

“Theatre is my Skin”

Tracing Julie Taymor’s Creative Ethos

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... what happened was that I came back to my beginnings. The most successful stuff is the stuff I’ve done my whole life, which didn’t cost anything. Like the tears coming out of the eyes. Or the silk going into the water hole. Or the shadow puppets of the fish. Or the little mouse. ... Those are the things that I’ve done since I had no budgets. They have the power. In fact *more* power because they are so transparent, so simple.

Julie Taymor on *The Lion King*¹

¹Richard Schechner, “Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to *The Lion King*,” *The Drama Review (TDR)* 43.3 (1999): 45.

Julie Taymor erupted into the theatrical mainstream in 1997² with the Disney-produced musical stage version of *The Lion King*. Its extraordinary masks and puppets represent the entire range of Taymor's techniques since her first production in 1975.³ As such, *The Lion King* constitutes, besides a lavish portfolio, a point of convergence for assessing the major formative influences upon Taymor's dramatic ethos.⁴ While the artist's designs are hardly separable from her directorial vision, this paper shall confine itself to discussing the role of the human actor in Taymor's work primarily in relation to the animated object.

Principal Techniques

Juxtaposition: The essence of Taymor's dramatic language becomes most apparent at and around the threshold between face and mask, body and puppet, in their *juxtaposition* as well as in their mutual transgression. Taymor describes the interaction between an actress and a life-size puppet, in *The King Stag* (1984):

She gently carries the fragile figure in her arms. She sighs, sadly. He shudders with regret. The audience sees a pile of fiberglass limbs and yet suddenly, almost miraculously, through the physical and emotional interaction of this human being and this puppet, a heightened perception of humanity is engendered. Air. Light. Breath.- Bringing to life the inanimate figure.⁵

For Taymor, "[t]he juxtaposition of live actor and puppet was one of the key emotional and humanizing factors"⁶ in her much darker *Juan Darien* as well. She also communicates meaning through contrast by juxtaposing 'refined' images or characters with 'vulgar'⁷ ones, or "the sacred and profane".⁸ Finally, she uses differences in scale to create a pseudo-cinematic experience, for example of close-ups alternating with wide shots,⁹ effecting temporal as well as spatial juxtaposition.

Transformation: The physical transformation of a character, often represented by a series of puppets or masks, is another recurring image. On occasion, puppet characters become flesh-and-blood actors, or characters are unmasked to reveal the human behind the mask.¹⁰



Double Event: Frequently in Taymor's designs and staging, the puppeteer and the mechanics of manipulation remain visible behind or within the puppet, or both the mask and the face of an actor perform simultaneously, creating a *double event*.¹¹



Ideograph: The initial impulse for an action, a character or an entire work is often defined by generating an *ideograph*¹² or essential gesture that summarizes the nature of the action or character.

Juxtaposition, Transformation, the Double Event and the Ideograph constitute fundamental concepts in Taymor's process, in her creative grammar.¹³ This paper will trace the probable origins of these principles, and discuss their role in the evolution of Taymor's conception of theatre as spectacle.

² *The Lion King* opened in July 31st, 1997 in Minneapolis, and previewed on Broadway October 15th.

³ Michael Curry, co-designer of the masks and puppets: "Three-quarters of the techniques we've used before. There are only 26 letters in the alphabet." cited in Christine Dolen, "Queen of the jungle: Director Julie Taymor reigns over her contemporaries with imagination and surprise," *The Miami Herald*, October 20, 2002, <<http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/4315872.htm>>

⁴ by which I mean the system of beliefs that determines her aesthetics as well as her practical approach to theatre-making.

⁵ Julie Taymor, with Eileen Blumenthal, *Julie Taymor: Playing with Fire*, updated and expanded ed. (1995; reprint, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1999), 88.

⁶ *Playing with Fire*, 136

⁷ based on the Indonesian principles of *halus* and *kasar*.

⁸ *Playing with Fire*, 13, 64; "Teatr Loh ...", 65.

⁹ cf. eg. Julie Taymor, *The Lion King: Pride Rock on Broadway* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 82.

¹⁰ Juan goes through five transformations, only the last of which is embodied by a 'live' actor.

¹¹ eg. *Playing with Fire*, 216

¹² eg. *Playing with Fire*, 105 (see ill.)

¹³ I write 'grammar' rather than 'vocabulary' to emphasize active rather than static principles.

Education

Arguably Julie Taymor's most significant developmental period is the decade between her high school graduation and her return to the United States (1968-1978). Taymor is remarkably consistent in enumerating her formative influences during this period as: the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, Herbert Blau at Oberlin, and her sojourn in Indonesia, where she founded her first troupe.¹⁴ It would be remiss, however, not to mention briefly several other individuals and events that laid the groundwork for Taymor's access, and her receptivity, to these principal sources of inspiration.

