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Julie Taymor

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Julie Taymor

Titus. 1999. Dir. Julie Taymor. Italy, USA, UK. Overseas Filmgroup and Clear Blue Sky Productions; *The Tempest*. 2010. Dir. Julie Taymor. USA. Touchstone Pictures.

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Describing the closing credits of *The Tempest*, Jonathan Bate borrows Wagner's term, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to praise Julie Taymor: "In the hands of a master director at the height of her magical powers, this is a total work of art" ("Enter Ariel" 11). This declaration of Taymor as a Shakespearean auteur is richly merited, and her feature film adaptations bear the proof.

After studying in Paris, America, and Indonesia, Taymor first turned toward Shakespeare in 1986, directing *The Tempest* at the Theater for a New Audience (TFNA) in New York (Blumenthal 34). Six years later, she directed *Titus Andronicus* there.¹ Both of her Shakespeare films derive fairly directly from these stage productions. She chose *Titus* (1999) as her first feature film despite its lesser-known status. By the time Taymor was filming *The Tempest* (2010), one of Shakespeare's best-known texts, she had crafted her reputation through *Frida* (2002), and had wrestled with recent legends in her Beatles homage, *Across the Universe* (2007). Importantly, she developed a cinematic signature originating in her theater work that made each film uniquely hers.

In her introduction to the published screenplay of *The Tempest*, Taymor articulates the guiding principle of her cinematic vision:

Revealing the mechanics of the theater creates its own alchemy, its rough magic, and the audience willingly plays "make-believe." In cinema, however, where one can actually film on real locations and create seemingly naturalistic events, the temptation is to throw away the artifice and go for the literal reality. There is something inherently sad about this. Even in fantasy cinema the audience expects the worlds that are created to feel "real," or at least plausible, and it is not required of viewers that they fill in the blanks or suspend their disbelief. ("Rough Magic" 14)

Adapting Shakespeare on film, Taymor values the fantastic by preserving the “rough magic” of the theater, requiring her audience to do the work of suspending disbelief, rather than striving always for cinematic realism. In her “Director’s Notes” appended to *Titus*’s illustrated screenplay, Taymor describes the film’s prologue as a depiction of violence transforming from “entertainment to horrific reality” as the young boy at play with tin soldiers in his kitchen suddenly confronts real soldiers in the Colosseum (178–79). But these soldiers are not wholly real: they remain fantastical through performing an elaborate martial dance. Similarly, speaking of Marcus’s dramatic discovery of the ravished Lavinia, Taymor comments, “[t]he result is surreal and poetic, thus keeping with my vision of the work and not falling into the trap of utter realism” (“Director’s Notes” 180). Here is what makes Taymor an auteur: her manipulation of the *caméra-stylo*² involves developing a visual language signifying both stage magic and screen realism. This signature can be separated into three component elements: the ideograph, the Penny Arcade Nightmare, and timelessness.

The Ideograph

Taymor studied under Herbert Blau, who “charged the performers to find ‘ideographs’ of the actions [...] a theatrical sign language that facilitated the layering and counterpointing of subtexts” (Blumenthal 12). Blumenthal cites Taymor claiming this concept “has informed absolutely everything she has done in the theater since then” (12). Translating this theatrical mode to film, she crafts cinematic ideographs from carefully-designed settings, explaining “location is metaphor and represents the essence of a scene in a visual ideograph” (“Rough Magic” 18). This term appears in both Taymor’s “Director’s Notes” on *Titus* and her “Introduction” to *The Tempest*, referring to locations that convey the spirit of Shakespeare’s text and her own interpretation of it. Taymor’s *mise-en-scène* is entirely dependent on the locations where she chooses to film. Two examples demonstrate the power of her cinematic ideograph: *Tempest*’s island, and *Titus*’s swamp. Taymor argues the “surreal and highly theatrical” Hawaiian island settings of *The Tempest* “represented the inner landscapes of the characters inhabiting them” (“Rough Magic” 18–19). Others have read the claustrophobic interiors of Milan as visually opposite to the open island vistas, a representation consonant with Taymor’s regendering of Prospera and refocusing on Milan’s patriarchal restriction as opposed to the island’s free, wild, female nature (Vaughan 350). In *Titus*, Lavinia is discovered post-rape in a swamp Taymor calls “a metaphor for [her]

ravishment” (“Director’s Notes” 180). The swamp is textually inspired: Titus describes Lavinia to the captive rapists as “the spring whom you have stained with mud” (5.2.169). We see Lavinia stained with mud and isolated atop a dead tree, in a barren, filthy landscape. No image could more aptly represent her violation and suffering.

