

## A Conversation with Julie Taymor

Stephen Pizzello

In theatrical circles, director/designer Julie Taymor is renowned as an adventurous and highly imaginative artist with a flair for mind-bending visuals. Her stage productions have garnered considerable acclaim; most recently, she earned two Tony Awards (direction and costume design) for her Broadway rendition of *The Lion King*.

In 1996, Taymor directed *Juan Darien* at the Lincoln Center's Beaumont Theater, and saw the fruits of her labor produce five Tony nominations, including one for Best Director. Some of her other theater credits include *Juan Darien —A Carnival Mass* (which earned two Obies and numerous other awards), *The Green Bird*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Salome*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Tempest*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Transposed Heads*, and *Liberty's Taken*.

Taymor directed her first opera when she took on Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* in 1992 for the Saito Kinen Orchestra in Japan, with Seiji Ozawa conducting. Her film version of the live production (shot by cinematographer Bobby

Bukowski) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and won the Jury Award at the Montreal Festival of Films on Art. After the picture was broadcast internationally in 1993, Taymor won an Emmy Award and the 1994 International Classical Music Award for Best Opera Production.

She also gained filmmaking experience by writing and directing *Fool's Fire*, an hour-long adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *Hopfrog* that was also shot by Bukowski. Produced by American Playhouse, it premiered at the (pre-Sundance) American Film Festival in Park City, and aired on PBS in March of 1992. An experimental blend of 35mm footage and high-definition video, *Fool's Fire* went on to win the Best Drama Award at the Tokyo International Electronic Cinema Festival.

Taymor's production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* was produced off-Broadway by Theater for a New Audience in the spring of 1994. She subsequently adapted the play into a film script, and kept her unique interpretation intact on the screen with the help of top-flight collaborators, including cinematographer Luciano Tovoli, ASC, AIC, two-time Oscar-winning costume de-signer Milena Canonero (*Chariots of Fire*, *Barry Lyndon*), production designer Dante Ferretti (a five-time Oscar nominee whose credits include *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Interview With the Vampire*, and *Kundun*), and composer Elliot Goldenthal (a two-time Oscar nominee for his work on *Interview With the Vampire* and *Michael Collins*).

Taymor discussed *Titus* with *AC* during a recent visit to Los Angeles.

**American Cinematographer:** *Have you always been interested in film as a creative medium?*

**Taymor:** Yes, but because I grew up doing theater, I was always busy with that. I never put aside the time to shift over to film, although I did do some Super 8 work and two-dimensional animation as a teenager. I eventually took a summer film course at New York University, and later on I participated in both the theater and film labs at the Sundance Institute. My first big film project was *Fool's Fire*, which was televised on the PBS series *American Playhouse*. Unfortunately, that was only an hour-long film, so it couldn't be categorized as either a short film or a feature. It went to festivals and won awards, but not many people got to see it. *Fool's Fire* was experimental in nature, but very much controlled within a studio.

*Titus* therefore wasn't my first time working with cameras, but it was my first real feature film on location. It was very different than working within theatrical limitations or entirely within a studio.

*How did you get your motion picture version of Titus Andronicus off the ground?*

**Taymor:** I'd done the play off-Broadway, and I decided to write a script adapted from Shakespeare's original text. Ellen and Robbie Little from the Overseas Film Group [who eventually would serve as executive producers of the film, along with Stephen K. Bannon] optioned the screenplay. We then went through the process of casting actors, and when Anthony Hopkins signed onto star, all of that became much easier. It was still hard to get enough money, but that's always difficult—especially when you're dealing with one of Shakespeare's tragedies, as opposed to a comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. However, [producer] Jody Patton of Clear Blue Sky liked the screenplay very much, and she'd seen a PBS behind-the-scenes show about my work on *The Tempest* [for the stage]. She'd enjoyed that, and my Broadway version of *The Lion King* was just beginning to bloom, so she and Paul Allen decided to back *Titus*.

The film's budget should have been bigger when we started, but at a certain point you have to just start working with what you have. Once everyone began seeing dailies, we got some more money for the CGI shots and other postproduction work.

