

The Tempest

REVIEW BY VIOLET LUCCA

Director: Julie Taymor

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Opening: December 10

Where: New York & Los Angeles

What makes Julie Taymor's adaptation of *The Tempest* so audacious—unforgivably so, it would seem, judging by initial reviews—is that it opens up space inside Shakespeare's play to reveal themes that the text might otherwise not have room to accommodate.

Eschewing the motif of magic as a metaphor for the illusionism of theater, *The Tempest* instead foregrounds issues of power. Foremost is the switch from Prospero to Prospera, fiercely played by Helen Mirren. Other textual changes are small yet pointed: pronouns are flipped, but the address of "Master" (which connotes more power than "Mistress") is retained; Prospera is still robbed of her Dukedom by her brother, but here he does so by accusing her of being a witch. The acid with which she delivers the line, "knowing that others of my sex have burned for far less" lingers long after it is hissed. Bellowing just as convincingly as when she delivers quiet, quick lines of iambic verse, Taymor's Prospera is the female role that never was: a powerful woman who has not used her sex to achieve or maintain her power, confident in her decisions, and motherly only with her daughter. Prospera relinquishes that power without tears, though the heavy sigh she breathes as Ariel (the excellent Ben Whishaw) tightly laces her corset—the physically deforming embodiment of European female subservience—says more about the reality of motherhood than all the weeping in *Stella Dallas* ever could.

Costuming is key to understanding Taymor's interpretation of Caliban (Djimon Hounsou), whose appearance contrasts with the semi-translucent Ariel and the buttoned-up conquistador garb of Alonso's men. Taking its cue from the derogatory language with which he is described in Shakespeare's original, he is monstrous by virtue of being a mélange of diverse elements ("fish" with webbed fingers and scales; "of the earth," covered in mud, naked; a "mooncalf," with a circular patch of vitiligo on his face), and as racial Other. The primal scene of white sailors encountering natives—and failing to recognize their humanity—is made more telling since first contact is made by the drunken Stephano (Alfred Molina) and the boobish Trinculo (a perfectly cast Russell Brand). Hounsou plays Caliban with roaring bluster, furious at Miranda's romantic involvement with Prince Ferdinand. The scenes involving this would-be usurping trio are hilarious and maintain a campy, frenetic energy that moves the film forward, complicated by the sinister undercurrent of colonialism that is subtly allowed to bubble up from time to time.

The splintered insurgency that threatens Prospera's dominion—Caliban and company, Alonso and his treacherous men, and the unfolding romance between Miranda and the *shojo*-tastic Prince Ferdinand—

are manipulated through the sorceress's control of time, not space. As such, *The Tempest* is less visually lavish than Taymor's previous two productions, relying on the inherent spectacle of its location, the volcanic Hawaiian island of Lanai, which encompasses beach, temperate rain forest, desert, and terrain reminiscent of the planet Mars. The director's usual CGI flourishes are mostly limited to the visualization of the sexually ambiguous Ariel, who, with transient breasts, darts around his master, never quite matching her eyeline (and never fully incarnate). Dispensing with tableau compositions, this adaptation feels liberated from static theatrical and, to a lesser degree, cinematic convention by the overall openness of its staging and camerawork that's somewhere between handheld and Steadicam. Perhaps most refreshingly of all, the visual strategy goes some way toward addressing the problems of those who find Shakespearean language comprehensible only when read. While you probably couldn't watch her film in lieu of reading the play and pass a high-school exam, Taymor goes beyond whatever 400 years of literary criticism and Wikipedia have to say about the play to create her own yonic paradise.



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