Born in Boston in 1952, Julie Taymor grew into her teens against the backdrop of the turbulent, iconoclastic '60s and the Vietnam War. Her early enthusiasm for acting was supported by educated, politically and pedagogically liberal middle-class parents.¹⁵ They also provided her with opportunities for developing an interest in other cultures. Her family was well-off enough - and adventurous enough - to allow young Julie to spend a summer in Sri Lanka with the Experiment in International Living,¹⁶ followed by a year with École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, before matriculating Oberlin (Ohio).¹⁷ The personal freedom, creative energy and questioning uncertainty of the late 60's, however, was balanced in Julie by a desire for structure and creative discipline. "I grew up in the 1960s doing Living Theatre kind of stuff, creating theatre from scratch, from ideas -- and I didn't feel I had any training."¹⁸ There is evidence that she felt continually driven to prove herself;¹⁹ Julie mentions that she was unusually young for a student of Lecoq.²⁰

L'École Jacques Lecoq (1969/70)²¹

To mime is literally to embody and therefore to understand better. ... [M]iming is rediscovering a thing with renewed freshness. This educational use of mime must not be confused with the art of mime, which reaches its highest expression in Japanese Noh theatre, when the actor mimes his anger by means of a few vibrations of his fan.²²



the neutral mask

Even at Lecoq's acting school, albeit indirectly, Taymor would be exposed to forms and techniques that were inspired, at their root, by Asian performance traditions. Lecoq's famous 'neutral mask', designed by Amleto Sartori, was based on the 'noble mask'²³ that Jacques Copeau's troupe had developed in the '20s. Lecoq had been introduced to Copeau's work through Jean Dasté, Copeau's student and son-in-law, in 1945,²⁴ during the "heady period of post-war freedom."²⁵ Dasté was enamored of the mask work of Suzanne Bing at the Vieux-Colombier. Both Bing and Copeau had been strongly influenced by their study of Japanese *noh* theatre, and other French innovators of the period, such as Jean-Louis Barrault, were inspired by *kabuki* and *bunraku* as well as *noh*.²⁶ The "renovation"²⁷ of French mime (and its use, through Lecoq, as an educational tool for actors) thus involved at least in part the revisioning of Japanese forms of

¹⁴ as eg. in Schechner (1999), and Sylviane Gold, "The possession of Julie Taymor," *American Theatre* 15.7 (Sep.98): 20-25.

¹⁵ according to Gold, her father was a Harvard Medical School professor; Blumenthal, however, writes that he was a gynecologist (he may have been both), and her mother a liberal activist (*Playing with Fire*, 10).

¹⁶ founded in 1932, the organization continues to promote intercultural living and education. See <<http://www.experiment.org/home.htm>>

¹⁷ *Playing with Fire*, 10-11

¹⁸ Schechner (1999), 40

¹⁹ In her recollections, Taymor frequently emphasizes that she was the youngest person or the first woman to tackle a certain challenge.

Occasionally she remembers being younger than the dates bear out. According to what she told Blumenthal in 1994, she went to Sri Lanka at 15, but she tells Bill Moyers in 2002 that she was 13. Blumenthal also reports that, in 1969, Julie became the youngest member, at 15, of the Theater Workshop of Boston, even though in '69 she must already have been 16, if not 17. I mention this not to discredit Taymor's achievements, but to demonstrate her need to pioneer and excel, especially as a female theatremaker. She gives JoAnne Akalaitis, Anne Bogart and herself as examples of the initial lack of attention accorded to young women directors, compared to the immediate buzz generated by a young male such as Peter Sellars.

²⁰ Nowadays the minimum age is 21. Julie was 16.

²¹ These dates suggest that Taymor did not witness the student protests in Paris in '68 and in the US, including at Harvard, in '69.

²² Jacques Lecoq, Jean-Gabriel Carasso, Jean-Claude Lallias, *The Moving Body (Le Corps poétique)*, David Bradby (New York: Routledge, 2001), 22.

²³ *The Moving Body*, 5 (while the 'noble mask' was used in performance, Lecoq's 'neutral mask' became a pedagogical tool)

²⁴ Kathryn Wylie, *Satyrical and Heroic Mimes: Attitude as the Way of the Mime in Ritual and Beyond* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co. Inc., 1994), 74-76. (supporting Lecoq's own statements in *The Moving Body*, 5)

²⁵ *The Moving Body*, 5

²⁶ Marjaana Kurkinen, *THE SPECTRE OF THE ORIENT: Modern French Mime and Traditional Japanese Theatre in the 1930s*, diss., University of Helsinki, 2000 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2000).

