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Behind the Scenes: Penn & Teller, Taymor and the *Tempest* Divide Shakespeare's Globe, London

KEVIN A. QUARMBY

Julie Taymor's 2010 film of *The Tempest* offers a decidedly expressionistic representation of the storm at sea. Released in a select few cinemas in the UK in March 2011, Taymor's film graphically portrays the storm's growing intensity as waves lash and thunder cracks over the sixteenth-century galleon bearing Antonio and his co-conspirators. The vessel is tossed and torn by the relentless localized tempest. Crew and passengers jostle on deck, their fear and panic heightened by the apparent purposefulness of this fatal event. The theatricality of the moment is made hyper-real by filmic techniques that accentuate the actuality of shipwreck. Mariners struggle to survive in their alien element, with nature unleashing its full fury against them. The cinema audience become voyeuristic onlookers as the tragedy unfolds. A visceral sense of horror accompanies this visual and aural tumult. Secure and safe, they experience the vicarious thrill of destruction and despair as the film's fictive characters suffer their mortal peril.

The directorial skill with which Taymor creates this traumatic opening episode confirms her ability to re-envision that most difficult of Shakespeare's scenes, the onstage shipwreck. It also confirms her understanding of the dramatic and narrative importance of this incident within the play as a whole, and her personal engagement with Shakespeare's playtext. In the glossy photographic book and screenplay, published to coincide with the film's release, Taymor goes some way toward explaining her particular fascination with *The Tempest* and its playwright. "Shakespeare was the ultimate screenwriter," she observes, with *The Tempest* offering "a great opportunity for a film director [. . .] from its wondrous and diverse parts for actors to visual dimensions and challenges that are ripe

to be realized through extraordinary locations and experimental visual effects” (Taymor 13). While acknowledging the filmic potential of the “extraordinary locations” and “experimental visual effects” she employs in her 2010 film adaptation of the play, Taymor admits that *The Tempest* was the “first Shakespeare that [she] directed in the theater,” the venue and date for this ‘original’ version, a “small stage in New York City in 1986” (Taymor 13). The expressionistic realism of Taymor’s 2010 *Tempest* film, by implication, is offered in stark contrast to this 1980s staging. An impressionistic, theatre-based performance, where “Prospero’s ‘magic’ was exposed through the art of theater lighting,” might compare less favorably with a cinematic exploration of the play’s “visual dimensions and challenges” (Taymor 13).

Taymor’s passing comment about her “first Shakespeare” foray suggests a radical new treatment of *The Tempest*, with her film representing an unusual and topical addition to the fast-expanding ‘Shakespeare on film’ canon. Indeed, proof of Taymor’s radical revisualization is evident in one of the film’s early scenes, in which a theatrically contrived camera shot shows the distant tempest raging around the stricken ship (Taymor 33). In the foreground of the same frame, a cloaked figure, with its back turned towards the camera, conjures the tempest’s fury. The composite



Fig. 1. Helen Mirren as Prospera in Julie Taymor’s 2010 film *The Tempest* controls the storm from her cliff-top vantage point as, far from the shore, the Milanese ship is engulfed with flames.

image presents a sorcerer standing triumphantly on an island cliff-top, clutching an obsidian staff horizontally in both hands, while directing its magical energy towards the raging sea. Film viewers see both spell-maker and spellbound as the ship collapses and sinks in a distant fiery tangle beneath the waves.

Realistic as the image appears, its radicalism rests not so much with the conflation of images as with the casting of the film's principal protagonist. The back belongs, as we expect, to Prospero, although in Taymor's film this male magus is controversially re-gendered and renamed. Shakespeare's Prospero becomes Taymor's Prospera, as played by a grey and tousle-haired Helen Mirren. Prospera is an exiled aristocrat who rules her island prison with maternal and alchemical rage. The casting of Mirren in this traditionally male role requires certain alterations to the text: "Behold [. . .] / The wrongèd Duke of Milan" (5.1.108–9) becomes "Behold the wrongèd Duchess of Milan" (Taymor 157), while Ariel regularly refers to "ma'am" instead of "sir" (5.1.32; Taymor 151). Nevertheless, the political dimension of this re-gendering is subsumed beneath the undeniable strength of Mirren's performance. While a male Prospero might appear emasculated by his self-indulgent absorption in his occult books, this female Prospera appears emboldened by her predicament and her protective attitude toward her daughter. Taymor's casting decision seems a fitting tribute to Mirren's 2005 and 2006 portrayals of those archetypal female authority figures, the Queens Elizabeth I and II.¹ It is the matriarchal Prospera, however, who now literally rules the waves, controlling the storm with regal fury.

