



Taymor Weathers Risks Of 'The Tempest'

Celebrated Film, Stage Director Takes Bard's Play To New Heights

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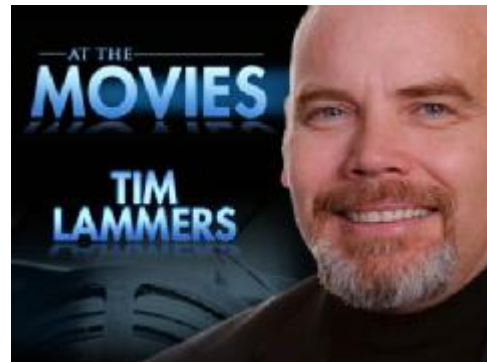


Disney Enterprises Image

"The Tempest" director Julie Taymor and her star Helen Mirren

In a recent interview with Lesley Stahl on "60 Minutes" for her upcoming Broadway musical and visual effects spectacular "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," director Julie Taymor said that she hates being in "the comfort zone" and embraced the "danger and risk" that came along with staging the most-expensive produced on Broadway.

Not surprisingly, Taymor applies those same principles to her film work, whether it be a biopic about artist Frida Khalo or vivid visual interpretation of the music of The Beatles in "Across the Universe." And as for the danger and risks associated with her latest film, "The Tempest," Taymor said the mere suggestion of adapting William Shakespeare's work for the big screen is risk for *any* filmmaker.



"Doing a Shakespeare movie in this day and age is risky," Taymor said in an @ The Movies interview Monday. "First of all, we are in a time where people aren't as willing to take risks. So just even getting people behind you to raise the money and have them believe that they won't lose it -- and even if they did, it's worth it. Hopefully, people will get out there to see 'The Tempest' right now, but (if not), it's still a good one, it's there and it lasts."

Taymor should know better than anybody who's tackled the monumental task of adapting The Bard's work for the big screen. Hot off the success of her Broadway adaptation of the Walt Disney animated classic "The Lion King," the director made her film debut with Shakespeare's epic tale of revenge, "Titus," in 1999 and remains committed to it to this day.

"'Titus' is getting much more of an audience now than it ever did because it was never promoted," Taylor said. "But I feel very responsible to the Shakespeare canon and the people who teach it. So 'Titus' will be there for a long time."

The big advantage Taymor had for raising the money to get "Titus" made was that the likes of Oscar winners Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange signed on to do the film; and she worked her magic again, so to speak, to get an Oscar-winning "queen" to star in as the sorceress, Prospera, in "The Tempest."

"Since I had Helen Mirren right at the get-go, that was a giant plus, and then I got people like Alan Cumming and Alfred Molina," Taymor explained. "Once I started putting these people together, I got the dream cast of all dream casts (the film also stars Russell Brand, Djimon Hounsou, Chris Cooper and David Strathairn).

Opening in theaters in limited release on Friday and expanding in the coming weeks, "The Tempest" tells the tale of Prospera and her mystical reign over a remote island, and how she conjures a tempest to cause a shipwreck and exact revenge on the enemies responsible for her exile.

Of course, staging "The Tempest" on an island imposed another risk for Taymor because it meant she would have to *film* on an island. Suddenly, the director got a taste of the technical challenges of filming the movie, a la "Lost," since the production was in Hawaii.

"Shooting on an island is very difficult, even if it's in America," Taymor said. "You have to ship all of your equipment by boat to the big island. And the logistics that fell into the producers' hands to get all these very famous and sought-after actors all on the island at the same time for a 44 day schedule was very challenging."

Taymor was proud of the way the shooting on the island was done in such a short time frame (far less than the norm of 10 weeks), one of the pieces of evidence that "The Tempest" was able to film on a small budget despite its impressive slate of visual effects. She was equally impressed how the entire cast (who worked for scale pay, Taymor added) and crew rallied around the production to see her vision through, even when it came to the smallest details.

"Even David Strathairn sat and sewed studs on his costume," Taymor said, giddily.



Disney/Miramax Image

Helen Mirren in "The Tempest"

When measuring the risks of the film overall, Taymor, 57, said her decision to change the gender from male (originally named Prospero) to female (redubbed Prospera) was one of the least of her concerns, knowing she had the perfect person with Mirren for the role

"If she wasn't good, that would have been bad," Taymor said with a laugh. "But the fact is Helen Mirren *was* 'The Queen.' She *was* Elizabeth. She *is* one of the great actors, male or female, of our

era. Therefore, you can rest easy knowing she was going to get to the depths of this role by hook or by crook. What Shakespeare wrote *works* for a woman."

Besides, Taymor added, some of Prospero's dialogue in "The Tempest" -- written 400 years ago - - was rooted in a character of a different gender in the classic Latin narrative poem, "Metamorphoses."

"The speech 'Ye elves of hills' -- the one Prospera says in the ring of fire -- *was* a woman's speech originally. It came from Medea," Taymor said. "Shakespeare lifted that speech straight out of 'Metamorphoses.' It works *beautifully* for a woman."

Leaving no stone unturned, Taymor and Mirren were convinced themselves they were doing the right thing by switching Prospero's gender by doing a read through of "The Tempest" long before filming commenced.

"We did so we could make sure it changing the gender wasn't a gimmick or wasn't going to ruin the play," Taymor recalled. "We didn't want to do it if it was going to change it so much that it would make it seem like a different play. I think it enhances the original play. If you don't know the original play, I don't think you'd feel the change at all. It just works."

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