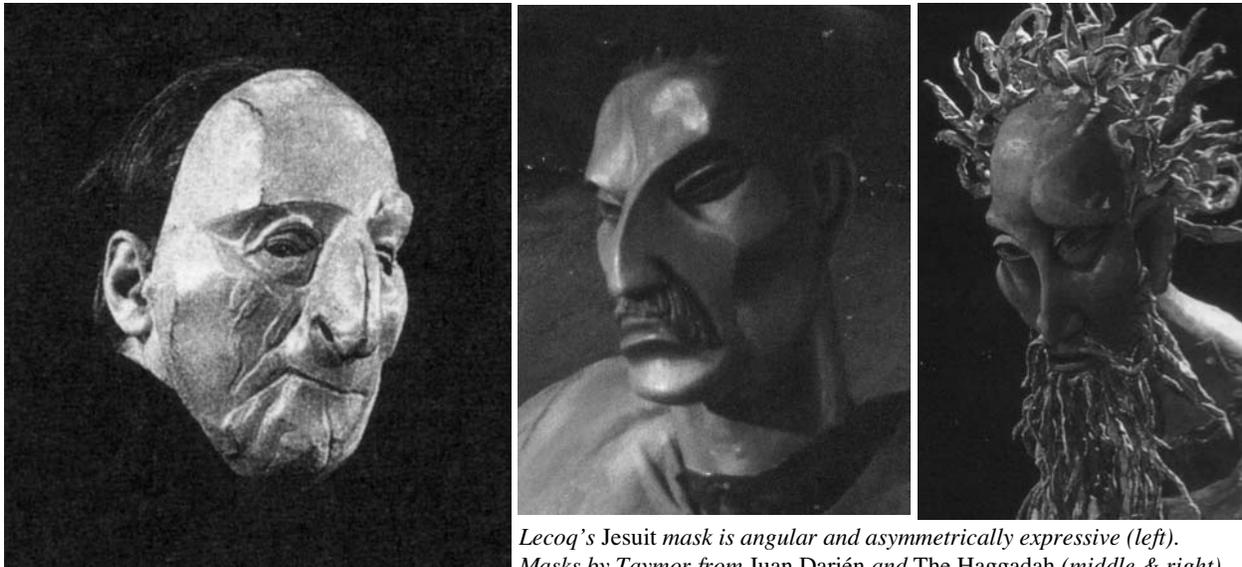
²⁷ Kurkinen, 1

performance and puppetry. Ironically, while questioning the stultified conventions of 19th century French mime, these innovators found freedom and authenticity in an even more rigid and codified tradition (as did Artaud in Balinese dance and Brecht in Beijing Opera²⁸).

Although Julie Taymor only completed the first year of Lecoq's program, and was by her own admission too young to benefit from it fully,²⁹ she managed to adopt a number of the school's techniques and principles that suited her needs. Taymor recalls:

I wasn't interested in being a mime -- but I was very intrigued with the use of masks and how the body became a mask. ... Really what Lecoq is about is that the body is a complete resource you can use to express anything. ... Your body's like paintbrushes. It's completely non-characterological at first. You start with the neutral mask. But then there were other ones that I found really inspiring and interesting. How and when can we be a fat person or a thin person? How do we get rid of what we ordinarily are? ... You should be able to transform your body. That part of Lecoq's work was amazing to me.³⁰

The purpose of Lecoq's neutral mask work, aside from necessitating the expressive use of the body rather than the face, is to facilitate the student's attainment of a state of receptivity, balance, authenticity and economy of movement, "like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed."³¹ In this state, students play at becoming elements of landscape and the natural world. Taymor still uses these visualization techniques to explore a work with her actors before commencing character study.³² Lecoq's students then proceed from passive "identification" to active "transposition": the performer animates elements of nature, or finds the animal qualities in a human character, and begins to develop expressive skills beyond realism.³³ Eventually the actor will "acquire a set of references" that become ingrained in the body so that he "can then speak from full physical awareness."³⁴ Significantly, Taymor also credits the program with awakening her interest in puppetry: masks and performing objects, intended as pedagogical tools to train the actor, revealed themselves to her as means of expression in their own right:



*Lecoq's Jesuit mask is angular and asymmetrically expressive (left).
Masks by Taymor from Juan Darién and The Haggadah (middle & right).*

²⁸ see eg. Henry Y.H. Zhao, *Towards a Modern Zen Theatre* (London: University of London, 2000), 51 & 211, for a Chinese perspective on Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.