The hyperrealism of this tempestuous scene invites comparison with other filmed Shakespeare shipwrecks. A similar fate engulfs Imogen Stubbs and Steven Mackintosh as Viola and Sebastian in Trevor Nunn's 1996 BBC Films version of *Twelfth Night*. Nunn's shipwreck off the shores of Illyria is no less graphic in its violent realism. For Nunn, as for Taymor, the cultural legacy of films ranging from swashbuckling pirate adventures, through iceberg-ramming Titanics, and on to wartime U-Boat hunting trips, abound in their shipwreck scenes. Although traditionally theatre-oriented, both directors opt to represent the absolute realism of a Shakespearean tempest through the medium of film. With Taymor, however, such realism relies on complex computer imagery unavailable to (or too costly for) Nunn when directing his film nearly fifteen years before.

Despite the high-tech film wizardry of Taymor's storm scene, aspects of this particular *Tempest* image were manipulated in an unusually low-tech, theatrical way. This low-tech theatricality is evident in a photograph prominently displayed over one and a quarter pages towards the beginning of the film's commemorative book. The photograph shows a simple theatrical effect, one hidden from the cinema audience, which allows Prospera's cloak to waft violently around her shoulders (Taymor 13–14). This metafilmic photograph, whose title declares "The crew helps

Prospera's robe move in the wind" (Taymor 13), shows four technicians lying uncomfortably behind Mirren on the muddy cliff-top, each grasping cables that are attached to the hem of the actor's expansive robe. The image reveals the simple behind- (or beneath-) camera trickery with which Taymor achieves the dynamic movement in Prospera's costume. Like huddled puppeteers, the technicians create an effect that is, of course, all 'done with strings.' On screen, all viewers register is the cloak's movement. A portion of camera track is also visible in the left-hand corner of the photograph. Resembling a portable railway line, this track was laid so that a wheeled 'dolly' or platform for a camera-mount could make smooth tracking shots over rough terrain. The final composite group of cliff-top scenes rely on technical trickery both old and new.

Unlike Prospera's manipulated cloak, the shipwreck itself depends on a relatively new filmic technique—computer generated imagery—to fool the audience's eye and mind. By way of explanation, Taymor expresses how "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," as they must in a theatre (14). In consequence, the onscreen image presents Prospera conjuring the storm in the foreground, while in the distant background the ship flounders under her spell. "The long shot of the tempest," as Taymor notes, thus "looks like a Turner painting come to life" (14). As she further explains, this visual trickery posits "one of the major themes" of *The Tempest*, "Nature versus Nurture":

The perilous storm that destroys the ship [. . .] establishes this theme, by exposing the fact that the lofty position of the king onboard is rendered meaningless when Nature is in control. The irony is that it is Prospera who, at this moment in time, is in control of Nature. (Taymor 14)

The manipulated hyperrealism of this initial storm scene—whereby Nature is controlled by Prospera but Prospera's appearance is controlled by wire pulling puppeteers—is in stark contrast with the later visualization of Ariel's direct involvement in the tempest wreck. When the genderless (and genital-less) Ariel (Ben Whishaw) describes how s/he "boarded the King's ship" (1.2.197; Taymor 43), Taymor allows viewers to see this fiery sea-monster in action. Appearing now no bigger than a children's toy, the sailing ship is set ablaze by the electro-magnetic flames that erupt from the arms and shoulders of the mischievous Ariel (Taymor 44–5). Computer generation, hyperrealism, and theatrical innovation combine to create an image that excites and disturbs in equal measure. The vi-



Fig. 2. Like an androgynous Ganymede turned Neptune god, Ben Whishaw's ethereal and ghostly insubstantial Ariel plays with the stricken vessel.

sual realization of Ariel's evocative description is only possible, however, within a medium that employs the most up-to-date cinematic technology.

