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Julie Taymor Takes You into Her Dream World

The director's staging of 'A Midsummer's Night Dream' is now in theaters around the country. Here, she reflects on her five decades in theater, from child actor to Tony-winning director

July 27, 2015, [Craig Barboza](#)
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Julie Taymor still remembers her first brush with the Bard. When she was only 7, her family piled into their car for a road trip from their home in Newton, Mass., a leafy suburb of Boston, to Canada. The trip included a stop at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival for a special performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That popular comedic play would become Taymor's first love in theater.



Julie Taymor (Photo: Marco Grob)

The next year, she would make her stage debut as Hermia, one of the play's bedeviled lovers. A decade later, while a student at Oberlin College, she took in Peter Brook's groundbreaking production of *Dream* on Broadway. Taymor herself then directed an hour-long staging of *Dream* in 1984 at the Theatre for a New Audience that she expanded into the 2013 play, which christened the company's sleek new headquarters in Brooklyn. Taymor's latest project is a film version of that great stage piece.

Now 62, and four decades into her career, Taymor is still one of the most imaginative voices on the American stage. Known for her experimental work with puppets, lighting and scenic effects, Taymor has always been interested in pushing the boundaries with her stylistic techniques. She was a non-profit, avant-garde "nobody" when Disney approached her 20 years ago about a stage version of their animated blockbuster *The Lion King*. That 1997 show, now the highest-grossing Broadway musical in history, catapulted Taymor to stardom and earned her a pair of Tony Awards. She has directed Stravinsky's *Oedipus rex* and *The Magic Flute* at the Metropolitan Opera, as well feature-length films, including Shakespeare adaptations of *Titus* and *The Tempest*.

With the film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, out now in select theaters, Taymor cements her status as a first-rate interpreter of Shakespeare. Summoning her gift for live theater, she conjures up a supernatural world brimming with romantic chaos. There's a scene in which silver bamboo polls move across the stage with balletic grace, creating the sensation of being lost in the Athenian forest and, at one key moment, a character seems to drip down like paint from high above the stage. "She brings a mastery of the visual to a deep understanding of the written text so what you see and what you hear fully compliment one another," says Virginia Mason Vaughan, a professor at Clark University and leading Shakespeare expert. "That's unusual. Some directors are text-based and some like bells and

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whistles. She can do both, seamlessly.”

We spoke with Taymor in advance of the film’s screenings in New York (July 30 and August 12 at Symphony Space). Here, the Tony winner reflects on the role theater played in her childhood, how *The Lion King* changed everything and the challenges and benefits of filming theater.



Kathryn Hunter in Taymor’s ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ (Photo: Courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival)

What did *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* gain when you adapted it for the screen?

I think the ability to go on stage with our cameras — the close-ups, the reaction shots of actors listening to dialogue, the camera movements — allows the audience to get that much deeper into the Shakespeare. In film language, it’s more intimate, visceral, exciting, and much more comprehensible, I think. I really adore Shakespeare on film for that reason. When you see David Harewood [who plays Oberon] say, “I know a bank …” he’s quiet. It’s an interior monologue that you can’t do in live theater because it wouldn’t communicate. But in film it communicates so beautifully. We also had Elliot Goldenthal create an additional one-third of music specifically for *Dream*. Once the film was cut together, Elliot knew the exact amount of time for each scene so he could score the emotions perfectly, which adds to the film’s emotional impact. And we balanced the sound so the music is loud enough, but you never lose a word. There are many things you get when you [switch to film and] have an even greater control over the production. Yet it’s still live theater. It still feels like the performance you could’ve seen at Theatre for a New Audience.

A Midsummer’s Night Dream begins with Puck crawling into a bed that is lifted up by a cluster of twisty trees and a giant bed sheet transforming into a starry night sky. How did you come up with that set piece?

Well, when I start a play or movie or opera, I try to find an “ideograph,” which means I try to reduce the show to its most simple image. In *The Lion King*, it’s the circle from “the circle of life” and you’ll see that circle repeated as a motif throughout the design, whether it’s the mask of Mufasa, the wheels that will propel the gazelles or the way that the Pride Rock circles up out of the floor. Here, I thought, Where do you dream? In a bed. So I found that element I could use over and over again. Once Puck is lifted up, the bed is deconstructed by a group of workmen who take it apart to make chairs. The bed sheet then becomes, as you said, the sky — a surreal, beautiful, ephemeral sky. The sheet becomes the hammock for Titania, becomes the wedding banquet tablecloth, it becomes this kind of wrap the young lovers wear when they’re discovered in the forest. The pillows become the bank upon which Hermia lies her head, become the pillows that up the ante of the hostility of the lovers with the pillow fight, where they’re actually supported by the Rude Elementals, or fairies. In the play Shakespeare is moving back and forth, from the banal to the dreamlike to the surreal to the unreal, and I wanted to do that in a theatrical, cinematic style with the opening.

