raabe would publish an autobiography, *Memories of a Munchkin: An Illustrated Walk Down the Yellow Brick Road*. Raabe donated millions of dollars earned from his book and his career to the Bethel Lutheran communities in Watertown, which support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. He passed away in 2010, the last surviving cast member with any dialogue in the film. He was 94.
- Speaker 5: 03:59 (singing)
- Speaker 1: 04:19 You're listening to the Thank You, 72 podcast, brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Once again, here's your host, Tod Pritchard.
- Tod Pritchard: 04:27 I am joined now by Rob Thomas. He's the film critic with the Cap Times here in Madison.
- Tod Pritchard: 04:32 Rob, thank you so much for being here on the podcast today.

Rob Thomas: 04:34 Thanks for having me, Tod.

Tod Pritchard: 04:35 You know, it's amazing to me that after 80 years, we're still talking about, we're still enjoying, *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy, the Munchkins, the Wicked Witch of the West, the Scarecrow, Tin Man, Lion, all the different characters. Why? What makes this movie so special?

Rob Thomas: 04:52 Well, I think you have to look at the impact it had at the time it came out. For many people, this was the first time they saw color in the movies, and they saw it in a big way, of course, when Dorothy goes to Oz. A lot of people never forget that.

Rob Thomas: 05:07 And then it became a hit on television. It became this annual tradition, as much as the Macy's parade or something like that, where families got together every year to see it, without fail, and grew up together.

Rob Thomas: 05:22 It's a different time now, obviously, with Netflix and stuff, and it's not the same, but I think it still has that same magic and wonder. It still is this wonderful movie about childhood. I read Roger Ebert's review, and he had mentioned that this is the movie where a child figures out that the adults around her don't really know what they're talking about necessarily. And every child goes through that, right? So it's a very universal theme, ultimately.

Tod Pritchard: 05:47 You bring up a really good point that, especially with the film, it had success when it came out, but it really seemed to gain steam when it hit television. And a lot of us remember, obviously, seeing the film on television for the first time, and then as we got older, re-sharing that moment, that memory with our kids. So it became sort of generational almost.

Rob Thomas: 06:14 Right. You almost pass it down to your kids. It's hard to think now, but the idea of showing movies on television was not a sure proposition back in 1956 when it started. They weren't sure that would work. I think I read that Danny Kay would host it, in a way, the screening, or Dick Van Dyke, I think, would host it a few years. So it was really an event on television.

Rob Thomas: 06:37 I think of it like the *Charlie Brown Christmas* special was another thing like that, where you watched it, your parents showed it to you, you watched it, and then your kids, you showed it to them when it was their turn. It was really this thing that was passed down, and was just as powerful and fun for each generation.

Tod Pritchard: 06:56 Just as a funny aside, when I was researching The Wizard of Oz and the playing of the movie on television, the movie would be shown on different networks every year, and it had different sponsors every year, and one of the sponsors was Dunkin' Donuts. And guess what product they launched during that showing?

Rob Thomas: 07:17 Dunkin' Donuts. I don't know. What was it?

Tod Pritchard: 07:20 Munchkins.

Rob Thomas: 07:20 Oh, of course.

Tod Pritchard: 07:21 The little donuts, right? So they used that. That's where Munchkins come from. I was like —

Rob Thomas: 07:27 That is hilarious. I'd never thought of that.

Tod Pritchard: 07:28 Isn't that strange? I always wonder, "Why do they call these little donuts Munchkins?" It was because of The Wizard of Oz.

Rob Thomas: 07:34 Very smart marketing for Dunkin' Donuts.

Tod Pritchard: 07:36 It's pretty smart marketing.

Tod Pritchard: 07:37 So let's go back to Meinhardt Raabe. He was with the other Munchkin stars. He took a train from California, and they prepared to begin shooting the film in November 1938. First, I guess they needed to cast the performers. Raabe always told reporters that he was chosen to be the coroner because he could enunciate his words.

Tod Pritchard: 08:03 So they began shooting on the sound stage, Sound Stage 27 at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, about a month after that. We're going to play a clip here of an interview with Raabe where he describes walking in on the Munchkinland set for the first time.

Meinhardt Raabe: 08:18 Well, to put it mildly, it blew your mind, because coming as a farm boy from Wisconsin to see all this color and this beauty was just, well, it was out of this world.

Tod Pritchard: 08:30 I think the color and the beauty of that film is still mind-blowing, and we talked about that a few minutes ago, where almost every film up to that point had been in black and white, so they used Technicolor really for the first time effectively in that movie. It had been used for some other films, but not to the extent that it was used in The Wizard of Oz.

Tod Pritchard: 08:54 It required a tremendous amount of lighting. Raabe once said that they used 150 39-inch-wide arc lights on the Munchkinland set. So not only was it super bright, arc lights or basically heat generators. He would say the temperature would rise on that set about to 100 degrees in just a few minutes.

Tod Pritchard: 09:17 It just seems like it was an amazing process, and we got this great film. It was very difficult to go through that and actually get those pictures and that magic on film.

Rob Thomas: 09:33 Well, there's so many stories behind the scenes about the troubles they had. I think I counted in total they had probably five different directors. Was Thorpe sort of the main one, I think? But also George Cukor. He had to leave to go do *Gone with the Wind*. George Cukor had to do *Gone with the Wind*.

Rob Thomas: 09:53 There are all these stories about how ... Well, Buddy Ebsen was supposed to be the first Tin Man, and he had an allergic reaction to the aluminum powder they put on his skin.

Tod Pritchard: 10:01 Well, and he almost died.

Rob Thomas: 10:02 Well, yeah, it was serious.