²⁹ Schechner (1999), 41

³⁰ Schechner (1999), 35-36

³¹ *The Moving Body*, 36-38

³² Schechner (1999) 36-37

³³ *The Moving Body*, 43-45

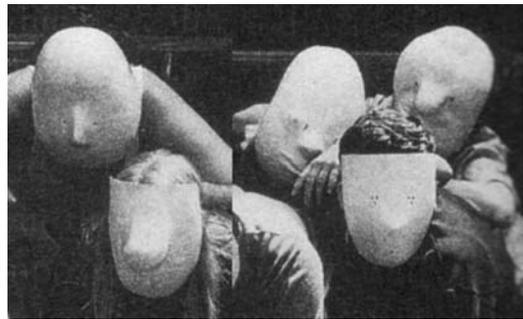
³⁴ *Ibid.*

I wasn't really interested in puppets as an artform then. ... Madame Citron animated objects, so it was really about mime, about understanding shape, form and substance. What is air? What is it to *be* air? ... I might want to use a concrete image like a dripping faucet. [*speaks in the rhythm of a dripping faucet*] ... What does that make you *feel*? ... You'd think about the shape of a broom and what it does, and you'd make it come alive.... It was wonderful. You'd start to really see -- to anthropomorphize these things.³⁵

It is worth noting that this transpositional process is akin to how a traditional³⁶ animator develops a character and its core movements. Although Lecoq's training is based on formal traditions,³⁷ he warns against the young actor's practising conventional aesthetic gestures without properly understanding them.³⁸ Lecoq is, in effect, like Blau, pursuing the authentic artistic gesture in a context of ideological uncertainty.³⁹ Taymor arrived at the school in 1969, after the 1968 uprisings⁴⁰ that Lecoq credits with "strengthening the teaching of the school":⁴¹



While the student movement exploded onto the streets, we were exploding the traditions of gesture and text in search of a new language and new meanings.⁴²



This would also become a characteristic of Taymor's work: rather than ideological polemics, she would pursue more basic, archetypal truths, in a form of theatre that offered the possibility of renewal, community, and transcendence. However 'experimental' her style may have appeared to North-American eyes (at least until *Lion King*), her ethos and choice of subject matter are deeply traditional, even archetypal. It is obvious how her Indonesian experience⁴³ helped shape this view on the purpose of art, but the identification of the artistic process with ritual, contemplation, and the search for universals was also evident in the efforts of Lecoq and Blau. Lecoq believed in a *universal poetic sense*,⁴⁴ a principle both formalist-modernist and vaguely Jungian, which endowed all humans with an abstract dimension, a shared understanding of space, light, colours, materials and sounds, which constituted a "common heritage, out of which will spring dynamic vigour and the desire to create."⁴⁵ Taymor echoes the conviction that human beings connect through a common creative impulse:



... there's home for me in many cultures, because if I can connect to what makes people create art, then it doesn't matter where you're from. It transcends culture.⁴⁶

New Guinea 'mudman' (top); Lecoq 'larval' masks (middle); Taymor's Caliban (bottom)

³⁵ in Schechner (1999), 37; Schechner points out the obvious parallel between Julie's teacher making a broom come to life and the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" scene in Disney's *Fantasia*.

³⁶ e.g. Disney-employed

³⁷ Japanese *noh*, Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the classical Greek chorus

³⁸ *The Moving Body*, 69 - ironically, he specifically doubts the intrinsic usefulness of *t'ai chi ch'uan*, which plays a central role in Blau's approach (see below)

³⁹ a variation on the characteristic Modernist search for truth or essence, yearning to replace a dead god with an inner metaphysical certainty.

When signs fail to convince, truth is sought in materials and pure gesture (eg. abstract expressionism, action painting &c.).

⁴⁰ student protests against deGaulle's government, that escalated into a general strike in May 1968.

⁴¹ which remained open during the crisis

⁴² *The Moving Body*, 11

⁴³ see below

⁴⁴ "le fonds poétique commun"

⁴⁵ *The Moving Body*, 46,168

⁴⁶ to Bill Moyers, interview from the *Frida* DVD supplement, 2002. (Transcript at http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript_taymor2.html)(2002)

Following the ‘neutral mask’ exercises, the school’s training with ‘expressive masks’ had a fundamental effect on Taymor. This is apparent in how closely her conception of masks echoes Lecoq’s teachings:

[Lecoq:] A good theatre mask must be able to change its expression according to the movements of the actor’s body. ... In performance, [it] must be able to manifest complex feelings.⁴⁷

