

Julie Taymor

American director, playwright, and costume designer

Written by: Naomi Blumberg |

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Julie Taymor, (born December 15, 1952, Newton, Massachusetts, U.S.), American stage and film director, playwright, and costume designer known for her inventive use of Asian-inspired masks and puppets. In 1998 she became the first woman to win a **Tony Award** for best director of a musical, for her **Broadway** production of *The Lion King*, derived from the **Disney** animated film of the same name.

Taymor showed an early interest in theatre when she and her sister began putting on productions in their backyard for friends and family. Taymor joined the Boston Children’s Theatre and performed as Hermia in *Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In high school she began attending the experimental theatre workshops given by playwright and theatre educator Julie Portman, in which she learned the art of “living theatre,” creating theatre from ideas or from scratch and using personal experience as the primary inspiration. Finishing high school at age 16, Taymor traveled to **Paris** to attend to Jacques Lecoq’s **mime** school. After one year, Taymor returned to the U.S. and began studies at **Oberlin College**, where she pursued **folklore** and **mythology**. Though not pursuing an academic course in theatre, she auditioned for and was accepted into a newly formed company on campus, KRAKEN, led by the experimental director and scholar Herbert Blau. .

With a **Thomas J. Watson** Foundation fellowship (1974), a one-year grant, Taymor left the U.S. to travel and study theatre. Her travels took her to eastern Europe, **Japan**, and finally to **Indonesia**, where she had planned to stay three months but instead stayed for four years. In **Bali**, with funding from a **Ford Foundation** grant, she founded **Teatr Loh**—a group of German, American, French, Sudanese, Javanese, and Balinese puppeteers, musicians, dancers, and actors—and developed her first theatre works, *Way of Snow* and *Tirai*. In 1980 and ’81 Taymor restaged both of those works in New York City. In 1980 she met composer **Elliot Goldenthal**, who became her life partner and artistic collaborator. One of their first projects was the original musical *Liberty’s Taken* (1985), an irreverent retelling of the story of the **American Revolution**. Other early collaborations included a stage adaptation (1986) of *The Transposed Heads: A Legend of India*, by **Thomas Mann**, and *Juan Darién: A Carnival Mass* (1988), based on the short story “Juan Darién,” by the Uruguayan author **Horacio Quiroga**. The latter earned Taymor an **Obie Award** (given for **Off-Broadway** theatre) for best direction. In 1996 she restaged it for Broadway and incorporated her soon-to-become-trademark puppets and masks. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Taymor also directed several plays by Shakespeare, including *The Tempest* (1986), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1988), and *Titus Andronicus* (1994), each of which ran at Theatre for a New Audience, a venue in **Brooklyn** devoted to Shakespeare and classic drama.

In the early 1990s, Taymor began branching out to directing films and staging operas. Her first production of an opera, **Igor Stravinsky’s** opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, based on the play by **Sophocles** and conducted by **Seiji Ozawa**, was recorded in 1993. The film of the performance was screened at a few film festivals and aired on television; for the latter it won an **Emmy Award** (1993). She staged **Mozart’s** *The Magic Flute* in Florence in 1993, with conductor **Zubin Mehta**, and the following year she took on **Richard Strauss’s** *Salomé*, conducted by **Valery Gergiev** in **St. Petersburg**. In 1995 she staged **Richard Wagner’s** *The Flying Dutchman*, conducted by **Klaus Weise** for the Los Angeles Opera. Taymor’s first film, *Fool’s Fire*—based on the short story “Hop-Frog” (1849) by **Edgar Allan Poe**—aired on television in 1992 and was screened at the **Sundance Film Festival** later that year.

In 1996 Taymor staged **Carlo Gozzi’s** play *The Green Bird*, in which she experimented with **Bunraku**, a form of Japanese puppet theatre that has the puppeteers in view of the audience but silent and cloaked in black so that their presence recedes into the background. In *The Green Bird* Taymor introduced her own version of Bunraku, which eliminated masks and involved speaking parts for her actor-puppeteers, a model she used again for *The Lion King* (1997).

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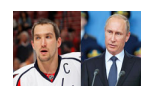
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Taymor was considered an unusual choice to design the staging of Disney's *The Lion King* for Broadway, given how dissimilar her aesthetic was to the whimsical and sentimental style of Disney animation. However, she won over the Disney executives with her innovative use of life-size puppets paired with actors. She designed traditional African costumes for the actors and animal masks that rested on their heads, allowing the performers' facial expressions to be visible. For some of her costumes, she created what appeared to be full-body puppets that were worn by the performers. The giraffes, for example, were actors on stilts wearing tall conical masks. In sum, Taymor created more than 100 puppets for the show, which came together into a fantastic spectacle that made *The Lion King* one of the longest-running musicals on Broadway. She won the Tony Award for best costume design in 1998.

Following the critical and financial success of *The Lion King*, Taymor dedicated more of her time to feature films, releasing her first, *Titus*, based on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, in 1999. The score was composed by Goldenthal, and the film starred [Anthony Hopkins](#) and [Jessica Lange](#). Taymor followed up with *Frida* (2002), a visually stunning film about artist [Frida Kahlo](#), portrayed by [Salma Hayek](#). The biopic won [Academy Awards](#) (2003) for best original score and best makeup. Other films directed by Taymor include *Across the Universe* (2007)—a [Vietnam War](#)-era love story set to a soundtrack of [the Beatles](#)—and *The Tempest* (2010), based on the play by Shakespeare and for which she changed the male role of [Prospero](#) to a female Prospera, portrayed by [Helen Mirren](#). Taymor also worked with Goldenthal on two more operas during this period: another staging of *The Magic Flute* for the [Metropolitan Opera](#) in New York City and an original work, *Grendel* (2006), based on the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*.

She next began work on *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, a Broadway musical that she signed on to direct, with [Bono](#) and the Edge of the band [U2](#) as its composers. The production, nine years in the making, was riddled with problems, and Taymor was fired from her position in March 2011 after reportedly clashing with both her collaborators and the show's producers. The show opened under new direction in June of that year. Though it was reasonably successful, it closed in January 2014 with the dubious distinction of being, at that time, the most expensive Broadway musical ever produced, at a cost of \$75 million.

After a long hiatus, Taymor returned to directing Shakespeare onstage with her 2013 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Theatre for a New Audience. She then helmed a 2015 production of *Grounded*, a one-person show featuring [Anne Hathaway](#) as a fighter pilot, at the Public Theater. Among her many nominations and awards, Taymor received a MacArthur fellowship (1991) and a Guggenheim fellowship for creative arts—drama and performance art (1989). She also won the first Dorothy B. Chandler Performing Arts Award (1989) and a Muse Award from the New York Women in Film & Television (2007).

Naomi Blumberg



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