The Tempest: Saved By More Than Gender

With current cinema, it seems as if most everyone has an opinion on the flaws and merits of a film. Whether a more serious, scholarly analysis, or a mere blurb on someone's Twitter account, we are not shy on offering commentary. With Julie Taymor's The Tempest, there is certainly no shortage of reviewers, and the general consensus does not seem favorable. While many will rave about Helen Mirren's strengths as Prospera, they seem to be hung up on the more "distracting" elements of the movie: the special effects were too flashy, Miranda and Ferdinand are boring, and Russell Brand was annoying. One has to wade through the obnoxious repetition of these phrases before one can even find a decent examination. The problem is, these are only surface-level judgments, and upon further analyzing, the true beauty of the film shines through. Helen Mirren is incredible in her role as the sorceress Prospera, and she’s certainly deserving of all of the praise given, but there are other aspects worth noting.

The main argument against this interpretation appears to be an outrage at the over-usage of CGI. One reviewer goes so far as to claim they are “cheesball visual effects sending Ben Whishaw's sprite, Ariel, zinging all over the place in superfast motion, when he's not hovering in place like the Ziggy Stardust dress-up version of the 2001 Star Child” (Phillips). Though he is quick to criticize Taymor’s chosen route, Phillips offers no suggestions, himself. How else might one interpret a spirit of nature? A woodland sprite isn’t likely going to just meander across the stage or film set. The character is magical, a creature of the wild, and not tangible. Doesn’t that conjure images of a sort of fairy desperately in need of Ritalin? Taymor herself says she tried to avoid reliance on computer graphics, especially with the characters. She states:

None of them are [CG]. And it's kind of disappointing that people think that they are, because we use a computer after to treat him but it's him – it's his body and you're just photographically multiplying it. Like old photographic techniques from Melies, Regnault, and from Muybridge in particular. So my inspiration was old, old photography. (Taymor)
Another matter has critics decidedly on one side or the other: the contributions of Russell Brand and Alfred Molina. More difficult than finding a hugely positive review is discovering lukewarm feelings regarding these actors' performances, especially Brand's. Notorious for rambunctious behavior and outlandish characters, Brand is a love him or leave him type. While a fan of the actor in general, Mick LaSalle believes "Brand turns Trinculo into a form of torture. His speeches are a muddle, and his physical comedy is disastrous. His performance is a grotesque attempt - not just his but Taymor's—to take a public image and bend it into a Shakespearean performance" (LaSalle). What many are quick to forget, however, is the nature of Trinculo's character. The Shakespearean fool was a privileged man, frequently at court, who was frequently able to get away with all manner of jests and jibes. The humor could be physical, bawdy, rude, and horribly offensive... but it was expected. In our current Hollywood court, the comedians are the jesters to which we look for our entertainment. Russell Brand is an excellent modern-day interpretation of the Bard's fool. Jonathan Henderson feels "as for Brand, I think the worst that can be said is that he overplays, yet, what is it to overplay a Shakespearean clown? Such overplaying was practically demanded of such characters in Shakespeare's day, and Brand is nothing if not an incredibly fast and sharp-witted modern clown" (Henderson). In complementary praise, he offers that “Alfred Molina effortlessly nails the drunken Stephano, with just a right hint of darkness that the original has without losing the vivacious humor” (Henderson).

One of the complaints regarding Taymor's film is with regards to the characters of Ferdinand and Miranda. Several critics have cited the simplicity of the romance as a failing, and have found Miranda to be a poor excuse for a female. One such criticism is that it was "as enacted by a pair of wooden juveniles, this isn't exactly a riveting romance" (Lumenick). Another analyst remarks that the couple "make dull and sappy lovers - especially when he's [Ferdinand] singing to her" (Hall). How soon these writers forget, though, the background of Prospera's daughter. Miranda is not the one-dimensional virgin. She has grown under the tutelage of her mother (or father, if looking at the play), and owes her life experience to the island on which she was raised. It's a lazy response to claim her innocence as a strike against her. Miranda has learned knowledge from her parent, and yet she displays additional traits as well. Her compassion, for instance, is wonderfully apparent in the text as well as in the movie. Upon viewing the storm's destruction, Miranda appeals to her mother/father:
O, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer: a brave vessel,
Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her,
Dash'd all to pieces. O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart. (Tmp. 1.2.5-9)

It is this same compassion that drives her to Ferdinand. He is an attractive man who has lost his father
(so he believes), lost his shipmates, and lost his boat. As far as he knows, he is stranded on this island, and is
greatly depressed due to all that has transpired. He soon encounters Prospera and Miranda, immediately drawn to
the beautiful daughter. Prince Ferdinand is ordered to do menial labor for the sorceress, Prospera, and this incites
more of Miranda’s good nature. Miranda kindly offers to assist Ferdinand, for she is a “child of nature, healthy,
strong, active, familiar with the rough demands of life on this uninhabited island, and unfamiliar with the
chivalrous deference to woman that exempts her from menial labor in civilized society, sees nothing "mean" or
"odious" or "heavy" in piling the wood” (Rolfe). While the courtship leading up to the young couple’s marriage
is brief, it’s hardly surprising that they fall for each other so quickly. Their passion is evident as the rockstar-
inspired prince sings to Miranda, an addition to Taymor’s re-envisioning of the masque of scene four (The
Tempest).

Frequently, the populace can be quick to judge something new and unfamiliar, and Shakespeare can be a
difficult subject to gage. Those who haven’t read the plays may miss the nuances and brilliance of an
interpretation, whereas certain scholars may be hesitant to accept a change. Julie Taymor’s version of The
Tempest is just that: her vision on what the play can be. Though she has made changes to the script, most notably
in altering Prospero’s gender, there is more to this movie than a sex change... and it is worth our attention.
Works Cited


