



Culture Monster

All the Arts, All the Time

Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' is a favorite for radical cinematic revision

August 3, 2010 | 4:09 pm



Julie Taymor's film version of "The Tempest" is one of the most eagerly awaited prestige films of the year. It is already gaining award momentum, having secured a spot at this year's Venice Film Festival and the centerpiece spot at the New York Film Festival.

A gender-bending adaptation, the movie stars Helen Mirren in the role of Prospera, a female version of Shakespeare's Prospero, the elderly wizard living on a magical island with daughter Miranda. The movie, which will be released in the U.S. in December by Disney's Touchstone Pictures, also stars Alfred Molina, Russell Brand, Chris Cooper, Djimon Hounsou, Reeve Carney and Felicity Jones.

As we await Taymor's film, Culture Monster thought it was a good time to look back at other radical cinematic interpretations of Shakespeare's last play. As you'll see, "The Tempest" has provided a number of directors with a template on which to project their often bizarre creative visions.

Peter Greenaway's "Prospero's Books" is a visually dense, dramatically diffuse adaptation that offers such peculiar sights as a naked John Gielgud as Prospero and a urinating cherub embodying the character of Ariel. Gielgud -- in his last major Shakespearean performance -- not only plays Prospero but provides the voice-over for all of the other roles as well.

As the title suggests, Greenaway focuses on the magical volumes that Prospero brought with him to the island and provides imaginary tear sheets from the books, with text frequently superimposed on the screen to create a double-exposure effect.

Greenaway's fixation on ornate compositions and textual deconstruction can wear down the viewer's patience, and the eccentric Michael Nyman score is certainly not for everyone. But this is a movie experience that's hard to forget, even if sitting through it can be an ordeal.

Equally unconventional is British provocateur Derek Jarman's "The Tempest" (1979). The film, which transplants Shakespeare's play to a drafty, candlelit cathedral, is heavy on visual hyperbole but in many other respects, remains faithful to the original text.

Heathcote Williams plays Prospero, who is a young man in this version, and Toyah Willcox is his daughter, Miranda.

Among the showstopping moments in Jarman's version is a breastfeeding sequence involving an adult Caliban and his mother, the Sycorax. The movie also includes a campy musical interlude of "Stormy Weather," sung by stage and cabaret star Elisabeth Welch.

Paul Mazursky's "Tempest" (1982), starring real-life couple John Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands, is a modern-day story freely inspired by Shakespeare's play. Cassavetes plays an architect undergoing a midlife crisis while living in quasi-isolation on a remote Greek island with his daughter (Molly Ringwald).

In flashback scenes, we learn about his life with his wife (Rowlands) and his shady dealings with a gangster. The movie also stars Susan Sarandon, in a role that is inspired by Ariel, and the late Raul Julia is a character named Kalibanos.

-- David Ng

Photo: Helen Mirren in a scene from "The Tempest." Credit: via Movieline.com