

## Julie Taymor brings 'The Tempest' to the screen

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Director Julie Taymor: The Bard is "the most visual writer."

Few contemporary artists have bounded so successfully across genres as Julie Taymor, whose repertory ranges from Sophocles to Walt Disney. She was an established director and designer of avant-garde theater and opera for more than two decades before her musical adaptation of "The Lion King" stormed Broadway in 1997. Since then, she has continued to reinterpret classics onstage, and has directed three feature films - "Titus" (based on Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus"), "Frida" and "Across the Universe." Whether on stage or screen, Taymor consistently dazzles and surprises audiences with the colorful spectacle of her aesthetic - a vibrant mix of classical iconography, masks, puppetry and a deep fascination with myth and ritual.

Her new film, an inventive adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," recasts the traditionally male character Prospero as a female sorceress played by Helen Mirren. In Taymor's version, Mirren's Prospera, stranded on a mysterious tropical island with her teenage daughter, Miranda (Felicity Jones), plots revenge on her shipwrecked enemies.

"Shakespeare is the most visual writer I've ever come across, that's why I keep returning to his work," said Taymor by phone from New York during a rehearsal break from "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," the \$70 million rock musical that will mark her return to Broadway when it opens in January. " 'The Tempest' is like a trailer for all his other plays because it has romance, comedy, treachery, revenge and forgiveness."

Taymor discussed using her famous attention to visual detail to make the Bard's language more accessible, and her experience working with an all-star cast, which includes Djimon Hounsou, Russell Brand, Ben Whishaw, Alan Cumming and Reeve Carney (who also plays Spidey in Taymor's new musical).

**Q: You've directed "The Tempest" several times onstage. Why did you want to make it a movie?**

**A:** It was the first Shakespeare I ever directed, in New York in 1986, and I fell in love with the play, with its great psychological situations and the sorcery. It is considered Shakespeare's last major self-written play, and immediately after I did "Titus," one of his early plays, I thought that if I ever did another Shakespeare movie, it would have to be "The Tempest." It lends itself so naturally to cinema - after all, it's a play about magic.

**Q: Your career moves back and forth between theater and film, two mediums that allow you to do different things. Audiences play make-believe in the theater, but with film you can show reality rather than artifice. How did you strike a balance in "The Tempest" between realism and a kind of expressionism?**

**A:** It was incredibly important to me to strike a balance between the literal reality of location, the natural light and winds in Hawaii where we shot it, and visual effects that create the surrealistic moments. I thought I could help make Shakespeare's language more accessible with the right imagery and the use of the close-up, but all the effects are foremost derived from the actors themselves. I had to think, for instance, how does Ben Whishaw play Ariel, a spirit who can appear and disappear on command, can fly and shape-shift, as human enough to be able to move an audience's emotions? So Ariel is never a CGI character except maybe one moment when he's a frog. Even in underwater scenes, Ben was actually acting under glass and two inches of water.

**Q: Tell me about your decision to switch the main character's gender.**

**A:** I had always wanted to work with Helen Mirren, and then I ran into her and learned that she and I had both been thinking of Prospero being played by a woman, and she said she'd love to do it. I didn't want this to be a gimmick, so I went back to work on the script, changed all the pronouns and decided to alter her character's backstory. Changing it only slightly, it became much more profound because Prospera becomes a widow and heir to a dukedom, only to be accused of witchcraft, as women always have been, and it was on punishment of death.

**Q: Vengeance is a recurring theme in your work - in "Titus," "Frida," even "The Lion King" - and there is a lot of scheming for revenge in this film, but you've said it's really about forgiveness.**

**A:** The story charts Prospera's realization that it is better to have compassion than to be vengeful, and on that journey Helen brings so many conflicting impulses - maternal warmth, and cruelty. I think what I adore most about Shakespeare is that things are not black and white. There is no greater author at expressing complexity of character. You don't know whether to really like Prospera. She is not a perfect mother, but twisted inside from guilt over her daughter's exile and the need to exact revenge on those responsible.

Shakespeare was at once a cynic and also a true believer in the power of the human spirit. He gives voice to the pull we have between our better selves and our true natures, between nature and nurture, which is the absolute crux of what "The Tempest" is about.

**Q: Were there challenges working with some actors who have Shakespeare experience and others who don't?**

**A:** It was just the same with "Titus," when I had Anthony Hopkins, who is extremely experienced, and Jessica Lange, who never had done a Shakespeare play. So, you rehearse. Reeve Carney and Felicity Jones rehearsed with us for three weeks, which is not a lot of rehearsal for Shakespeare, but for film it is.

Reeve was such a natural, and his speaking of Shakespeare is flawless, exactly in meter. I auditioned many more well-known actors for the part, but he was so believable. And I had no idea he would then be Spider-Man.

**Q: People might be surprised to see Russell Brand doing Shakespeare.**

**A:** I went to see Russell do stand-up in New York and I knew right then he was a perfect Trinculo. He is a court jester. I told him I wanted him to look like a sewer rat, so I gave him bad teeth to wear and he slumped his shoulders, slobbered, did whatever it took to be as slimy and grimy as possible. He is a wonderful actor and we will only see him grow as he moves away from comedy. And his improvisations in rehearsal were pure genius. We are going to put one of his great improvs on YouTube.

**Q: Isn't there a great irony in the fact that you're directing Shakespeare for the movies and Spider-Man for the stage?**

**A:** Well, I figure that Shakespeare was the real pop artist. He was the popular one, writing for the masses. And the guys who wrote those comic books were actually doing something that is classical and stretches back to the Greek myths. I wouldn't be working this long on the Spider-Man story, and neither would Bono or the Edge (who wrote the songs), if we didn't find something deep and ancient in it. So, yes, I think people see this as ironic, but to me it strikes right at the heart of what I love to do. {sbox}

**The Tempest** (PG-13) opens Friday at Bay Area theaters.

To see a trailer for "The Tempest," go to [links.sfgate.com/ZKQO](http://links.sfgate.com/ZKQO).

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