[Taymor:] ... The sculptor has only one opportunity to incorporate the anger, humor, and passion of a character ... It is an ideograph that through movement by the performer or shifting light can seem to change mood.⁴⁸

[Lecoq:] The expressive mask shows a character in its broad outlines. It structures and simplifies the playing style by delegating to the body the job of expressing essential attitudes.⁴⁹

[Taymor:] I tried to sculpt the essence of each character, to sculpt the expression that would represent the character’s dominant trait.⁵⁰

[Lecoq:] The mask then becomes a sort of vehicle, drawing the whole body into an expressive use of space, determining the particular movements which make the character appear.⁵¹

[Taymor:] [Masks] will inform the actors as to the characters’ idiosyncrasies as much as the dialogue will. And ... the masks will also clue the actors as to their physical type of movement. The actors’ bodies must complete the sculpture. The shape, color, and dominant features of the masks are the guide.⁵²

[Lecoq:] It is not the theme that is important, but the way of playing it and the level of transposition achieved.⁵³

[Taymor:] It’s not the story ... it’s how you tell it in the theatre It is about finding essence.⁵⁴

Finally, another acting exercise bears mention, though it is uncertain whether Taymor would have witnessed it.⁵⁵ It consists of a group of actors presenting a continuous, cinematic “travelling shot”, using gestures, that takes the audience from a distant view of a city, closer to and into the city, zooming in on someone eating in a restaurant, right into his stomach.⁵⁶ Similar adaptations of cinematic techniques to the stage is also characteristic of Taymor’s work, although she never formally studied filmmaking. She did, however, first encounter the films of Fellini and Kurosawa while in Paris with Lecoq, and there began to analyse their styles and techniques.⁵⁷

Her year with L’École de Mime laid the groundwork for Julie Taymor’s understanding of the art of the mask and the expressive potential of puppetry, as well as for her focussed, essentialist approach to performance. She returned to the States to study anthropology; at Oberlin, she put together a major in folklore and mythology, examining the shamanic and totemic origins of theatre.⁵⁸ The program allowed her to apprentice for credit with a theatre company in New York. As a result, in 1971-2, she was exposed to the off-off-Broadway avant-garde, including Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater and Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theater. According to Taymor, Schumann encouraged her to pursue sculpture, to travel abroad, and to develop her own style from what she observed, rather than imitate the work of her mentors:

Peter felt if you had your own vision it should show. Don’t hook on. Don’t go study bunraku and then do bunraku. ... I should just travel, take my time, and just watch. “Just watch.” That stuck with me.⁵⁹

⁴⁷ *The Moving Body*, 53-55

⁴⁸ *LK: Pride Rock* ..., 41

⁴⁹ *The Moving Body*, 53

⁵⁰ see note 49

⁵¹ *The Moving Body*, 56

⁵² *Playing with Fire*, 86

⁵³ *The Moving Body*, 60

⁵⁴ to Gold (1998)

⁵⁵ since in the current curriculum it belongs to the second year.

⁵⁶ *The Moving Body*, 101-102

⁵⁷ *Playing with Fire*, 10. She employed some of the same craftsmen on *Titus* at Cinecittà that had worked on Fellini’s films.

⁵⁸ *Playing with Fire*, 13

⁵⁹ Schechner (1999), 40

When Herbert Blau's experimental troupe took up residence at Oberlin, Taymor returned to Ohio to audition and became the youngest member of the experimental troupe.

Herbert Blau - KRAKEN (1972-74)

In the late 60's and early 70's, Herbert Blau was engaged in performance experiments that bore a resemblance to Grotowski and the Artaud-inspired work of Peter Brook. He was Dean of the School of Theatre and Dance at CalArts, "that unlikely crucible of unorthodox art and activist politics underwritten by right-wing money,"⁶⁰ from 1968-71, before moving his young theatre group KRAKEN to Oberlin. Set against rising skepticism in America toward the Vietnam War, Blau's investigations were philosophically as well as politically motivated:⁶¹ what is the essence of performance, and what its purpose in society? His own writings about the period are at times dense and obscure, but it is evident that, affected by the apparent political hypocrisy and teleological uncertainty of the era, he was searching - like Lecoq and many others - for the authentic core of his artform, "to understand as far as possible the disputable appearances of reality in the art of acting, and to materialize in those appearances an act of understanding."⁶² Blau was further propelled by a preoccupation with the postmodern dissolution of the self.⁶³