Taymor's long theatrical, as opposed to purely filmic, association with *The Tempest* is, as her introductory chapter "Rough Magic" suggests, well documented (Taymor 13–20). As mentioned earlier, she first directed the play in 1986 for a "Theatre for a New Audience" production staged for the CSC (Classic Stage Company) in New York City. Taymor's radical theatrical style suited this off-Broadway venue, whose website proclaims its ongoing commitment "to re-imagining the classical repertory for a contemporary American audience" (Classic Stage). The following year, 1987, Taymor reprised this production for the Shakespeare Festival Theater, Stratford, Connecticut. Her admiration for *The Tempest* stems from the appeal, for her as a director, of its "beautiful, deep themes" (Schechner 46). There are no extant recordings of either the CSC or Shakespeare Festival Theater productions. There is, however, one obscure televisual re-presentation of Taymor's earlier theatre-based *Tempest* that seems lost to critical consideration.

In 1992, under the auspices of the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Taymor directed a one-off revival of her *Tempest* reimagining for the children's television program, *Behind the Scenes*.² Part of a triad of creative programs entitled "Theater, Sculpture and Photography," Taymor's *Tempest* provided the "Theater" element of this enthusiastic introduction to Shakespearean playmaking. Directed primarily at a young, junior school audience, this program was hosted by the magician-comics, Penn & Teller. The 'magic' of the theatre was the focus of this televised introduction to the arts, and Taymor, the obvious link to accessible, innovative Shakespeare for a younger audience.

The program was aired repeatedly on PBS Television throughout 1993 and 1994. In it, Penn & Teller are employed merely as popular ‘link men’ to the documentary-style theme of the program. Their presence onscreen amounts to little more than two minutes of the program’s twenty-seven minute playing time. The rest of the program is a fascinating exploration of the process of theatrical production, containing interviews with Taymor, the set and costume designer G.W. Mercier, as well as the acting personnel. Viewers of the television program watch the rehearsal (or re-rehearsal) process for a one-off performance in front of an invited live audience. A select group of *Tempest* scenes focus specifically on the opening tempest (1.1.0.SD), Prospero’s conversation with Ariel and his first confrontation with Caliban (1.2), the comic interplay between Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban (2.2), and their duping by Ariel (3.2). The performance ends with the release of Ariel in 5.1. These scenes, requiring only six actors to play their respective parts, are interspersed with analysis of the stage set, the costumes, and, most importantly, the masks and prosthetics that have become a hallmark of Taymor’s theatrical experimentation. Throughout, the program is underscored by Elliot Goldenthal’s original music. As a husband and wife team, Goldenthal and Taymor remain professionally and personally associated, with Goldenthal’s musical compositions also underscoring Taymor’s 2010 *Tempest* film.

The entire 1992 “Videotaped” production of Taymor’s *Tempest* was presented to its audience in the New 42nd Street Victory Theater in New York. This old theatre was built in 1900 by Oscar Hammerstein (“About the New Victory”). By the early 1990s, during a slump in real estate values, this theatre was deemed the least desirable property in the area. When Taymor situated her production within its ghostly cavernous space, it was three years off being converted into a purpose-built children’s theatre in the heart of New York. The audience sat in temporary seating on the vast, significantly flat, stalls area of the theatre. Primarily made up of schoolchildren from the socially deprived Community School District 24, this audience would have suffered significant sightline problems if not for Mercier’s innovative stage design.

Describing in interview how Taymor had suggested the “essence of [Prospero’s] island” to be “sand in isolation” (*Behind the Scenes*), Mercier explains how he constructed an acting platform that appeared as a steeply-raked bank of black sand.³ Mercier’s wall of sand rose up to a blue sky backcloth like a malevolent dark wave. For the audience, this meant that actors were visible even to those seated at the rear of the theatre, although there seemed little consideration for the physical difficulty, for the actors,

of maneuvering themselves on such a surface. Several scenes show the actors scrambling down the steep bank of sand in a vain attempt to gain a firm footing and grounded stance to deliver their lines. This simple stage design nevertheless also permitted the magical manifestation of Caliban (Mamadou Diome), his body emerging from the sandbank like a subterranean creature escaping an underworld darkness as he forces himself into the open air.