*What led you to select Titus Andronicus as your first feature-film project?*

**Taymor:** I've had other offers, but I've always loved *Titus Andronicus*. I felt that it was the most contemporary and accessible of Shakespeare's plays, and I also thought it had the most to say about the violence that's taking place in the world right now. It's a very powerful play, and I knew it could be a movie.

Frankly, I think Shakespeare should be given some kind of Lifetime Achievement Award for Screenwriting. His plays *are* screenplays, because there's no scenery in them; he doesn't place those types of limitations on the reader's imagination. They're not like modern plays, which often have two or three characters sitting around in living rooms or kitchens. Plays like that are so boring—they lack the vision and scope of Shakespeare. He doesn't include specific settings, so if you're adapting one of his plays, you can envision anything you want. As an artist, I find it very exciting to be able to add my own ideas, such as staging a key scene with Titus in a bathtub. There's nothing in the play that says Titus is sitting in a tub, or that Rape, Revenge, and Murder visit him in the guise of animals. I'm very dedicated to Shakespeare's intent, but I've also taken some artistic license with the material. For example,

Titus's grandson is a minor character in the original play, but I wanted to expand his role a bit to show the scope of the story through his eyes.

*In both the play and the film, you've melded various eras into a unique, timeless, and rather surreal setting. The costumes, production design, and other visual elements combine both classical and modern Western aesthetics. What inspired you to adopt that creative strategy?*

**Taymor:** That idea is introduced in the first scene, in which the young boy is shown sitting at a kitchen table and playing with toys representing both modern superheroes and classical soldiers. From there he enters this kind of timewarp that transports him into an ancient coliseum, where Titus and his soldiers are returning from their victorious battle with the Goths.

I had talked everything over with my wonderful Italian collaborators, and we really worked on how we could unify this world that's actually a collision of various worlds. By introducing that concept in the first scene, we could then combine tanks, chariots, motorcycles, horses, and Etruscan armor in the following sequence. All of that was extremely plotted out, because I had spent four years working on *Titus*. I'd done it as a play, so I had already been through that rigorous discipline of “reducing” things. As a theater director, you have to be very strict about getting things down to their essence. I also work as a theatrical designer, and I'm always striving to find the simplest and most essential way to create a scene. Before *The Lion King*, my productions didn't have huge budgets, I think that gave me discipline as a director.

*What were some of your specific visual influences in terms of the material?*

**Taymor:** In the theater version, everything was much more black-and-white, one of the strongest influences was the work of [still photographer] Joel Peter Witkin. In both the play and film, I wanted that sense of defamed, deflowered elegance. When you go to Rome, you see graffiti on these beautiful monuments. The symbol of Titus is really a great sculpture from antiquity with a broken hand and a broken foot. In his photography, Witkin often defiles various masterpieces, but they're still beautiful in the end. *Titus* is a dark tale, but it's also very moving—there's exquisite beauty in the ugliness and the torture. The play could be treated as a big, Grand Guignol comic book, but I think the poetry of the story is too rich and too deep to take that approach.

*In Playing With Fire, a book about your work, you've cited both Fellini and Kurosa as influences.*

**Taymor:** I think Kurosawa's *Ran* and Orson Welles's *Chimes of Midnight* are the best screen interpretations of Shakespeare's work. I've always loved Kurosawa; I spent a year in Paris [at age 16, studying mime at L'École de Mime Jacques LeCoq,] and when I used to go to the Cinémathèque to see films, Kurosawa classics like *Rashomon* and *The Seven Samurai* were among the first that I watched there.

With Fellini, I'm not as drawn to his *entire* sensibility. Oddly enough, I'm not that into *8½* or his other movies that deal with male-female relationships, but I love *Nights of Cabiria* and *Amarcord*. I'm a caricaturist, and so was Fellini. I also sculpt and make masks, and I think I share Fellini's love of the human face, as well as his interest in puppets, clowns, the carnival, and the theater.

*The film seems to have a very strict color scheme. Was that by design?*

**Taymor:** Yes. The costumes became a difficult challenge, because we were trying to limit our color palette in that respect. We'd limited our palette in the theatrical production as well, because when you're covering such a great span of time, you have to find a [visual] way to glue it all together. My instructions to [costume designer] Milena Canonero were that everything should be either metallic, black, white, red, or blue, with no other colors except for the green of the grass if necessary. Originally, I wanted to drain the colors, and we experimented with various lab processes. But when we shot the film, it was so beautiful and rich that we decided against using desaturation.

