

## Local firm co-produces 'The Tempest'

TalkStory Productions makes magic with Mirren and Taymor

By Mike Gordon , POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Dec



Courtesy Tempest Production

Jason Lau, president of TalkStory Productions, the Hawaii company that co-produced 'The Tempest,' and actor David Strathairn who plays King Alonso.

Island to co-produce Taymor's version of "The Tempest."

The film, which opens in Hawaii theaters tonight, was transformational. Lau went from producing a pair of movies of the week on the SyFy Channel to being listed alongside eight Academy Award winners and a cast that includes Helen Mirren, Chris Cooper, Djimon Hounsou, Tom Conti and David Strathairn.

But Lau needed some convincing at first, especially when Taymor said she wanted to film Shakespeare on Lanai.

"How are we supposed to do that?" he said. "It was so out of the box."

Taymor wanted to film at the otherworldly Garden of the Gods as well as Lanai's rocky coastline -- and later, on the Big Island. She had also done some gender bending and changed the story's lead character into a woman, Prospera, played by Mirren.

When he got the message that Julie Taymor had called, Jason Lau didn't recognize the name.

Sure, he was familiar with her films -- "Titus," "Frida" and her Beatles fantasia "Across the Universe." But the idea that an Oscar-worthy director would be asking for help from his tiny Honolulu production house seemed as remote as the island of Lanai.

Turns out it was his first brush with a perfect storm. Not only was Lau swept into the world of Hollywood elite but his TalkStory Productions was dropped onto the Pineapple



Courtesy Tempest Production

Helen Mirren, top, stars as Prospera in a gender-bending role imagined by director Julie Taymor in the new film version of Shakespeare's 'The Tempest.'



Courtesy Tempest Production

Russell Brand as Trinculo and Alfred Molina as Stephano in a scene from the film.

The director, the visionary behind the Broadway version of Disney's "The Lion King," had been to Lanai the year before, Lau said. The whole time Taymor was there, every location made her think of Prospera, an exiled sorceress who wields magic and mayhem to bring characters from her past to her mysterious island.

"It would have this fantastical look," Lau said. "She described the images she had and we were hooked."

Taymor already had Mirren cast. Lau met the British actress, who won a Best Actress Oscar for her role in "The Queen," while at the L.A. home of producer Robert Chartoff. They were in the kitchen. Mirren made Lau a pastrami sandwich.

"It was surreal," Lau said. "Helen Mirren making me a sandwich. She seems larger than life but when you meet her, she is down-to-earth."

Mirren, now 65, told Lau about her only trip to Hawaii. She was on her way to Australia to star alongside James Mason in the 1969 film "Age of Consent." She had a layover in Honolulu but found herself stranded at the airport, dressed in a black leather miniskirt and dying from the heat. She asked a police officer for help and he gave her a ride to her Waikiki hotel.

"The Tempest," the largest independent motion picture financed and produced by a Hawaii company, cost about \$22 million.

TalkStory Productions co-produced the movie with Chartoff/Hendee Productions and Artemis Productions but Lau's ability to bring local investors to the project became critically important in the months before the economy crashed. The local company raised all of the funding for the project.

TalkStory Productions was created in 2003 after Lau, whose background is in financial consulting and portfolio management, started working with a mainland screenwriter who wanted to do a film in the islands.

The film never happened, but Lau wound up as president of the company, his wife, Deborah, became the business manager and one of his oldest friends, John Ching, became vice president



Courtesy Tempest Production

Chris Cooper, in his robed costume as Antonio in 'The Tempest,' meets with Lau, president of TalkStory Productions (far left, in hat) during filming on Lanai.



Courtesy Hawaii International Film Festival

TalkStory Productions executives John Ching, above left, and Jason Lau attend 'The Tempest' screening at this year's Hawaii International Film Festival.

and director of development. Now 48, all three were childhood friends who graduated from Punahou one year after President Barack Obama. Lau often shot hoops at lunch with "Barry."

They started filming on Lanai in November 2008 after securing permission from the island's owner, Dole Food Co. Dole Chairman David Murdock didn't know who Taymor was but he could quote Shakespeare.

Everything had to be shipped to Lanai, and later the Big Island, for additional shots. Filming was completed in February on a New York sound stage.

But as remote as Lanai is, the film's stars could not escape the paparazzi, Lau said. The celebrity shooters would buzz locations in helicopters and had to be flushed from hiding places in bushes. When Mirren went to the beach, photos of her in a bikini wound up on the Internet.

On the Big Island, the "lava dogs" presented a totally unexpected challenge. In one scene, the dogs chase characters up a tree and the filmmakers created a set along a rocky stretch of coastline, said Ching, who had worked for several L.A. producers before joining TalkStory in 2007.

The dogs balked, he said. Too many rocks.

"So at first they rolled out some carpet," Ching said. "They wanted them to run over the carpet but they wouldn't do that. They put tabis on their feet but they got distracted by the tabis and tried to chew them off. They finally tried duct tape on their feet and that wouldn't work, either."

So they shot the scene in New York, where the filmmakers hired tougher dogs.

If it's a hit, "The Tempest" could make TalkStory Productions attractive to other directors looking for help in Hawaii. But even if that happens -- and Lau and Ching believe it will -- the circumstances would have to go far to equal the tempest they experienced.

"It's the perfect storm," Lau said. "If you asked me if we could do it again with the same budget, I would say no way. I don't know how we did it."