

## Blu-Ray Review: Julie Taymor's 'The Tempest' Redeemed By Excellent Extras

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CHICAGO – Risk-taking visionaries are always exciting to watch in action, even when their gambles don't quite pay off. Yet while the recent projects tackled by Julie Taymor have sported great promise on paper, their externalized metaphors often work against the material she's aiming to enhance. In her Beatles musical "Across the Universe," soldiers were seen carrying the Statue of Liberty into Vietnam while singing, "She's so heavy."

That singular image would work great as a political cartoon, but as a live-action scenario in a musical montage, it just looked flat-out silly. Though "Universe" admittedly had its share of sublime scenes, they were always the most spare, minimalist moments of poignant visual poetry. The film's chaotic effects-leaden second act didn't work at all, and the same could be said of similar passages in Taymor's adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," an exuberant hodgepodge of elements from the Bard's past work.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

In light of Taymor's mortifying Broadway failure with "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," it's easy for critics to write off the auteur's recent work as uniformly misguided. Yet taken on its own terms, "The Tempest" works its magic rather well. Yes, the picture is easily a triumph of style over substance, but there's a great deal of substance residing within Taymor's carefully composed style. Casual viewers lacking the patience for abstract art and archaic dialogue might see nothing more than a bunch of big names forced to wear funny costumes while stumbling along the cliffs and dunes of Hawaii's Lanai Island (a brilliant location choice for the play's central action). Yet the meticulous detail in Taymor's abstractions prove to be rewarding on multiple viewings, particularly when accompanied by the splendid and hugely insightful extras available on this extra-special Blu-Ray edition.



Helen Mirren and Felicity Jones star in Julie Taymor's production of The Tempest.

Photo credit: Touchstone Home Entertainment



Helen Mirren scorches the screen as Prospera, the exiled wife of a deceased Milanese duke, wrongly charged by her brother Antonio (Chris Cooper) for maliciously using witchcraft to claim the crown. After living for years on an island with her young daughter Miranda (Felicity Jones), Prospera decides to live up to her malicious reputation by wreaking vengeance on her detestable siblings. When she spots Antonio sailing nearby, she whips up a fierce storm that leaves him and his crewmates stranded on the same island. Also onboard is Prospera's other brother, Alonso (David Strathairn), whose son Ferdinand (singer Reeve Carney) falls in love with the naively wide-eyed Miranda at first glance. Meanwhile, Prospera's slave Caliban (Djimon Hounsou) hatches a plan with two shipwrecked clods, Stephano (Alfred Molina) and Trinculo (Russell Brand), to take down the reigning sorceress once and for all.

Though this audacious Shakespeare adaptation is considerably more coherent than Baz Luhrmann's modernized "Romeo and Juliet" (in which many of the best lines were drowned out by gunfire), it still moves at too swift a pace to fully engage first-time viewers unfamiliar with the tale. That being said, there's still plenty here to admire. Cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh captures some stunning low-angle shots of towering characters whose heads threaten to scrape the raging sky bearing down on them. It's easy to see why Jones (a major awards contender this year for the Sundance smash "Like Crazy") has become a star overnight. Her character's tender awakening to newfound passion is beautifully portrayed and never obscured by her ethereal glow. I will admit, however, that it's distressing to see the overqualified Hounsou fourteen years after his breakout role in "Amistad" still reduced to shrieking "Freedom" at the top of his lungs in what is ultimately a forgettable role (despite the four hours worth of eye-catching makeup gracing his skin). While some of the more extravagant visuals are guilty of upstaging the storytelling, others compliment it perfectly. Many of Taymor's most inspired visual concepts materialize in the shape-shifting form of Ariel (Ben Wishaw), Prospera's devoted spirit aid who transforms into a host of malevolent creatures.



The Tempest was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Sept. 13, 2011.

*Photo credit: Touchstone Home Entertainment*

"The Tempest" is presented in dazzling 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) and includes a one-hour making-of documentary that provides a fascinating portrait of Taymor's tirelessly inventive spirit onset. Production designer Mark Friedberg defines her approach as "experimental," and his claim is validated time and again by the candid footage. When the crashing waves on Lanai proved to be more forceful than expected, Taymor decided to spontaneously utilize them in a key shot. After discovering the haunting water photography of Brian Oglesbee in a magazine, she decided to bring him onboard to fashion a sequence in which Prospera and Ariel communicate through a wall of water. It's startling to learn that this effect (along with several others in the picture) was done in-camera rather than on a computer. Working within the limitations of a \$20 million budget, Taymor and her remarkable effects team deserve extra kudos for their ingeniously conceived, remarkably complex imagery.

Mirren refers to the project as "one of the most important experiences of my career," though she admits that it made her extremely nervous to portray the female version of Prospero on film rather than onstage. Despite the gender change, Taymor points out that her biggest diversion from Shakespeare's text came in Prospera's backstory, where the character is persecuted for being a woman, thus giving her more motivation to enact vengeance on the brothers that allowed her to be exiled. Taymor elaborates on this in her audio commentary track, where she also discusses why she chose to turn the play's ending monologue into the lyrics for the end credits song (moodily crooned by Beth Gibbons). As for her repeated use of close-ups, Taymor says that her intention was to get audiences as close to the speech as possible in order for the Bard's words to be fully absorbed. In an all-too-brief featurette, Taymor explores the comic potential in Stephano and Trinculo's dialogue during rehearsals with Brand and Molina. Elsewhere on the disc, Brand delivers a four-and-a-half minute Shakespeare-inspired riff that would be Oscar worthy if Oscars were ever awarded to Blu-Ray extras. Yet literature buffs are guaranteed to ignore all of the above in favor of the superb "Annotated Shakespeare" commentary from experts Virginia Vaughan and Jonathan Bate, who share a wealth of information on the play's self-reflexivity, its reflection of early English colonial development, and its initial performance in the court of King James.

*'The Tempest' is released by Touchstone Home Entertainment and stars Helen Mirren, Ben Wishaw, Felicity Jones, Reeve Carney, David Strathairn, Alan Cumming, Chris Cooper, Djimon Hounsou, Alfred Molina and Russell Brand. It was written and directed by Julie Taymor. It*

*was released on Sept. 13, 2011. It is rated PG-13.*



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