

Julie Taymor as Puppet Artist

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Note: This paper was written for a graduate course in puppetry history and theory, co-taught by [Bradford Clark](#).

Preface

In my study of Julie Taymor, I have attempted to examine her as a puppet artist. This has forced me to leave out much material which many previous scholars have considered as basic to any study of Taymor. Her relationship with Eliot Goldenthal, her work with Joseph Chaiken's "Open Theatre," and her extensive work in non-puppet performances has been omitted, along with much other material. Unlike many other puppet artists, Taymor has a large amount of material published about her, and any study about her suffers from a wealth rather than dearth of information.

With this in mind, I have included a lengthy bibliography consisting of both works cited and consulted. I also wish to here include a brief bibliography of sources which I was unable to attain. It is my hope that these sources will be of use in further studies concerning Taymor. They are specific to the study of Taymor as a puppet artist. The sources are: Berson, Misha. "A Spectacle of Puppet People Pulls Heartstrings." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 11 Nov. 1990: 21. Kelly, Kevin. "Beyond Miss Piggy: Taymor's Puppets Are Extraordinary." *Boston Globe*. 7 July 1991: 43. "Puppets, Masks Work Wonders." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 16 Nov. 1990: 1. Rosenberg, Scott. "Pathos Among Puppets." *San Francisco*. 18 Nov. 1990: 3.

I have not chosen to include visual reproductions of Taymor's work within the context of this study. Miriam Horn's 1993 article for *Smithsonian* provides some of the best color reproductions of Taymor's work to date. The videos of **The Tempest** and **Oedipus Rex** also contain good looks at Taymor's work.

I would also like to thank BGSU students Cynthia Gibson and Kristen Koehler, whose previous research helped me greatly in the production of this study. I have purposely tried to avoid re-hashing their research, but it is inevitable that some should overlap. Gibson's paper is an excellent biography of Taymor, and Koehler's provides an insightful discussion of her adaptation of **Oedipus Rex**.

Finally, I should point out that I have purposely avoided using Mel Gussow's excellent 1992 article from the *New York Times* entitled "The Looking Glass World of Julie Taymor" to any extent. As that article was included among the course packet in the course for which this study was produced, I felt as if I could write this study with the knowledge that this material was common knowledge to my audience. Therefore, references to it are intentionally avoided in all but a few cases.

Introduction

Julie Taymor is a multi-talented theatre artist for whom puppetry is merely one aspect of her art. Nevertheless she is primarily known for her work in the realm of puppets and masks, and there is little doubt that it is this work which has been instrumental in gaining her international recognition as a theatre artist. Although Taymor regularly designs, directs and writes, the focus of this study will be on her work as a puppet artist.

As such, this study will detail the highlights of Taymor's career and development specifically as they relate to her puppet work. Although it is nearly impossible to divorce Taymor's other theatrical endeavors from her puppetry, this study will minimize all other work so as to highlight her profile as puppet artist. Taymor has recently stated that she is moving away from puppets, and this study will attempt to highlight what she has done in the field thus far. It is the hope of the author that Taymor's puppet career will be of particular interest to other puppet artists, theatre practitioners and scholars.

Training and Influences

Julie Taymor was born in 1952 in Newton, a suburb of Boston (Kleinfield B3). Taymor began to experiment in the theatre as early as age eleven. She also began to show signs of her future interest in puppetry and mask representations. Taymor would have her mother make faces at her, which she would attempt to draw. This is still her primary technique today for creating puppet and mask expressions (Horn 63).

After some work with both the Boston Children's Theatre and the Theatre Workshop of Boston, Taymor decided that she wanted to spend some time abroad. At age fifteen, Taymor traveled to Sri Lanka and lived as a foreign exchange student (Horn 64). She then returned to the United States, but was abroad again as soon as she graduated from Newton High School at the age of seventeen. This time she traveled to Paris to study at the prestigious Ecole de Mime with Jaques le Coq (Horn 64). This school has been immensely popular with various puppet artists, and was important in shaping Taymor's theatrical style.

Upon her return to the United States, Taymor enrolled in Oberlin College, where she created her own major in the ritual origins of theatre through the study of folklore and mythology. During her sophomore year at Oberlin, Taymor apprenticed at the Bread and Puppet Theatre. Taymor had first been exposed to this troupe when they came to Boston while she was still very young. Also during her time at Oberlin, Taymor worked with Herbert Blau and Bill Irwin, both noted for their avant-garde staging techniques (Gussow 1992: 52).

