

# Djimon Hounsou weathers 'The Tempest'

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Djimon Hounsou stars in *The Tempest* with Helen Mirren.

LOS ANGELES — Djimon Hounsou's first attempt at Shakespeare did not go well.

"It was a nightmare experience," Hounsou, 46, remembers. "I had just finished *Amistad* and I wanted to do something meaty and profound.

"So I auditioned for (director) Julie Taymor's *Titus*." The film starred Anthony Hopkins, Jessica Lange and Harry Lennix in the part Hounsou didn't get.

Even though he had been living in America since 1990, the West African-born former model had not yet perfected his English. "At the time, my understanding of the language was not that good," he says.

And in *Amistad*, his character Cinque, who led a rebellion on a ship bringing hundreds of slaves to the New World, spoke only one sentence in English—"Give us free."

"People said I was getting awards (NAACP Image Award and Golden Globe nomination) just because I came from that world (Africa)," Hounsou says. "I was saddened by that. I had to spend a lot of time taking meetings with heads of studios who thought I would come in with a translator."

Hounsou, who speaks six languages, later proved his fluency in English. He received Academy Award nominations for his work in *In America* and *Blood Diamond*, and he held his own against Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*.

But he still had a Shakespeare itch he needed to scratch. So when he learned that Taymor was planning to film *The Tempest*, (in theaters now) Shakespeare's tale of sorcery and a shipwreck, he immediately wanted to play Caliban, the unwilling slave of the island's mistress, played by Helen Mirren.

"I was afraid," Hounsou says, "but my wife (Kimora Lee Simmons) forced me and drove me all the way there and told me, 'Go have your meeting.'" This time, he was ready.

Soon he found himself on barren landscapes in Hawaii with a cast that included Russell Brand, Chris Cooper, Alan Cumming, David Strathairn and Alfred Molina.

In addition to juggling Shakespearean dialogue, Hounsou had to stand still for at least five hours a day to get ready for the camera. While everyone else was dressed in 17th century costumes, he was nearly naked.

"I had so many prosthetics and so much make-up on that it was dreadful," Hounsou says, sitting in comfort at the Four Seasons Hotel in West Hollywood. "So when I would come out of that make-up room, I was in a rage. I was ready to trample anything, ravage everything in my way."

His bad mood worked well for the character. "Caliban was born on the island," Hounsou says. "His mother is a sorcerer, so that gave him a certain understanding and fear of spirits. His nature is very primal, very raw."

"For instance, he saw Miranda (Prospera's daughter) and wanted to have himself a woman, so he wanted Miranda. He has no inhibitions. He's never been segregated, and he doesn't understand being indoctrinated by someone or being enslaved."

Hounsou enjoyed the challenge. "I liked Caliban's childish view of things," he says. "I loved playing a man without limitations."

Finding roles that don't pigeonhole him has been Hounsou's continual challenge. He doesn't want to play roles he describes as "the African-American" or "the African." He just wants to play "a person," he says. "In the beginning it seems like there was a lot of typecasting," Hounsou says. His first Hollywood roles were playing a nightclub doorman on *Beverly Hills, 90210* and Sandra Bernhard's ex-boyfriend in *Without You I'm Nothing*.

After *Amistad*, Hounsou continued working in films but also turned to TV. He appeared in six memorable episodes of *ER* as an African refugee seeking asylum. He also spent time on *Alias*, playing an enemy of the CIA.

"I'm not finding all the parts I want," he says. "I'm at the mercy of what's available at the time. Thank God for the forces of nature that bring you into a project that's meaningful and powerful."

"Nowadays, typecasting seems a little less because I've rejected so much involving stereotypical attributes in films. It's going to be there, and it will come around now and then, but I find myself doing better and better."

Hounsou has completed two more films, both dramas. "In, which I shot with Kevin Bacon in Thailand, I play a mercenary for hire who goes there to resolve the age-old situation with child exploitation," he says.

In *Special Forces*, costarring Diane Kruger, he also carries a gun. "I play a commander-in-chief who's designated to go down and retrieve the hostage, a French journalist who was captured (by the Taliban in Afghanistan)," he says. The film, which is loosely based on a true story, was shot in Tajikistan, near the Afghan border.

Despite the hardship location—"If I wanted to back out, I would have had to take an 18-hour road trip to get to the capital," he says—he wanted to make a French movie. "French is close to being my first language because that's where I was raised and went to school."

The youngest of five children, Hounsou spent his early years in Benin. His father was a chef. He moved to France to live with one of his brothers when he was 13.

"I went there to better my education," he says. "My family wanted me to be a doctor, but once I was there I dreamed of being an actor. I tried to study psychology, but then I rebelled."

He moved to Paris and lived on the streets for awhile, washing in public fountains. French designer Thierry Mugler, who was looking for a new face, spotted the 6'2" Hounsou and chose him.

Modeling eventually brought Hounsou to Los Angeles, and he decided to stay, teaching himself English by watching TV documentaries. Janet Jackson and Madonna both hired him for music videos, and gradually he built a career in entertainment.

Hounsou has never forgotten his roots, speaking out for African causes whenever he has the opportunity.

"Bono, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie do things for Africa, so why not me?" he says. "It's my continent. Some issues definitely need celebrity status to draw attention to them. We're not necessarily politicians. I certainly don't care about politics, but I do care about equality and diversity in our world. I need to come to the aid of the ones who don't have any."

Hounsou is also an Oxfam Ambassador and spokesperson for SOS Children's Villages. He opened the 2009 UN Summit on Climate Change and also appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee on behalf of runaway and homeless youth.

Hounsou's next goal is to play a black superhero. He voiced the lead character in the animated TV series *Black Panther* and would like to play him if a film is made. "Who wouldn't want to be a superhero?" he asks, "especially a superhero nobody has touched. Sooner or later it's going to happen."

He won't comment on why there has yet to be a black superhero, saying, "Some things are better left alone. It took a long time to get an African-American president of this country—a country that's the leading democratic country in the world."

If *Black Panther* doesn't come his way, Hounsou has another larger-than-life character he might play. "I'm working on my own with a comic book I bought the rights of called *Thulsa Doom*," he says.

And he is learning how to be a family man. He and Simmons have an 18-month-old son, Kenzo. Simmons also has two daughters (Kim, 10, and Aoki, 8) from her former marriage to Russell Simmons.

"Being a dad is great," Hounsou says. "I've learned that it's not about me. It's all about them. You have to surrender to them. Somehow it's uplifting. You don't worry so much about yourself any more."

"We're all together in one house—Mom, Dad, the two girls and Kenzo. It's a full house with some boys in there too. That's good. The girls are always talking about dressing and make-up, so now we talk about cars."

Would Hounsou work with Simmons on a project? "Yes," he says. "She's definitely very talented. She could be a very accomplished actor. She's an entertainer as well. We'll see."

Meanwhile, his beard may have flecks of white, but he is determined to stay in shape. "I know one thing," he says. "No one's going to employ me fat."