Most importantly, the program records the staging of the 1.1 “*tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning*” wreck of Antonio’s ship (1.1.0.SD).

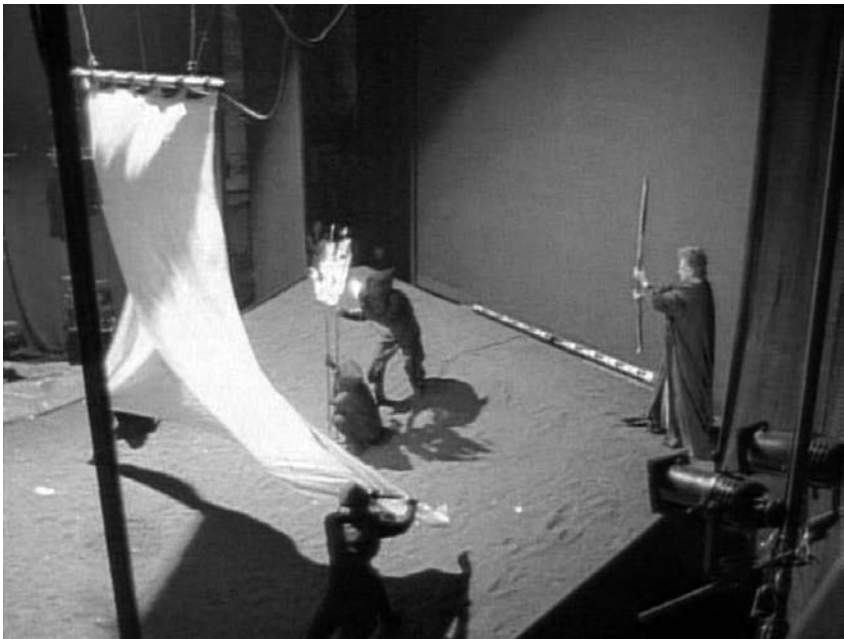


Fig. 3. A traditionally male Prospero, played by Robert Stattle in a bushy-haired wig, wields his magical staff. Before him, four black-clad puppeteers create a traditionally theatrical ‘storm at sea’ using a hand-held spotlight, shadow puppetry, and the ubiquitous billowing sail.

Prospero inscribes a circle in the sand as he conjures the storm, standing midway down and slightly off-centre stage left. Behind him, the top of the sandbank (which rises to at least two meters) becomes the sea’s horizon. Because the sandbank is a structure, actors and puppeteers can crouch behind its rear elevation in preparation for their entrances, invisible to the audience in front. A white wooden cut-out of a sailing ship,

attached to a rope pulley, then appears upstage left and is slowly pulled across the horizon. Upstage right, Miranda (Niki Renee) kneels beside what appears to be a miniature representation of the island made of soft clay. A black clad puppeteer, watering can in hand, pours its contents over the island model, which slowly melts and sinks beneath the horizon. At the same time, Prospero washes his hands in the arcing droplets of another downstage watering can. Suddenly, the storm erupts. Lights flash violently on the darkened stage, and drums are beaten percussively to suggest thunder. Actors bearing a billowing silk sail waft it onstage as behind, two actors, one carrying a hand-held spotlight, the other an identical cut-out ship mounted on two poles, create a shadow puppet