After her senior year at Oberlin, Taymor spent a summer in Seattle. Here she studied Javanese shadow puppetry and wood carving at the American Society for Eastern Arts (Burns 50). Her work here enabled her to receive a Watson Fellowship, which allowed her to travel to Eastern Europe, Japan and Indonesia (Reardon 10).

Perhaps the most influential influence on Taymor's puppetry came from her experiences in Indonesia. She says of this time: "I have never seen theatre as potent, powerful, and overwhelmingly theatrical as I have in Indonesia, It's part of the every day fabric of society. . . (Burns 50-51). What was supposed to be a one year stay turned into four. She spent her first two years studying with Javanese playwright Rendra, who encouraged her to branch out and create her own work (Burns 51).

She assented to Rendra's wish, and moved to the small island of Bali. While there, Taymor formed the Teatr Loh, which was an international performing troupe. Taymor co-directed this troupe from 1974-

1978 (Burns 49). The group formed what basically amounted to a commune at one of Bali's most sacred places. They shared knowledge with each other, training in dance, Tai Chi, mime, yoga, improvisation, story telling, mask making and vocal warm-ups (Taymor 65). Taymor returned to the United States in 1979, where she attempted to procure funds to bring the Teatr Loh to the United States. She was unable to do this, but remained in America nevertheless (Burns 51).

Taymor Productions and Their Puppets

Taymor's first major production came with the Teatr Loh. It was financed by the Ford Foundation, and was entitled *Way of Snow*. Based on an Eskimo legend, this production was a "puppet-mask trilogy, which was very well received in Java in 1976 (Burns 51). It was also revived by the Ark Theatre in 1980 (Burns 51). The troupe's next production, entitled *Tirai*, was performed in six different languages with numerous masks and performance traditions.

Taymor's first project in the United States was when she designed the set, costume, puppet and mask concepts for *The Odyssey* at Baltimore's Center Stage (Burns 51). Taymor was then awarded a Maharam Theatre Design award for her work with *The Haggadah* at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1980. This production consisted of a reenactment of the Jewish Passover festival.

Her puppet work in this production consisted, in part, of shadow puppets which enacted the ten plagues (Horn 69). These were enhanced by two-dimensional frogs and locusts that flew about the audience, attached to strings (Horn 69). The audience was seated around a long table. It became somewhat of a shadow puppet theatre in the round, except that it was the audience rather than the players who were surrounded. This project, on which Taymor collaborated with Elizabeth Swados, was produced in three successive seasons at the Festival.

Taymor's next major project was also performed for three successive seasons, this time at the American Repertory Theatre from 1984-1986. She designed costumes, masks and puppets for **The King Stag**, which was directed by Andrei Serban (Burns 51). A bear puppet that she designed for this production was sent to Czechoslovakia as a part of the winning entry to the Prague Quadrennial International design competition (Burns 52).

In 1985, Taymor co-adapted **Liberty's Taken**, which consisted of a 200-page script. This production was based on the life of Deborah Sampson Gannet, who disguised herself as a man in order to fight in the American Revolution (Horn 70). Taymor utilized 150 masks and puppets for this production (Burns 52). She says of that production:

It is . . . extremely earthy, with talking ship's figureheads hobbyhorses that fall apart and get eaten, Punch and Judy, and a brothel that's a 30-foot-tall woman who has copulating shadow puppets in her torso. (Burns 52).

In 1986, Taymor staged a production of William Shakespeare's **The Tempest** at the Theatre for a New Audience in which she utilized both puppet and mask. Taymor's time in Indonesia definitely had an influence on her handling of the storm contained in the beginning of the play. A cut-out of a ship is seen sailing on the horizon. As the tempest hits, a shadow screen drops from the ceiling, and the shadow from this cut-out is projected onto the screen by a hand held light source. The operators move both the light source and the cut-out, and an abstract storm effect is achieved through what basically amounts to a shadow puppet.

Perhaps Taymor's most innovative contribution to the production is her handling of Ariel. She decided to have Ariel represented by a hand-held mask and a costumed hand, which would be manipulated by an operator garbed in all black, much in the same way as a left hand or foot operator of a Japanese

bunraku puppet. She says of this decision:

Ariel is described as a spirit. . . I kept wondering "How do you really get the essence of a spirit?". . . That this [hand], with this face could express all of the human emotions which this spirit has, and yet is not a human. ("Behind the Scenes" Video)

Taymor's decision was made in order to capture the essence of a non-human creature, and this says much for the power of puppetry in her performance. Rather than use a human to portray the spirit, Taymor has opted for the magic of puppetry. She says:

That it [the Ariel mask] is absolutely nothing more than an object, that is brought to life by an actress' talent, by her ability to manipulate it that it has so much humanity through the movement, to me this is sort of the essence of theatre. ("Behind the Scenes" Video)