Fortunately for Taymor, these "heady"⁶⁴ ideas were being explored by means of rigorous exercises that tied into her previous training with Lecoq. As Schumann had advised, she would take from the experience, not an ideology or an aesthetic, but selected ideas and techniques, which she would interpolate into her own process. Apart from relentlessly challenging actors creatively and physically,⁶⁵ Taymor credits Blau with introducing her to one of her own key techniques, the ideograph.⁶⁶ In his own reflections on the period,⁶⁷ Blau mentions ideographs only in passing and does not describe them further; when interviewed by Blumenthal for *Playing with Fire*, he defines them as "tightly formed, consolidated, volatile moments of apprehended energy" that acted like a "vortex":

Everything outside it is whirling in a kind of indeterminate way, but as you get toward the center it becomes dense, and it focuses the mind with sufficient intensity that it explodes it outward.⁶⁸

In practice, actors attempted to capture the essence of a moment or character in a concentrated, emblematic gesture. Taymor later applied her version of the ideograph to almost every facet of the initial creative process:

Ideographs are like Japanese brush paintings; one has to abstract the essence of the image into a few brushstrokes. Detail can be a distraction from the heart of the image. ... In ideographing the gestures for each of the figures and eliminating extraneous movement, I looked for what was the most minimal action to express the essence of the moment in time.⁶⁹



'Friendship:' ideograph as action

Whether or not the actual ideograph ends up in the performance in some way, it helps Taymor to develop a visual style, and her actors to join forces in the initial exploration of the work.⁷⁰ An ideograph can be a simple icon, or a complete movement. The ideograph for *The Lion King* is the circle (of life), and it recurs visually throughout the design.⁷¹ In a performance, an ideograph can act akin to a musical motif.⁷² A more complex ideograph was developed by two actors in *The Transposed Heads* (1984) to represent their characters'

⁶⁰ Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 111.

⁶¹ *Take Up ...*, 80

⁶² *Take Up ...*, 116

⁶³ "For the theater is not so much concerned with an empty space (in Brook's sense), but with an empty solitude, striving to explain itself away.;"The self, we hear, is a construct of language, not an entity but an *appearance*." *Take Up ...*, 87, 90

⁶⁴ Taymor to Schechner (1999), 41.

⁶⁵ Schechner, 41; *Playing with Fire*, 11-12

⁶⁶ eg. Schechner, 41; *Playing with Fire*, 12

⁶⁷ in *Take Up the Bodies* (1982)

⁶⁸ *Playing with Fire*, 12

⁶⁹ *Playing with Fire*, 82. In this case, Taymor was animating large relief puppets for *Savages*.

⁷⁰ Schechner, 38

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 42

⁷² *Ibid.* 40

friendship: they shook hands and went into a symbolic, heart-shaped figure that would collapse if one of them decided to upset the balance.⁷³ A mask, too, is an ideograph, of a character's fundamental traits.⁷⁴

It is likely that Taymor's conception of the ideograph owes at least as much to Lecoq as it does to Blau, and that it has been further modified as a result of Taymor's study of Asian art, as the brush-painting simile suggests.



Taymor (far right) in *Seeds of Atreus* (1973)

Nevertheless, Taymor could not have passed through the metaphysical intensity of *KRAKEN*'s explorations without effect. Blau drew inspiration from Tai Chi, which for him bore striking parallels to acting:

What drew me to Tai Chi was the commitment to evanescence It has the allure of an exercise and a spiritual discipline with the character of a performance. ... the Tai Chi is a form of moving meditation For the actor, it is helpful in dealing with the insoluble dilemma: action or motive, being or becoming, inner or outer - which comes first? ... Craft passes into art when, surpassing function, it becomes gratuitous.⁷⁵ ... the cleansing action of a true craft is an attitude of reverence toward the moment ... The Tai Chi knows that the Spirit is exact.⁷⁶

In practice, meditative breathing, based on ideas from Zen archery⁷⁷ as well as Tai Chi, became a primary technique for the actors. Meanwhile Blau attempted "to work out some liveable union between panic and grace"⁷⁸ amidst political and existential uncertainty. Even though much of the experiment was impossibly esoteric and self-reflexive, the ultimate goal appeared to be a performance training so vital and powerful that an actor could communicate just by being there:

The doing without showing is mere experience. The showing is critical, what makes it theater. What makes it show (by *nothing* but breathing) is the radiance of inner conviction, the growing consciousness that it *must* be seen ...⁷⁹



Leaf-like costume in *Seeds of Atreus* (left);
Floral character in *The Lion King* (right)

Julie participated in two seasons, creating and acting in *The Seeds of Atreus* (1973)⁸⁰ and *The Donner Party, Its Crossing* (1974).⁸¹ Taymor, describing herself as "the physical, visual person in that company,"⁸² also did design work and takes credit for the idea of performing *The Donner Party* as a square dance. Herbert Blau recalls that *The Seeds of Atreus* was performed shortly after a truce had been declared in Vietnam, and that the group argued over whether the celebration at the end of the play, as written, was justified:

⁷³ Ibid. 39

⁷⁴ compare the masks of Mufasa and Scar in *LK: Pride Rock* ..., 41-43

⁷⁵ this is a statement with which, as we shall see, Taymor would definitely disagree.