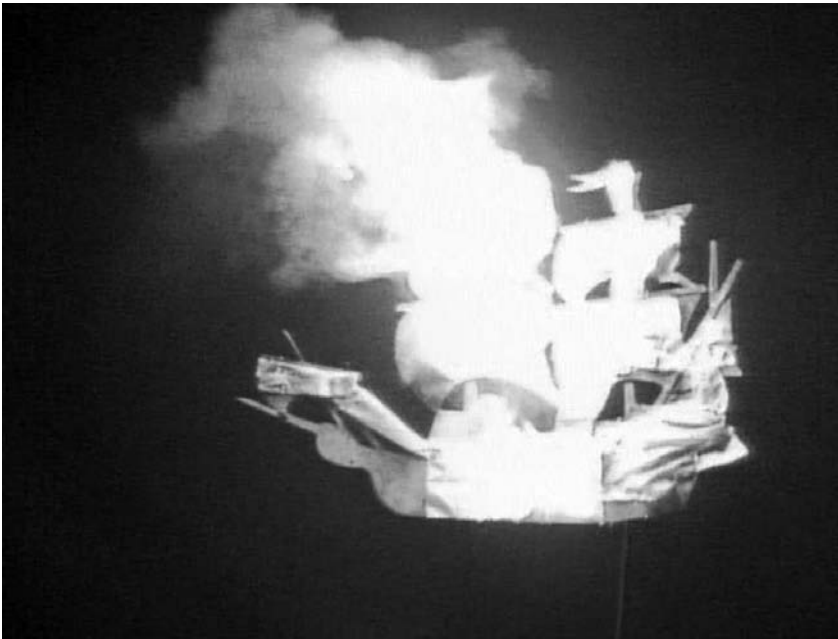


Fig. 4. The shadow-puppet ship is engulfed by flames (ignited by a puppeteer wielding a cigarette lighter), as Goldenthal's percussive accompaniment to the storm reaches its violent and noisy climax.

storm. The ship appears tossed to and fro. All of a sudden, strategically placed inflammable paper, attached to the surface of the cut-out model, is ignited, engulfing the ship in fire. The effect is as magical, even when recorded by the low-definition video cameras, as it is also simple.

The obvious constraints of the venue aside, and the fact that this was a one-off restaging of Taymor's tried and tested theatrical formula, this *Behind the Scenes* program is significant for several reasons. It shows how Taymor's theatricality relied to a great extent on the visual representation of the storm using Javanese shadow puppet techniques that stem from her early studies at the American Society for Eastern Arts in Seattle (Brandon, "Julie Taymor as Puppet Artist"). Despite its artistic effectiveness, it also highlights the traditional approach to 'storms at sea,' whereby the visual and aural signifiers of sail, wind, and sound provide easily accessible image markers that transcend cultural, age, and medium boundaries. As a method, this sits well with Taymor's professed concern for the "very exciting" immediacy of "live theatre": "though the production can be repeated again and again, it's not canned, it's not frozen, so you have that sense of—of danger when something is live" (*Behind the Scenes*).

The New York children, whose delighted faces are filmed during the performance, sit enthralled by the dangerous dramatic effects unfolding before them. Nevertheless, this same 'traditional' staging is subtly re-envisioned nearly twenty years later in Taymor's "canned" film version of *The Tempest*, a factor easily missed by those unacquainted with the obscure television program. The flaming ship remains, now a computer-generated image, superimposed against a real sea, and a flimsy plaything for the giant Ariel—another computer enhanced image. More significantly, the opening sequence of Taymor's 2010 film, described in detail in the director's opening comments about the film, also echoes her 1992 re-enactment for television of the 1986 stage version (Quarmby). In Taymor's film, however, Miranda (Felicity Jones) no longer kneels beside a dissolvable model of the island; instead, she holds a black sand model in her hand. Similarly, it is not the action of a black-clad figure wielding a watering can that destroys this sandcastle world, but apparently 'real' raindrops from the tempest itself. As the camera angle changes, we see Miranda gazing out to sea, her look more of wonder and innocence than horror. Without the *Behind the Scenes* video evidence, the similarity between the 2010 film and its 1992 theatre counterpart would be lost to comparative consideration.