The mask is also very important in Taymor's production. It is important to note the strong power that the mask has in this performance in terms of control. The actress playing Ariel is masked as a bunraku operator, and Caliban is masked in a "stone" mask (which is Taymor's interpretation of Shakespeare's line: "Here you sty me in this hard rock"). When Caliban decides to revolt against Prospero, he breaks open the mask with a stick, and when Ariel is finally freed by Prospero, the actress removes the mask and reveals her face for the first time. The mask represents enslavement for the spirits, and its removal reveals their inner self. The whole idea can perhaps be looked at as a metaphor for puppetry. Until their freedom, the spirits were little more than puppets to Prospero. Perhaps representative of the "magic" contained within a puppet.

In 1988, the Taymor adapted production of Horacio Quiroga's short story, **Juan Darien** was staged by the Music-Theatre Group in New York (Burns 49). The story is about a jaguar cub nursed to health by a South American villager and is turned into a boy. The performance was composed almost entirely of puppets. Taymor says:

The character of **Juan Darien** appears as a jaguar puppet, a bunraku 12-year-old puppet, and a real boy. . . The real boy is the only flesh and blood in the whole play. All the other characters are sculptures, hand puppets, and shadow puppets. (Burns 49)

Juan Darien was critically successful mainly because of Taymor's fascinating puppet artistry. Mel Gussow writes in his review for the New York Times:

On one level, the show is an interpretive anthology of puppet arts -- monumental mourners reminiscent of Bread and Puppet Theatre parables; beasts that move bunraku-style; tantalizing shadow puppets and. . . an aurora borealis of butterflies. (1988: 24)

Gussow, in his praise of the puppets and the performance says that Taymor has never before fused her art into the "breathtaking intensity" of this production.

Michael Feingold, critic for the Village Voice, heartily agrees with Gussow. After a brief discussion of the power of puppets, Feingold delivers an enthusiastic review of Taymor's production which has only two complaints. The first is that he does not like the moments where masked characters show their faces. He writes that after looking at "larger than life," and "magical creatures" for so long, "ordinary humanity seems a bit of a disappointment" (Feingold 116). He also complains that the production is closing so soon, and berates the fact that "must see" events like this have to operate on a "curtailed" schedule (Feingold 116).

In 1991 Taymor began work on a PBS production of Edgar Allen Poe's short story **Hopfrog**. She renamed it **Fool's Fire** (Kleinfield B3). The production was composed almost entirely of puppets. The only human actors in the production were a pair of dwarves. The story details the revenge of these dwarves against their abusive masters. This production contained some of the largest scale puppets

that Taymor had ever worked on, and she enlisted the help of designer Michael Curry for the project (Malkin 50). The pair went through an extended and extremely technical process to create the large-scale puppets needed for the production. As Taymor works in one of the most primal arts, she still uses the most current technology available to bring her works to life.

Taymor's most popular success to date was her production of Igor Stravinsky's opera, **Oedipus Rex**. She directed this in 1992 for the Saito Kinen Festival in Tokyo. Truly an epic rendition of Stravinsky's work, Taymor again utilized a large number of puppetry techniques. Three-dimensional birds suspended from strings begin the onslaught of puppet and mask usage. Many actors became something like living sculptures, as they were entirely encased in plaster-like costumes.

Taymor's use of masks was also unique. Rather than wear them on their face, the main actors wore "stone" heads on top of their heads. This created particularly exciting moments within the opera. For example, when Oedipus blinded himself, he stabbed the pins into the eyes of the stone mask. This created an interesting stylization of violence upon the stage, in a manner that is not possible for the actor to achieve. The characters are also costumed with large "stone" hands, which regulate all gestures to puppet-like movements.

Oedipus Rex was another critical success for Taymor. Both Leighton Kerner of the Village Voice and Patrick J. Smith of Opera News gave glowing reviews of Taymor's work. Taymor is no stranger to critical praise, and the primary importance of this performance must be seen in the relatively large audience it received. PBS has broadcast Taymor's work on at least three occasions, and this has allowed numerous people to witness her work. Her success is important in that it helps to paint puppetry as an art which is not only for children.

It seems that the future of Taymor's puppet career is not in doubt, although she has, at times, expressed dismay at being pegged as merely a puppeteer. She has plans to direct an opera version of Beowulf, which she has adapted. Her opera is based on John Gardner's re-telling of the myth which is named after the chief protagonist, Grendel (Reardon 10). Even though she has hit a number of financial snags, Taymor predicts that the opera will be up and running by 1997 at the latest (Reardon 10).