*How did you determine the individual costumes for the various characters?*

**Taymor:** Costumes convey character, and various periods evoke certain feelings in the viewer. In *Titus*, each character spoke to me in a different way. Lavinia is therefore dressed like a lady from the 1950s, with her little short gloves and veil. She's the beautiful girl you want to defile, the jewel of Rome, and I thought of Grace Kelly as the archetype. We put Lavinia quite literally on a pedestal, like Degas's ballerina. In the play we used an actual pedestal, but that was too literal for the film, so we changed it to a tree stump.

Tamora, on the other hand was more of the 1930s and '40s. She's more androgynous, so we put her in a sleek metal gown with her hair slicked back. Meanwhile, Titus's clothing goes from black to grey to white as the story progresses, from armor to a sweater to a bathrobe to a chef's outfit. He gets lighter and lighter. When he's in the sweater, he's like an uncle from the

1960s—his armor has been pierced, and he's been violated. He ends up seemingly stripped of all his power, sitting naked in a bathtub.

*Transforming Titus into a feature film allowed you to "open up" the play on a larger canvas. How did that additional freedom impact your directorial instincts?*

**Taymor:** Well, I've never directed an entire army of extras before! I particularly remember going to the location of the Goth camp, which was at this fabulous quarry. It was really daunting, but after we set up all of the tents and soldiers, I just began working my way through it. Camera movement came fairly naturally to me, because I tend to think in very visual terms. We created shot lists ahead of time, but we didn't use many storyboards. Once we went to a given location, I could visualize things, and Luciano and I would sit together and plot things out beforehand. I do like to pre-edit [in my mind], and on this picture I also had a great editor, Françoise Bonnet. I don't do tons of coverage, because I don't believe in it—to me, shooting a lot of coverage means that you don't have a clear idea of what you're after. It's good to have coverage if you have to make cuts for length, or if you're dealing with action scenes.

In fact, some scenes in the film were staged exactly as they were in the play, such as the sequence in which the heads of Titus's sons are brought to him in a wagon. We shot that scene from behind Titus and the other characters who are with him, so that when his shoulders begin shaking, you think he's crying

until he turns around and you see that he's actually laughing. In that situation, there was really no need for additional coverage or close-ups. The scene was preconceived to produce a particular effect.

In the theater, you don't get to edit, so the transitions—how you move from one scene to the next—are very important, because they all happen right in front of the audience's eyes. In movies, you can cut, which creates a lot of possibilities. However, I think those options can be even more exciting if you have a dear, preconceived idea in your mind. I generally don't like to "discover things" at the editing stage, but still, I must say that Françoise managed to come up with some very surprising and exciting ideas.

*What were some of the key problems you faced on a larger-scale film project?*

**Taymor:** Well, the biggest problems were getting the permissions to use certain locations, and dealing with the weather. The logistics were the real torture for me. We began shooting in October, and it would get dark at three

o'clock in the afternoon while we were shooting an enormous scene in a forest. We were fighting the sun or the rain all the time. During the scene at the crossroads, we wanted gray skies, and they'd be there for a moment and then go away again. I never had to confront those types of problems on my previous film projects, which were both shot indoors.

I much preferred shooting on Dante Ferretti's sets, which were just magnificent and very imaginative. His work on this film is really an example of beautiful and truly *conceptual* production design. He was the one who introduced me to E.U.R., Mussolini's government center, which is known as the "square coliseum" [and serves as the exterior of the Emperor's palace in the film]. In our de-sire to blend eras, that building really served as the perfect link to the past; it's a "modern" structure, but Mussolini was trying to recreate the grandeur of the Roman Empire when he built it.

*What led you to hire Luciano Tovoli as your cinematographer?*

**Taymor:** When I started the film, he wasn't available, but I decided to make a change [regarding the cinematographer's position] during production, and he was available at that point. Luciano has done great work, and I love the crystalline quality of his photography. He understands depth of field in a way that's very exciting. When we were on the set, I'd sometimes think he was using too much light, but he'd always say, "Don't worry, Julie, it will give us tremendous range." And it did—his approach to the lighting gave the picture extraordinary depth and clarity.

