

The One ... if You Need to Brush Up on Your Shakespeare

by Jeremy McCarter, November 26, 2010



Recycling isn't just useful; it can be fun to watch, too. No director working today has done more to translate creativity from one medium to another than Julie Taymor. In 1997 she took a middling property—*The Lion King*, a Disney animated movie with an Elton John score—and, using puppetry and African masks, turned it into one of the most inventive and satisfying Broadway musicals of the decade. Since then, she has made three films, all inspired by or adapted from material in wide circulation: a Shakespeare play (the gory *Titus*), Frida Kahlo's paintings (the biopic *Frida*), and Beatles songs (the musical *Across the Universe*). The films don't always work: she doesn't have the same command of spectacle onscreen that she does onstage. But they've all had some interest, and at their best, her treatment tells us something new about the materials she's used. I've thought much better of "All My Loving" since Taymor had some young lovers sing it softly to each other as they were about to be separated in *Across the Universe*.

The Tempest marks Taymor's latest effort to pour old wine into stylish new bottles. Shakespeare's comedy has been filmed before, but never with quite the spin she gives it here. In her screenplay, Prospero, the usurped duke and father of Miranda, becomes Prospera. The gender switch requires some tweaked dialogue about witchcraft, which doesn't offer much fresh illumination, but it does allow the role to be played with cool authority by Helen Mirren. (Her starry castmates include Russell Brand, who labors at playing the drunkard Trinculo, and the excellent David Strathairn as Duke Alonso.)

The illumination comes from the spectacle Taymor uses to depict the story's magic. Beyond the ferocious storm that strands Prospera's enemies on the island, the film's special effects, to a surprising extent, add little to the story. Watching Taymor's film, you realize that the resemblances between Prospero and Shakespeare go beyond the fact that they're both aging masters about to give up their craft. Shakespeare's words themselves are spells. On a bare stage, they conjure the fantastical island and its inhabitants as succinctly as Prospero conjures his Ariel. Next to the concise power of his language, the screen wizardry of even a resourceful director like Taymor seems like rough magic indeed.