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## Taymor's 'Tempest' a Triumph

Julie Taymor's "The Tempest" (opening today at Landmark's Harbor East) is a triumph -- a new vision of the play in which everything that is original and surprising also feels inevitable and true. What makes it equally subtle and sweeping is Taymor's uncanny ability to fuse visual and verbal poetry and weld seemingly opposite dramatic forms -- as she puts it in a beautiful new "Tempest" book, "from visceral reality to heightened expressionism." And she does this while preserving and enriching the core story.



Taymor's casting of Helen Mirren as a female "Prospera" instead of the usual male "Prospero" is inspired, not gimmicky. In this rendering of Shakespeare, Taymor and Mirren's Prospera became Duke of Milan when her husband died. She was deposed when her brother spread the rumor that her scientific studies were "dark arts." Saved by her people, who pushed her out to sea in a bark, she has made a barren island her home and raised her daughter Miranda there for a dozen years. Her only help has been the sprite Ariel and the island's enslaved native, Caliban, the son of another exiled sorceress (an evil one).

Mirren's prismatic Prospera -- enchanting and menacing, sage and savage -- helps Taymor root the almost reckless, always exhilarating comedy and drama of this "Tempest" in the heroine's dueling impulses. Her daughter's exile weighs on her conscience. She has creative urges, like marrying Miranda off to the King of Naples' son, though the monarch betrayed her. But she also

has destructive drives, like wreaking vengeance on the men who plotted against her, including the King and her own brother, when she summons them to her shores.

As Taymor explained in an interview this week, the way Prospera hovers at the brink of “the alchemical transformation – the change from white magic to black magic,” sums up “the condition of human beings at the moment. We have the power to be so intelligent and artistic and procreative and all that. Yet we’re just as easily able to slip into the dark side of our power and destroy the earth. That’s why this ‘Tempest,’ any ‘Tempest,’ is so right about the condition of humankind.”

Taymor starts the movie with a dissolving sand castle, suggesting that “civilization as we create it will fall to nature no matter what.” Taymor matches that image at the end with Prospera’s books drowning in the sea. “I had a Shakespearean scholar tell me that [the books falling in the water] were the saddest image ever seen, that the books dissolving in water – we’ve just lost them. And I feel that’s true. The notion of poetry has gone out of our culture. It’s become a little bit obsolete. What we think of as realism or naturalism has taken over the power of what your imagination can create. It’s not just with reality TV. There’s something about the expediency and immediacy of numbers and words, like with texting and the Internet, that the time it takes to concoct and create an elegant sentence or a line of poetry is useless now.”

But Taymor isn’t hopeless. She still sees poetic vitality all over the world, whether in the wizardly yarn-spinning of African griots – “the storytellers who weave images through the labyrinth of words” -- or the improvisatory comic brilliance of Russell Brand, who plays the jester in her “Tempest.”

Her own art gives hope to the rest of us. She's imbued her "Tempest" with the vivid, haunting textures of a tangible dream.

### **About Michael Sragow**

Mike Sragow first demonstrated his critical faculties at age four, after an infuriatingly brief Ferris Wheel ride. "What a gyp!" he exclaimed, politically incorrectly, shaming the Wheel operator into giving him and his fellow passengers another spin. The movie that made him want to write about movies was Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch," which he saw six times in two weeks in 1969. He is the author of "Victor Fleming: An American Movie Master" (Pantheon), co-winner of the National Award for Arts Writing in 2008. He was the first regular movie critic for Rolling Stone, a movie columnist for Salon and has appeared in The New Yorker since 1989.