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## Julie Taymor's visions manifest in 'Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark' and 'The Tempest'

**In the ambitious new musical and Shakespearean film, the director brings her fantastical ideas into being.**

By John Horn, Los Angeles Times, December 12, 2010



Patrick Page as Norman Osborn/the Green Goblin, left, and Reeve Carney as Peter Parker/Spider-Man in a scene from the Broadway show "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark." (Jacob Cohl/ 8 Legged Productions)

Reporting from New York —

— Jammed with computers, cables and technicians, the orchestra section inside the Foxwoods Theatre looked like the control room at a particle accelerator, yet it was a very different kind of physics experiment Julie Taymor was trying to manage.

Standing in front of rows of oversized monitors staffed by her creative team inside the darkened Broadway auditorium in mid-November, Taymor was running through one of the most elaborate, gravity-defying fight sequences in "Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark," her creatively and financially audacious musical.

The sequence called for the titular web slinger to battle the villainous Green Goblin as both characters zoomed around on wires anchored to the cavernous theater's roof. The aerial system's powerful motors, which can fly performers at speeds approaching 35 mph from

the stage to the balcony, already had propelled one of the musical's cast members into the hospital with two broken wrists. With little more than a week before the musical's first preview, Taymor and her collaborators had never rehearsed the entire scene near the end of the show's first act, and "Spider-Man's" composers and lyricists, U2's Bono and the Edge, were about to drop by to see how the whole thing was progressing.

As Taymor, writer Glen Berger, choreographer Daniel Ezralow and several dozen designers, programmers, stage hands and cast members looked up from the orchestra, Spider-Man and the Green Goblin launched into the air for their dogfight, with the web slinger at one point riding atop the villain's back as if he were an airborne skateboard.

"Oh my God! Whoa," Taymor yelled as Christopher Tierney, who performs some stunts for lead

Reeve Carney, zipped down on his wires to land in the middle of an aisle. Collin Baja, dressed for the fight as the Green Goblin (the part will be acted and sung by Patrick Page), spun into a high-speed roll, coming within a few feet of the theater's walls. As both actors landed on their marks and the three-minute sequence ended, a visibly relieved Taymor applauded.

"As you can imagine," she said as Tierney and Baja unclipped from their flying harnesses, "this takes more time than you'd think."

About seven years, if you can in fact imagine — and some \$65 million, easily the most expensive show in Broadway history. To break even, "Spider-Man" will have to play to sold-out houses for as many as four years, a feat pulled off by only a handful of shows like "Wicked" and Taymor's own "The Lion King."

Taymor's ambition hardly can be measured in time and dollars. As she has done in a fantastic mix of film, opera and theater productions, the 57-year-old director, writer and designer conforms to few artistic margins. She says she is often motivated by a project's inherent unfeasibility, and labors to weld eclectic influences — masks, puppets and mime, myths and shamanism — to popular culture.

This month alone, Taymor will be represented on stage with "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" (now in previews, it opens Jan. 11), in movie theaters with this weekend's gender-switching interpretation of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" and at the Metropolitan Opera with a holiday-season revival of her interpretation of Mozart's "The Magic Flute," a family-friendly production stuffed with Masonic, tantric, bunraku and cabala influences.

Taymor also directed the 2007 film "Across the Universe," which foreshadowed "Glee" by using pop music (Beatles songs, in Taymor's case) to drive a narrative. Along with her composer husband, Elliot Goldenthal, she staged 2006's Los Angeles Opera world premiere "Grendel."

"Along with great directors, she takes new and creative steps to expand the imagination of the audience," said Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. "She has an extraordinary visual vocabulary — which is always growing. She thinks big, and not just in terms of budget, but also creatively."

Though Taymor's break-the-boundaries aspirations might put her "Tempest," starring Helen Mirren in a role written for a man, beyond the grasp of some moviegoers, her recombinant style has yielded one of the most successful productions in the history of show business. Taymor's musical adaptation of "The Lion King" is currently playing in seven cities around the globe and is nearing a global gross of \$4 billion, dwarfing the combined worldwide ticket sales for all three "Spider-Man" movies.

The "Spider-Man" musical may never approach "The Lion King's" grosses, but on that November afternoon inside the Foxwoods Theatre, that benchmark was far from Taymor's thoughts. Rather, she had to make sure the whole thing would not be ensnared in its own complicated web.

### **Actualizing the impossible**

Taymor likes to explain that her works are governed by an ideograph — a tangible distillation of a creative concept.

The ideograph for "The Lion King" is the circle — "The Circle of Life," as the song has it, the

conical Pride Rock that spins up from the stage, the round gazelle wheel that is pushed to simulate running animals. In "The Tempest," it's nurture versus nature — a child's mother trying to control Mother Earth. For "Spider-Man," it's the internal battle between the public and private self — that with great power comes great responsibility: Spider-Man has to learn that he can't climb away from his destiny.

"I think I am drawn to outsiders — Grendel, Spider-Man, Frida Kahlo," Taymor said, referring to her 2002 movie "Frida." "They allow us to step out of our own lives and look at them from a different perspective. As artists, that's what our job is. That's what I believe we are here to do."

At the same time, she looks for intuitive connective tissue — ways to make contemporary stories feel primal, and vice versa. Russell Brand, who plays the jester Trinculo in "The Tempest," is dressed in the kind of bright green and red garb you'd find at a West Hollywood thrift shop. For the much more modern "Spider-Man" story, Taymor and writer Berger have infused the musical with Greek myth, adding a four-member chorus and the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance.