Tod Pritchard: 10:03 It was very serious. Right. It wasn't just like, "Oh, you know, I ate some shellfish."

Rob Thomas: 10:07 A skin rash.

Tod Pritchard: 10:08 Right. In fact, he was in the hospital, and the executives at MGM didn't believe it until they walked in the room, and they were like, "Oh my gosh, he's almost dead." It was really scary.

Tod Pritchard: 10:23 Yeah, and I understand that he was ... They started principal shooting. He had recorded the Tin Man song. They were down the road before they changed that up.

Rob Thomas: 10:32 "The Yellow Brick Road." Yeah, right.

Tod Pritchard: 10:38 But they just couldn't quite get the ... They couldn't really make him look like a tin man, so that's when they used that super heavy-duty, whatever it was, paint, and then he had the reaction to it.

Rob Thomas: 10:50 Yeah. I don't think they've ever released that footage of him as the Tin Man. There may be some still photos or something out there, but if they have it, they've kept it locked up in the archives.

Tod Pritchard: 10:59 Right. There's a few still photos. I don't believe I've ever seen the film. There is, somewhere out there, some audio of him actually singing the song.

Rob Thomas: 11:12 Neat.

Tod Pritchard: 11:13 Yeah. But it kind of got locked up and thrown into the archives. But, yeah, a lot of challenges with getting this film put together.

Rob Thomas: 11:22 Yeah, which you can imagine, obviously, as it was such a technical achievement for its time. It's such an unusual film. I mean, you can't think of anything like it before, certainly. Like you say, color was a big part of it, and they were putting that front and center with the ruby slippers and the Yellow Brick Road and the Emerald City. It was quite a production. It's still kind of a miracle that it came off as well as it did, right?

Tod Pritchard: 11:50 Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And you're right, they have a lot of directors. I think Victor Fleming was one of the directors, and he ended up getting pulled off. Did he do *Gone with the Wind*? I think he did, right?

Rob Thomas: 11:59 I think that's right, yeah.

Tod Pritchard: 12:00 So you're right, they had a lot of different challenges, a lot of different things going on with that movie.

Tod Pritchard: 12:07 Of course, it was the perfect vehicle for 16-year-old Judy Garland, who, to a person, the actors who played the Munchkins said that she treated them with tremendous respect, treated them as equals. I'd like to play another clip from UW alumni and Munchkin actor Meinhardt Raabe talking about Judy Garland.

Meinhardt Raabe: 12:32 My most treasured possession is a personally autographed picture from Judy in which she says, "To Meinhardt, a perfect coroner and person, too. Love from Judy."

Tod Pritchard: 12:42 The film opened up nationwide on August 25th, 1939. If you really think about it, 1939 was this watershed year for motion pictures. The Academy Awards nominations for that year read like the lineup of 20 of the best movies ever made of all time. Along with *The Wizard of Oz*, there was *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* with Jimmy Stewart; *Ninotchka* with Greta Garbo; *Stagecoach*, which was the first big film success for John Wayne; *Wuthering Heights* with Laurence Olivier; *Gunga Din* with Cary Grant; and of course the winner for that year was the epic *Gone with the Wind*.

Rob Thomas:	13:24	Hard to compete. That's a tough year to be —
Tod Pritchard:	13:26	That's a tough year.
Rob Thomas:	13:27	To try to win, yeah.
Tod Pritchard:	13:29	That's a tough lineup, yeah. Of course, <i>Gone with the Wind</i> was such an epic movie to make, and then tory that kind of captured the imagination of the country. Yeah, there was a lot of clutter, I guess, or a lot of amazing creative filmmaking out there that that <i>Wizard of Oz</i> film had to try to get through.
Rob Thomas:	13:54	Right. Exactly. Yeah, you see from that list just how different it was from everything that was being made at that time. It really is a film for all ages. It seemed to be like films were either for adults or there were serials for the kids and stuff like that, and here's a film that really bridged the gap in a way that I think foresaw a lot of what Disney would do and a lot of "children's films," quote, unquote, we see today, which adults blubber at <i>Toy Story</i> just as much as the kids do, or maybe a lot more. So you see films that are really made for all ages and that the entire family can enjoy, and maybe in different ways.
Tod Pritchard:	14:38	Rob, 80 years from now, do you think people will still be watching Meinhardt Raabe play the coroner, and will we still be talking about <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> ?
Rob Thomas:	14:47	I think so. I think it's one of the great works of literature and of cinema, for sure. We don't have those annual viewings on television anymore where the whole family watches it, and I don't think it plays in theaters as much as it used to. Once in a while, it does. I saw a sing-along version once, which was a lot of fun.
Rob Thomas:	15:10	But I think it is still such a singular achievement. Even though we're used to color film, and even though it's 80 years old, it just has this timeless quality, and great music and great characters, and I think people will still be going down the Yellow Brick Road for a long time to come.
Speaker 5:	15:30	Follow the Yellow Brick Road. Follow the Yellow Brick Road?
Speaker 8:	15:47	Follow the Yellow Brick Road.
Speaker 9:	15:48	Follow the Yellow Brick Road.
Speaker 10:	15:48	Follow the Yellow Brick Road.

Speaker 11:	15:48	Follow the Yellow Brick Road.
Speaker 12:	15:48	(singing)
Speaker 1:	16:27	Rob Thomas hosts Classic Movie Chats at Marcus Point Cinema in Madison. For more information, visit <a href="http://madison.com">madison.com</a> . Thanks for listening to the Thank You, 72 podcast, stories of amazing Badgers from the Wisconsin Alumni Association. For more podcasts, visit <a href="http://thankyou72.org">thankyou72.org</a> . That's <a href="http://thankyou72.org">thankyou72.org</a> .