⁷⁶ *Take Up* ..., 122-126

⁷⁷ *Take Up* ..., 84

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Take Up* ..., 86

⁸⁰ based on the *Oresteia*

⁸¹ based on documentation of an ill-fated cross-country expedition that culminated in cannibalism

⁸² Schechner, 41

... the celebration seemed - to me at least - shocking, insupportable, unreal. Some of the actors, however, younger than I, conditioned by the risen hopes of the period, argued vociferously for the celebration, regardless.⁸³

Whether Julie was one of the hopeful is not known, but she does remember the tenor of the period:

That was probably the most formidable, exciting, creative time for me ... Seven incredible people locked in a gymnasium in Ohio, where you could really concentrate. It was a very idealistic period ... [a]nd the work was exceptional, though probably more interesting as process than as product.⁸⁴

As part of her studies, Taymor attended a summer program in Seattle⁸⁵ in 1973 to study Indonesian masked dance and shadow puppetry for her thesis. She applied for and, upon graduation, was awarded a Watson Fellowship⁸⁶ to spend a year studying “visually oriented theater as well as experimental and traditional puppetry”⁸⁷ in Europe, Indonesia and Japan. Upon arrival in Indonesia, however, Taymor became enthralled by the culture and was soon encouraged by her mentor in Java, W.S. Rendra, to create and direct her own work, using some of his actors. And so in Indonesia, Taymor finally became a “theatremaker”⁸⁸; she remained there almost continuously for four years to create her first two productions.⁸⁹

Indonesia (1974-1978)

While not inevitable, Taymor’s fascination upon encountering Indonesian culture *in situ* was hardly surprising. Her parents had encouraged the development of her multicultural interests, her recent acting training had incorporated Asian techniques, and disaffected North-American artists like Blau were generally looking to the East for renewal and authenticity. Taymor’s study of the ritual origins of theatre suggests that she was in search of a credo, a fundamental reason for doing theatre. Both Lecoq and Blau had based their workshops on pseudo-metaphysical principles of ‘truth’, but in a self-reflexive, almost hermetic manner that attempted to validate the act-in-itself without having to rely on a questionable social context - in effect, without requiring the audience’s endorsement. That the performance meant something to the rest of the world was taken for granted by Lecoq and more or less irrelevant to Blau.⁹⁰ Blau’s approach had been “so private, so interior, so precious, and nobody could watch until we were ready.”⁹¹ By contrast, Rendra’s troupe was part of the daily activity of its town, rehearsing out of doors and performing for a diverse audience in small public spaces and huge stadia.⁹²

It’s incredibly moving because it’s the original way theater was. It’s the way it started as a tribal village event. ... It functions as education, as political, as honoring the village. Shakespeare was very much in that vein. That’s why I’m very attracted to it.⁹³

Taymor likens the layering of bawdy humour, history and philosophy in Shakespearean drama, to the kind of theatre she was discovering in Indonesia, which could be appreciated on many levels, by “villagers, university students, intellectuals, artists and children.”⁹⁴ It was the opportunity of creating an event that would function in an American context like the Mahabharata did in the Indonesian village,⁹⁵ that drew her to *The Lion King*.⁹⁶ It appealed to her anthropological-mythological conception of theatre:

⁸³ *Take Up ...*, 102

⁸⁴ cited in Gold (1998)

⁸⁵ organized by the American Society for Eastern Arts. *Playing with Fire*, 13.

⁸⁶ <<http://www.watsonfellowship.org/>>

⁸⁷ Blumenthal, *Playing with Fire*, 13

⁸⁸ cf. her experience with Theater Workshop of Boston (1969), which practised ensemble creation and gave her “a very early understanding of how to be a creative theatremaker ... as opposed to a playwright or an actor.” (cited in Gold) Back in the States after Indonesia, in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, Taymor would be frustrated by being initially typecast as a designer of masks and puppets.

⁸⁹ Two years would subsequently not be an unusual period of time for Taymor to develop a show, eg. *Oedipus Rex*.

⁹⁰ these conclusions are purely my own, based on my reading of Lecoq & Blau.