*How involved did you get with the lighting and composition?*

**Taymor:** I was certainly very involved with those aspects of the shoot. Since I come from the theater, where there's no natural light, I'm used to creating stylized lighting. I think Luciano was a bit surprised by how much I knew about it. He was aware that I didn't have a lot of experience making films, but I do enjoy playing with lighting effects, and I think he was pleased about that. I understand and love the art of lighting, and I also realize that it takes time to set every-thing up. Sometimes that setup time can be debilitating for the director and the actors, but if you're trying to tell the story through lighting and imagery, the wait is well worth it. With a cinematographer like Luciano, you know you're going to get beautiful results, and I think I gave him a big more freedom than he's had on some of his other projects. I felt that I was able to tap into his talents, and I gave him the space he needed. I had some great artists around me on this project, and I let them do their jobs.

As far as the framing was concerned, we shot the film in the Super 35

format, and since I'm a painter and a visual artist, every single shot was carefully composed. There wasn't one shot in the film where I didn't know what was going to appear in a given corner or background. Luciano has a beautiful humility and openness, and he's so comfortable in his own experience that he can work well with a newcomer and appreciate new ideas.

*In the play, you used intermittent, haiku-like images, which you dubbed 'Penny Arcade Nightmares,' to reveal the inner landscapes of the characters' minds. In the film, these interludes were shot against bluescreen and then composited digitally. What made you opt for that approach?*

**Taymor:** The Penny Arcade Nightmares were composited by Kyle Cooper [of the Los Angeles-based visual design firm Imaginary Forces], who has done some striking title sequences for various films, including *Seven*. I knew I was going to do those sequences digitally ahead of time. If we'd done them optically, it would have been really frustrating. I've done some compositing on high-definition video, but I didn't want a video look. Kyle understood my desire to lend those sequences a surreal, handmade look that was a bit funky; I didn't want them to be *slick*. I wanted to keep that same raw quality that we'd lent the Penny Arcade Nightmares in the stage version. We provided Kyle with the raw footage for the sequences, and he put them together based on my descriptions of what I wanted to see. It was an interesting collaboration.

*You also used Mad Cow's Time-Slice system during the film's climactic banquet sequence to heighten the key moment by "freezing" it. The use of similar camera-array systems has become very popular in television commercials and feature films such as The Matrix. Did you simply feel as if that instant in the story required a special kind of technological spotlight, so to speak?*

**Taymor:** Well, I initially intended to use that technique three times during the banquet scene, but that seemed a bit excessive, as well as expensive and time-consuming. I decided that if I was going to use it, I should do it to highlight the final act [of violence] that the child sees. I think in that regard, it worked as the climax of the film. I actually hadn't seen *The Matrix* or all of those commercials before we did it. I've seen them since then, of course, but I think we used the technique as more than just an effect—to me, all effects have to have an under-lying meaning that relates to the film's narrative content.

We shot that sequence without the effect as well, but I think you need to stop that moment to highlight the way we create art out of violence, or masterpieces out of torture. The banquet sequence really plays with the way an audience perceives violence.

*Your personal interpretation of Shakespeare's work is often categorized as completely original, but Shakespeare himself often cribbed from other sources. How would you assess your work on Titus in that regard?*

**Taymor:** I'm a person of this day and age, so my approach to the material is quite naturally influenced by all of the movies, plays, books, and paintings I've absorbed. You can't run away from all of that; it's how you twist and turn those influences that make the work interesting.

For example, in *Titus* we have a huge orgy sequence in the palace featuring visual elements that will certainly recall Fellini's *Satyricon*, because both scenes involve orgies set in ancient Rome. But at the same time, the sequence in *Titus* is really nothing like the orgy scenes in *Satyricon*. Fellini's version is much more formalized and theatrical.

In the same vein, if you're shooting military marches and you do it well, on some level it's going to look like the work of [German Third Reich filmmaker] Leni Riefenstahl. It's not as if we consciously set out to copy that style.

In my opinion, "originality" is a very dumb concept—it's very "late 20th Century." None of Shakespeare's stories are original. You can read passages written by Plutarch that have the exact same lines, and watch Shakespeare's genius as he twists the language and makes it deep and poetic. It's how an artist assembles his or her influences into a whole piece that really matters.