I’m sure the stage production’s large cast (15 principals and 17 children) would’ve made it difficult to tour. But it must kill you when a show that you’ve nurtured and invested so much time and energy on sees its final curtain.

Yes. And now it hasn’t! Now we have our big dream with *Dream*. Wouldn’t it be great if the film played every year, like *The Nutcracker*. In summer, all over the world — Australia in the winter [she laughs], which is their summer — people stage this play. *Dream* is the perfect introduction to Shakespeare. So the fact that this show will live on makes me very happy! We had 8-year-olds here the other night at the London premiere, and they loved it. They can really follow what’s go on.



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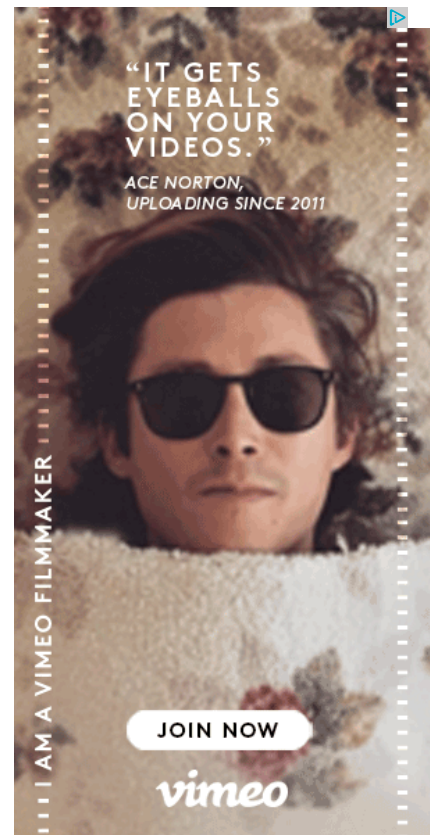
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Filmed theater is said to be a booming niche business these days. How does that benefit live theater?

I think it's great for Off-Broadway. I hope the unions and everybody gets behind this kind of thing because [these films] will keep theater alive. And for the Off-Broadway theaters that sell out, it would be great if they record the performance because not everything should move to Broadway. Not every show is commercial, but that doesn't mean people from all over the country don't want to see it. They do! They just can't always come from Iowa and get here in time to see it. Film is cheaper, too. Broadway now cost \$200 for some folks. People are scared that [filmed theater] will be the end. I don't think so. I think it's the beginning because you got to have theater on stage to be able to shoot it!

How did this film version come about?

During the last month of performances at the [Theatre for a New Audience's] Polonsky Shakespeare Center, I was very lucky to have met Ben Latham-Jones of Ealing Studios. Ben came to see the play and wanted to talk to me about doing a movie. I said, "Wow, I really wish I could get the money to shoot this production because I know how to shoot it." I knew that it would lend itself well to film and Ben said okay. We put it together in a week over Christmas.

What was the filming process like?

I got the Director of Photography from *Frida*, Rodrigo Prieto, who had never done live theater, as well as three other tremendous cinematographers, and we planned how to shoot it. We decided to film four performances with four cameras each night and to do pick up shots during the day. In live theater, every seat gives you a different feeling, so being able to cover a theater production with cameras on stage, up in the balconies, upstage, downstage, everywhere, was remarkable. By the time we finished, I had 85 hours of material to cut from. I spent a month, personally, going through every shot and obviously the editor, Barbara Tulliver, who's a genius, worked with me over 10 weeks in refining that. So what viewers see when they see this film is that they are actually in all of the best seats in the house.

Do you tend to work with a lot of the same people on projects?

I have beautiful collaborators, who I've worked with over and over again. Lynn Hendee produces my films; we're doing everything together, and composer Elliot Goldenthal has been with me for 30 years. I've worked with some wonderful designers, too, like Donald Holder [lighting], Constance Hoffman [costumes] and Es Devlin [sets]. It's a collaborative process. It's all about who you work with, and are you all on the same page and excited about where you're going?

It's been said that you and the producers of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* weren't exactly on the same page. *A Midsummer's Night Dream* was your first foray back into New York theater since that derided musical. Was it a relief when the show turned out to be a hit?

You know, I'm so sick of talking about something that was four years ago. With *Dream*, I was just doing a play, a great play, as the inaugural production for the new home of the Theatre for a New Audience, and I chose this play because it's a blessing on the house. It's a marriage between the audience, actors and artists. The fact that it was successful is always a relief, no matter what you do.