Miranda's dissolving islands are not the only similarities between the theatre and film versions. In Taymor's film, for instance, the Caliban of Djimon Hounsou yet again emerges from the island rocks, his menacing presence and physical demeanor appearing almost identical to Diome's 1992 stage representation. An African actor born in Benin, Hounsou



Fig. 5. Enslaved by Prospera, Caliban struggles under the weight of his burden of branches and logs. Caliban's black skin is seemingly 'infected' by the genetic residue of his white mother.

presents Caliban as the tortured 'other,' his body caked with dried mud, and his skin bearing the dappled heritage of his Caucasian mother, Sycorax. As this Caliban stares with noble defiance from one brown and one blue eye, we sense the horror with which he sees his enslavement at the hands of the matriarchal Prospera. Prospera's domination of the hapless misfit acquires additional malice as the sorceress strives to shield her daughter from Caliban's lustful advances. Nevertheless, this Caliban personifies the mixed-race slave who returns to overall domination of the island when Prospera releases him from punishment and torture.

Hounsou's Caliban might appear a socially and culturally significant figure in this twenty-first century production, with Taymor responding to prevailing post-colonial attitudes to race and slavery, but her choice of actor mirrors almost identically her 1980s stage casting. As the 1992 *Behind the Scenes* shows, Diome is an equally strong, black actor, his Caliban no less analogous with the slave-cum-noble savage. Diome's skin may not be mud-encrusted like Hounsou's; nor does he wear a contact lens to mismatch his eyes (a make-up effect only visible in a camera close-up). Instead, Diome's 'stage' Caliban relies on a far more dramatic image of otherness. Described by Taymor in the television program as her conscious attempt to emulate the "mud men of New Guinea," Diome's Caliban wears a whole head mask when emerging from beneath the stage. Resembling a ball of rock, bored through with two round eyes, a round mouth and two ear holes, this mask literally evokes Caliban's comment, "here you sty me / In this hard rock" (1.2.345). As Taymor suggests by way of explanation, she reads Caliban's comment as referring to being "stymied, to be stuck, to be in prison," a colloquial allusion that, if cor-



Fig. 6. In close-up, this ‘infection’ spreads to Caliban’s eyes, one naturally dark, the other, unnaturally pallid and blue.

rect, has eluded editors of the play (*Behind*).⁴ Prospero’s punishment is to “stymie” Caliban in the rock that encases his head. When eventually he roars his defiance, “Farewell, master, farewell, farewell!” (2.2.169), Caliban grabs a log that Taymor describes as “the symbol of his enslavement” (*Behind*), and smashes it over his head. The mask shatters and Caliban raises his arms while bellowing in triumph like a “howling monster” (2.2.170).

Caliban’s journey to freedom has led him into the corrupting world of Trinculo and Stephano. For the television program, Trinculo (Kelly Walters) and Stephano (Reggie Montgomery) also wear masks, although theirs are more traditionally ‘western’ in their *commedia dell’arte* construction. Encasing the upper jaw and cheekbones, Trinculo and Stephano’s masks change the actors’ appearances dramatically by adding comic-book grotesqueness to their features. For the 2010 film, the Trinculo of Russell Brand and Stephano of Alfred Molina require no such comic masquerade, with Brand’s hyperactive personality and Molina’s aggressive simplicity sufficient for all their grotesque, slapstick humor. Brand’s Trinculo becomes a camp buffoon, while Molina’s Stephano is a careworn fool with pretensions to grandeur. Compared with Caliban, these monsters deserve to suffer all the computer-generated trickery in the film technicians’ repertoire.