The Penny Arcade Nightmare

In *Titus*, Taymor introduces her Penny Arcade Nightmares (PANs). These “portray the inner landscapes of the mind as affected by the external actions” (“Director’s Notes” 183). Developed to offer “theatrically surreal visions of violence,” Taymor adapted them to film in *Titus* (“*Titus*” 238).³ She describes them as “abstract collages” and “stylized, haikulike images [...] counterpointing the realistic events in a dreamlike and mythic manner” (“Director’s Notes” 183). *Titus*’s central PAN occurs while Lavinia writes “*Stuprum—Chiron—Demetrius*” in the sand (4.1.77). It unfolds as a sequence imagining Lavinia’s attack: she stands on a pedestal, in a torn petticoat, with a doe’s head atop her own and doe’s legs and hooves for arms. This literalizes the repeated imagery of Lavinia as a “dainty doe” Chiron and Demetrius hunt (2.1.118), and echoes the previous PAN, in which a sacrificial lamb’s head was replaced with Mutius’s. Taymor’s PAN cites more than Shakespeare, though: “Leaves fly as wind blows up Lavinia’s petticoat, causing her to use her doe arms to keep the skirts down. The famous image of Marilyn Monroe standing over a subway grate and holding her blowing dress down seemed an apt modern iconic parallel adding to this scene of humiliation and rape” (“Director’s Notes” 184). Each of *Titus*’s PANs combines familiar images to communicate horror and disgust without sensationalizing the actual violent act. While Taymor doesn’t use this term when writing about *The Tempest*, the concept clearly carries over in the depictions of Ariel managing the titular storm, tormenting Stephano and Trinculo with a pack of hell hounds, and appearing as a harpy.

Taymor notes that PANs are designed to “counterpoint” realism, linking them to her auteur-stamp: the blend of filmic realism with theatrical magic. Rather than using film to create a realistic tempest or enact Lavinia’s rape, she deploys her own version of the postmodern pastiche, a nightmarish montage that simultaneously separates the viewer from the reality of the event and vividly imparts its emotional cost.⁴

Timelessness

Most Shakespeare film adaptations use a specific temporal location as their jumping-off point; Taymor prefers not to adhere to any particular time frame in either *Titus* or *The Tempest*. This timelessness is most striking in the mixed medley of costumes—from leather and zippers to feathers and lace—especially if the viewer expects a certain visual coherence from Shakespeare film adaptations. Taymor rejects coherence in favor of variety, allowing characters to embody individually appropriate cultural references. In *Titus*, the Goths' skin-baring leather, metallic fabrics, and animal fur, contrast with the sharp, buttoned-up midcentury fashion of the consuls and the Andronici. Taymor describes Lavinia's look as inspired by Grace Kelly: "little black gloves and a full bell skirt, daddy's little girl all ready for defilement" ("Director's Notes" 181). In *The Tempest*, Prospera's flashbacks to Milan show the patriarchal society's constrictions embodied through her tight corset and high ruff, contrasted with her island wardrobe of loose tunic and practical leggings. The scene where Ariel helps Prospera dress in her Milanese clothing, tightening her stays, inspires respect for what Vaughan calls "the sacrifice Prospera is making for her daughter" in returning to Milan (351). It also evokes a sense of moving backward in time, from the more contemporary costume of tunic and trousers to the more period look of corset and ruff. In both *Titus* and *The Tempest*, Taymor uses the film's refusal to occupy a single time to convey an essential truth about its story: for *Titus*, the timelessness of violence; and for *Tempest*, the backwardness of patriarchal control.

Taymor's ideographs, PANs, and timeless settings form a foundation for her innovative adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, and her work continues to evolve. Perhaps most exciting about Taymor's auteurship is the new direction promised by her amazing work with Ben Wishaw in *The Tempest*. Wishaw, unable to join the cast and crew on location in Hawaii, filmed the role of Ariel in a studio with a green screen and was added into the shots in postproduction. He was both able to see Helen Mirren's performance as Prospera (previously filmed on location), and subject to it: Mirren's choices directing her gaze dictated many of Ariel's movements. In post, his body was treated with a variety of CGI effects, making him varyingly translucent, transparent, oversized, or miniscule. In a very metacinematic sense, Ariel was the spirit subject unto the magician.

This approach to filming Wishaw's Ariel constitutes next-level puppetry. Taymor's theatrical work has been dominated by puppets, sculpture, and dance; Wishaw's Ariel points to an intriguing new development

in Taymor's filmic design. Her earliest film—a one-hour production of Edgar Allen Poe's story "Hop Frog" retitled *Fool's Fire*—featured both puppet-based characters and actors in full-body masks. Perhaps in *Tempest*, Taymor has discovered a way to make the puppet a cinematic phenomenon, thus opening a new chapter in her filmmaking. One can only hope she continues to deploy this in service of reimagining a Shakespeare on screen that embraces both cinematic realism and theatrical rough magic.

Notes

¹She also directed *The Taming of the Shrew* (1988) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013) at TFNA.

²See Semenza and Hasenfratz's discussion of Alexandre Astruc (256).

³An early version of these PANs might be the "Tiger Tales" Taymor developed in *Juan Darién: A Carnival Mass*, described by Blumenthal as "a series of scatological shadow-puppet farces" that appeared "at especially intense moments" (Blumenthal 32–33).

⁴These images occur in *Frida* with its "tableaux vivants" depicting Kahlo's paintings coming to life. Taymor developed these tableaux to "break out of the framework of what she called 'dreary naturalism', even as she was shooting a biopic" (Monda 216–17). Many scholars have noted the importance of montage and pastiche to postmodern auteurs. For one excellent example, see Lehmann, ch. 4.

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