"Julie is unafraid of being poetic," said Mirren, who in "The Tempest" plays Prospera, as the play's usurped Duke of Milan, Prospero, has been renamed. "And she never underestimates the audience. Her work is not of the moment — I think that what she does has legs, and will be remembered."

Taymor believes as dissimilar as her works might first appear, they share common elements.

"People think Shakespeare is highfalutin, esoteric — and certainly not commercial. How do I go from that to the most pop in pop culture?" Taymor, dressed in jeans and a loose sweater, said during a dinner break in the "Spider-Man" rehearsal.

"I actually see Shakespeare — and I really mean this — and Spider-Man as pop icons. They are both mythic. They both come from ancient cultures. Even Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, who created Spider-Man, were drawing from ancient Greek myths. And there are human spiders in Indian, American Indian and African ... stories. My push for 'Spider-Man' is its mythic DNA, and my push for Shakespeare is its common denominator — its ability to be accessible to the groundlings."

The setbacks surrounding the musical are mythic themselves. Producer Tony Adams died in 2005 just as the Edge fetched a pen to sign the show's contracts, and producer David Garfinkle subsequently ran out of money as the musical's budget — which included millions of dollars of theater renovations — ballooned past every Broadway reference point.

Rock music promoter Michael Cohl, recruited by Bono and the Edge, came in as the new lead producer to prevent the musical from falling apart. As actors were hurt during rehearsals (the injuries include a concussion suffered by Natalie Mendoza, who plays the musical's central invention, the temptress Arachne), Cohl and Taymor pushed back the date for their first previews and opening.

Any number of concepts, including web-shooting and an elaborate final scene, were abandoned along the way, but with so many stunts, costume changes and scene changes, "Spider-Man's" first preview had to be stopped five times.

Anyone who was around "The Lion King" when it launched its tryout in Minneapolis knows that its first preview was nearly as chaotic.

"She is very adventuresome," said Peter Schneider, who with Thomas Schumacher produced "The Lion King" for Disney Theatrical Productions in 1997. "And you need a serious artist to stage something of the magnitude of 'Spider-Man,' to do the impossible. But she's done it before. She put giraffes on the stage in 'The Lion King,' and people weep."

### **Inside the story**

Over the course of watching Taymor and her team rehearse all afternoon, it was obvious why the show has been so challenging to mount. The New York-based director, who studied drama and performance at Oberlin and spent several influential years leading an Indonesian theater troupe after college, seemed calm as her stage manager repeatedly had to stop rehearsals.

"The Lion King" tried to turn a cinematic event into a theatrical experience, but "Spider-Man" aims to do something far more complicated: take the audience inside a movie. The musical's flying, lighting, projections, scenery and sound design all are designed to free "Spider-Man" from the confines of the proscenium arch, and propel the story into the house.

"The idea is, how do we give the audience the experience of being in it?" choreographer Ezralow said as Tierney and Baja prepared to practice their flying duel once more. Added Taymor: "Talk about 3-D. Spider-Man is going to walk down the aisles and clip in" to the flying apparatus. It's telling that the only key person Taymor recruited from the films was Scott Rogers, the stunt coordinator on the last two "Spider-Man" movies.

Yet Taymor knows that even with so much technical wizardry — original film scenes about the musical's villains are projected on massive video screens flanking the stage, huge scenic pieces like the Chrysler Building unfold from above the stage like deconstructed origami — the audience won't much care if they can't connect emotionally.

"I wouldn't call it a spectacle," she said. "That implies it doesn't have depth or content. None of us would be here if we weren't involved in telling the story."

Carney, who has stuck with the show even as original costars Evan Rachel Wood and Alan Cumming left after the delays (Wood's Mary Jane Watson will now be played by Jennifer Damiano, and Page replaced Cumming), said he was initially attracted to the show because of Taymor's fearlessness.

"The main thing I kept hearing was that she wanted to do something that had never been done before — a rock and roll circus drama," said Carney, who is a professional musician with the band Carney. "Julie is really a master of mixing media, and I think this show is a good example of that," says the actor, who also plays Ferdinand in "The Tempest."

Where she used highly stylized puppets and masks in "The Lion King," Taymor is turning to Greek mythology in her new musical. "What's the entire basis of the Spider-Man stories? Hubris. Every villain's downfall is their own hubris. Spider-Man never kills anybody," she said. "They are done in by themselves. Spider-Man has no hubris. He is the chosen one. He is the everyman."

If hubris is something she assigns to some of the musical's characters, she insists it is an attribute from which the production itself does not suffer. "Cirque du Soleil spends \$150 million to \$200 million per show," she said. "There are a lot of people who put money in this show. Why? Because they believe in the show, and the artists, and that it might pay off. The audience doesn't get rooked in this deal. We're not using taxpayers' money. When people do a two-character, one-act, one-set play like 'Red' and the ticket prices are the same as 'Spider-Man,' why are they not

angry about that? I mean, where's that money going?"

"Spider-Man's" early ticket sales have been solid but not spectacular, and as the show's budget climbs, Cohl may need to find more investors. But Taymor has heard enough about money.

" 'The Lion King' cost \$29 million 13 years ago, and nobody talked about money then. Now, it's ad nauseam — like the weekend movie grosses. Nobody says, 'Is the movie any good?' They just talk about the weekend grosses. No one says, 'What was it about? Did it move you?' Our country is just totally transformed in that sense. But 'Lion King' has made more than \$3.8 billion. And it's still running. No, we don't know if 'Spider-Man' is going to be a success. But that's always the hope, isn't it?"

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