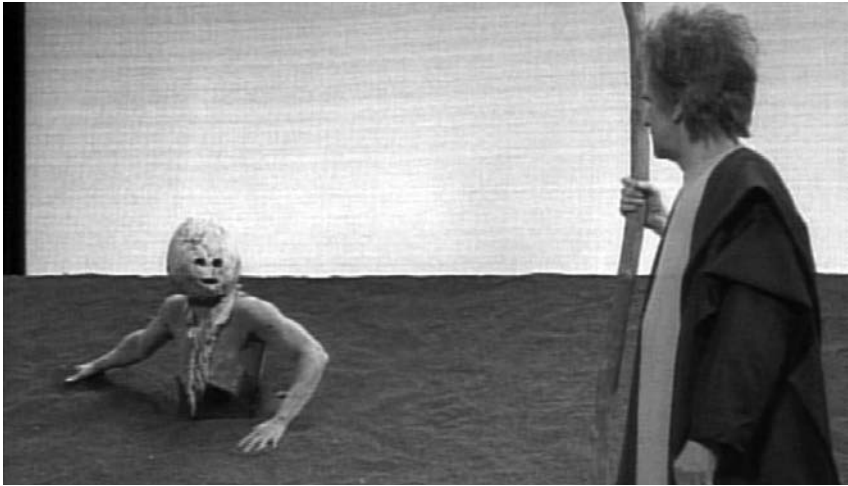


Fig. 7. Mamadou Diome's first entrance as Caliban in Taymor's 1992 *Tempest*, wearing the simple rock-like mask that signifies his state of oppressive subjugation. Despite its appearance, the mask does not interfere with the actor's vocal expressiveness, but only heightens the visual imagery of his enslavement.



Fig. 8. The instant that Caliban, defying Prospero's obvious command, lifts a branch in both hands and smashes it against his masked head. The mask shatters as the startled Caliban realises the enormity of this act of freedom.



Fig. 9. Ariel binds the corset of Prospera's ducal dress, the force of his last constricting tug making her gasp involuntarily for breath.



Fig. 10. Wearing the visual signifier of her ducal responsibility, Mirren's Prospera announces her regal return, her costume echoing images of the Virgin Queen.

If Mercier's 1992 costume designs suggested the comical deconstruction of early modern dress, Sandy Powell's 2010 film costumes offer a far more fetishistic response to the trials of shipwreck. Powell's designs incorporate steel zips that act as decoration to early modern doublets and corseted dresses alike. This sadomasochistic fetishism is most marked, however, when Prospera greets her long-lost tormenters. Assisted by

Ariel, Prospera encases herself in a corseted leather costume. Taymor's film direction describes how 'Each tug of the cord by Ariel's nimble fingers is a reminder of where [Prospera] came from and where she will be going' (155). Yet again, Mirren evokes the iconography of Elizabeth I, strangely reinvented in pseudo-bondage dominatrix attire.

Julie Taymor's *The Tempest*, innovative as it may first appear, owes its heritage to over twenty-five years of theatre production of her original theatrical concept. Despite a relatively lavish film budget (certainly more money was spent on this than on her original off-Broadway stagings), Taymor still returns to techniques that are decidedly impressionistic. The film's Hawaiian location might offer an expressionistic slant (the exotic islands of Lanai and the Big Island of Hawaii are the natural backdrop to the film's action), but strings still need to be pulled and fiery storms conjured. Likewise, Caliban still emerges from the rocks of his island. His African face and body, encrusted with mud and earth, might suggest a topical and socially sensitive political statement, but this same concern was obviously already firmly established in Taymor's 1980s version of the play. The film's Caliban may no longer be "stymied" in a mud man's rocky mask, but his analogous association with slavery, subjugation and exploitation are as strong as when Taymor first decided her 'stage' Caliban should rise out of his island's sand. Prospera's magical robe is, like the impressionistic storm-tossed vessel in the 1980s production, still manipulated by unseen puppeteers, who pull strings to simulate the storm's wind. As the evidence from *Behind the Scenes* suggests, Taymor's transition from theatre to "fantasy cinema" involves relatively little change, other than the film's relocation to a "real" location, and an acceptance of the computer wizardry that film now offers an innovative and creative theatre director. However, it is not so much the radicalism of casting a woman in a traditionally male Shakespeare role that is intriguing, but the fact that Taymor had established her postcolonial reading for Caliban, and one that still resonates in the twenty-first century, so early in her directorial career.

Notes

¹Helen Mirren is the first actor to play both Elizabeth I and II on screen.

²I am indebted to Sheila Cavanagh of Emory University, Atlanta, for first suggesting this association.

³A 'rake' is the theatrical term for any sloped stage. It stems from the *OED* definition for 'rake': "A way, a path; *esp.* a steep narrow path up a hillside, ravine, etc." (n.³.2).

⁴To 'stymie' is described by the *OED* as to "impede, obstruct, frustrate, thwart (a person, an activity, or a project)" (*v.*².fig.).

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