Director Julie Taymor takes bow during final night of 'The Lion King' at the New Amsterdam Theatre before it relocated to the Minskoff Theatre (Photo: Richard Corkery/NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images)

How important has *The Lion King* been to your career?

Having such a successful production like *Lion King* has supported me in the freedom [to pick and choose my projects]. But even before *Lion King*, I never did anything I didn't find moving or exciting.

Is there any downside to your *Lion King* success?

No. None. I just did the final rehearsals on the Mexican *Lion King* and was thrilled with it. I'm one of the luckiest people in the world to be offered it for my Off-Broadway background. Then Tom Schumacher, Michael Eisner and the team at Disney gave me such tremendous freedom to create that piece, to create a new experimental piece with that kind of support ... Wow. That's just rare. Totally rare.

How is the experience of directing different when it comes to a play vs. a movie?

Film is more of a literal medium. You deal with certain realities and locations. *Transposed Heads* [which I've been adapting for the screen] was first done as a small Off-Off Broadway play in the 1980s. Then it was a musical at Lincoln Center and in Philadelphia. Now Elliot and I have redone it completely, with all-new songs, set in New York, contemporary India and mythological India. As a movie musical, it's really spread-out and wild because the medium allows that. Over time, I've become well versed in the differences between film and theater and it's really fun for me to move back and forth between the two. When I did *Lion King*, I didn't want any projections. I didn't want anything cinematic because *Lion King* had been an animated film. I wanted it to be pure live theater where you see the strings and the rods, where all of the magic is right in front of you because that's what theater does best. But on *Grounded*, a one-woman show at the Public Theater, we did something different. We created a desert by covering the stage with sand. The projections on the sand allowed for a black mirror to reflect it and we were able to make an extremely cinematic one-woman show. So what I do in theater is very cinematic sometimes and what I do in cinema, quite often, if it's appropriate, is highly theatrical.



Anne Hathaway in 'Grounded' at the Public Theatre (Photo: Joan Marcus)

Grounded star and Oscar-winner Anne Hathaway said that she struggled early on in the project with her role as a cocky Air Force pilot reassigned to fly drones, but that you helped her find the character. How did you do that?

Well, we had eight hours a day of rehearsals for six weeks. We talked a lot about the kind of woman her character would be to make it as one of the first female fighter pilots and then have to go through this experience of working a “desk job” after becoming pregnant. So I did what I normally would with all actors, whether it’s Selma Hayek in *Frida* or [Anthony Hopkins in *Titus*]. It’s about going deeply into the character and allowing the actor to explore all aspects of themselves that we haven’t necessarily seen yet. With Annie, I wanted her to find the accent of this woman from Wyoming because that would take her out of the Anne Hathaway that we know or distance her from the characters that she’s normally asked to play. I was excited about that aspect of the project because there’s nothing more thrilling than helping actors get to other parts of their talent and I had a phenomenal time with Annie. She went really far into this character. I feel proud about it.

How old were you when you decided to try directing?

I’ve been directing since I was 15, but I really started to change over from a performer to director at around 20. I directed at Oberlin, then I traveled on a fellowship in visual experimental theater to Eastern Europe, Japan and Indonesia, where I started a theater company called Teatr Loh. I wrote, developed and designed two original plays. The first was *The Way of Snow*, which subsequently I did in New York with a mixed Indonesian and American cast, including Bill Irwin. *Way of Snow* was about modernization, shamanism and insanity; it was a wild, visual theater piece. After that, I directed *Tirai*, which means the curtain, and it was about crossing over into someone else’s culture, so it was very personal.

What advice do you have for fledgling stage directors?

Oh, dear! Well, if you look back, my first independent plays were original works. They were stories I had to tell. So, what I would say is, you need to have a passion for the stories because you spend a lot of time working on them. Most shows take one to two years, minimum, to develop so you better love what you’re doing. Don’t take jobs just for the money, or just for the job.

What helped you grow into the artist you are today?

I had incredibly supportive parents who believed in me and trusted me and let me go out and explore the world. I was in the Boston Children’s Theatre for years. Can you imagine a 9-year-old riding the subway every day after school to do theater for four hours? I went from my nice, upper-middle-class neighborhood to Boston, and was working with kids from the projects and kids from all over the place. Being out of your comfort zone is important for artists. It’s important for everybody, frankly. Americans have to do it a little more. When you go away and look back from a different perspective you learn a lot about yourself and your culture. You know, we always hear, “give the audience what it wants.” Well, what’s the point of that? If the audience gets what it wants, it’s nothing new. But if the audience gets what it didn’t know it wanted, then it’s transformative.

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