Taymor on Puppetry

In this section, I have attempted to let Ms. Taymor do the talking. The section includes statements that she has made on many aspects of puppetry. My comments on her remarks are intended to draw various conclusions regarding her philosophy towards puppetry. It is my hope that this section will paint a revealing portrait of Ms. Taymor's beliefs, and what they mean in the broader context of puppetry.

Although Julie Taymor's artistic influences are fairly obvious in much of her work, she is quick to point out that she is not attempting to reproduce the forms she adapts. She says "I was inspired by Asian theatre forms, but I don't simply mimic them. . . They go through me, and something original comes out" (Reardon 10). "If I appropriate things from other cultures, its in terms of technique," she echoes in a 1992 article (Gussow 1992: 52). This tendency is important, because it shows that her works are not slavish reproductions, but rather vital works of imagination which are infused with ideas from other cultures.

Taymor sometimes is commissioned to build puppets and/or masks for productions with which she is not involved, and does not enjoy this type of work. She says:

"I'll always put the same amount of effort or love into the artwork. But if I'm not

emotionally involved in the show, I do it as a job. The real fun. . . is seeing puppeteers, dancers and singers adding to what I conceived. That's the enjoyment. (Burns 53)

Taymor is always working at a rather torrid pace, and her devotion to excellence enables her to only work on a few projects at a time. She says:

It's very exhausting. . . I can't design a mask and say to someone else, "Just do it." It's partly because I'm a better sculptor than I am a drawer. Considering the amount of time it would take me to draw exactly what I want, I might as well sculpt it. I paint most of it too. It's incredibly time consuming so I end up turning down a lot of jobs I want to do. (Shewey 72)

Taymor might do as few as four shows in ten years, and clearly she strives for quality rather than quantity. This would help to account for the number of productions which receive numerous revivals.

Puppets are not the sum total of Ms. Taymor's work. She works with many other artistic mediums, but she still relishes the freedom that puppets give a director. She says:

I would never do something with just puppets. . . But I like the things puppets allow you to do. I had this puppet Dinah Donewell, and she had this hand puppet named Mr. Pleaser. He was her lap dog who was constantly under her skirt. Now if you did that with actors, people would be off ended. But in this case, so what? It was a puppet with a puppet. (Kleinfield B3)

Taymor's comments are interesting not only because they provide an insight into her artistic aesthetic, but also for their relevance to modern puppetry. Taymor demonstrates how the puppet can achieve things that an actor could not. This recognition is important, the idea that there are things which puppets can do much better than actors.

These ideas are expressed by a puppeteer who has never produced a puppet show for children, but nevertheless lives in a society which has regulated the art form to this group. Taymor sees this as the major problem in America's perception of the puppet. "We have a ways to go in understanding the power of puppetry," she says in referring to her native country (Kleinfield B3). Indeed, Taymor is one of the artists leading the way in instructing Americans about this power.

Yet Taymor does not wish to be looked upon as only a puppet artist. Her career consists of much more than her operating as a "puppeteer," a term which she despises. She says:

Sounds like a mouseketeer. . . . It's an easy peg, but I've never been a puppeteer, I conceive and I write and I design and I direct. And not just puppets. I direct actors, I direct dancers, I direct singers, I direct films. I also direct puppeteers. I'm really a theatre maker, but there's not a word for that. (Reardon 10).

Even as she attempts to dispel the notion that she is merely a puppet artist, the fact is that she is a puppet artist, and a very successful one. While she has many other talents, the work of Julie Taymor can be examined solely in terms of puppetry, which is what this study has attempted.

Summary

The work of Julie Taymor is very imaginative, and this has earned her an international reputation. Not the easiest thing in the world to do, as N. R. Kleinfield writes: "Becoming renowned for puppets is not easy -- finding a new galaxy or making the draw at Wimbledon is easier. . ." (B1). Kleinfield wrote

this in 1991 shortly after Taymor was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Grant, which will distribute \$245,000 to her over five years.

Yet Taymor has received international recognition for her puppetry work, and has established herself as one of the imaginative pioneers in the field. As her names becomes more and more commonplace in the discussion of puppetry, it is almost a certainty that she will exert an influence upon future puppet artists. As such, it is useful to study Ms. Taymor's puppetry career.

This study has attempted to highlight Ms. Taymor's work in the field of puppetry. By examining her influences, puppet productions and statements on puppetry, the study has attempted to provide an introductory overview to Taymor's puppet work. It is the hope of the author that other scholars will one day treat this topic with the in-depth study it so richly deserves. Until then, this study can serve as an overview of one of the great puppet performers of the day.

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