⁹¹ Taymor, in *Playing with Fire*, 14

⁹² *Playing with Fire*, 14

⁹³ Taymor to Bill Moyers (2002)

⁹⁴ Taymor about the audience of *Tirai*, her second Indonesian production. She remembers traditional Indonesian performances, which could last many hours, where “the children would get all excited about the clowns and fall asleep during the philosophical sections, or they’d run around and watch the shadow puppeteer ... it was part of living with the adults.” (to Gold)

⁹⁵ at least, 30 years ago, before the onslaught of media technology

⁹⁶ Does the fact that only families living in, or travelling to, major urban centres, who are able to afford at least three tickets, can participate in the experience, weaken her argument? On the other hand, more people probably *will* have seen *Lion King* than any other work of theatre.

Something is getting people on a very deep, very old level. I've watched it enough now to realize that the opening of *The Lion King* is really the origin of theatre. You're there, and you're seeing Creation again, a ritual pageant of Creation. ... It reasserts your place in your own culture, and that's what 'The Circle of Life' is about.⁹⁷

The ubiquitous recognition factor of the movie, combined with an archetypal plot, according to Taymor, affords the tale of Simba the status of a contemporary myth.⁹⁸ While the uncritical portrayal of a 'natural' patriarchal order⁹⁹ may be unsettling to some, Taymor does point out that the musical presents the only "black king"¹⁰⁰ in American mainstream theatre. She also transformed the shamanic Rafiki into an important female character,¹⁰¹ cast an African-American actor as Simba,¹⁰² and made multicultural collaboration an essential procedural and thematic element of the production. Even though the basic plot points and character portrayals remain the same, the theatrical version escaped the charges of racism and gender stereotyping raised by some critics against the film,¹⁰³ supporting Taymor's credo that "the meaning comes in the telling, not in the story itself."¹⁰⁴ Taymor has the uncanny ability to create a unified aesthetic from disparate elements, and endow a show with a convincing (at least to the non-expert) overall ethnicity. *The Lion King* looks and feels African, even though the masks and the puppetry were based primarily on Asian examples.¹⁰⁵



Lion King shadow puppet (above); Chinese shadow puppet (right)

Julie Taymor's Indonesian experience, I would argue, shaped her working process and her artistic philosophy more profoundly than it did her visual style. After *Tirai* (1978), her designs do not betray a particularly Asian 'flavour' until *The King Stag* (1984),¹⁰⁶ where an imaginary pan-Asian style intermingles with Italian Commedia dell'Arte. *The Lion King*, in fact, looks 'African' in the same way that *King Stag* looks 'Asian' - i.e., poetically or by allusion, rather than literally so. The distorted postures and elongated limbs of the shadow puppets for *The Haggadah* (first produced in 1980)¹⁰⁷ may echo similar proportions in Indonesian shadow puppets, but may just as likely have been inspired by the work of Egon Schiele or Käthe Kollwitz. While Eastern forms do resonate in Taymor's designs, there has never been anything specifically Indonesian about them. Rather than by way of

⁹⁷ Taymor to Gold (1998)

⁹⁸ Schechner, 50

⁹⁹ even Tom Schumacher, its producer, wryly acknowledges this reading in his introduction to *LK: Pride Rock ...*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 53

¹⁰¹ in the movie, Rafiki is a male baboon. *LK: Pride Rock ...*, 24, 73

¹⁰² in the movie, Simba was voiced by Matthew Broderick.

¹⁰³ e.g. Andy Bauck, "This Mouse Roars," *Washington Free Press*, Aug/Sep 1995. also Kathi Maio, "Pocahontas: Disney Does It (To Us) Again," *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*, Aug. 1995; reprinted in *The Thistle* 9.09 (1995), Cambridge: MIT Alternative News Collective, <<http://web.mit.edu/thistle/>>. I myself noticed that, though I had had substantial issues with the movie, I found the Taymor version - which I attended in Los Angeles in 2001 - inoffensive and delightful.

¹⁰⁴ to Schechner, 51. cf. also to Gold (footnote 51). Whether this is a good thing, or the ethical Achilles heel of Taymor's selection of and approach to her material, is endlessly arguable and not the subject of this paper.

¹⁰⁵ according to Michael Curry, in Dolen (2002).

¹⁰⁶ *Playing with Fire*, 84-93.

¹⁰⁷ *Playing with Fire*, ills.pp. 75-6

superficial aesthetics, Indonesia left a deeper imprint on Taymor as an artist and “Seeker”.¹⁰⁸ It helped her to affirm two fundamental principles: the communal value of theatre, and the devotional aspect of performance. She witnessed the latter around 1976, in Bali:



top: Javanese Wayang Kulit shadow puppet.
middle: Shadow puppet from The Haggadah.
bottom: Self-portrait by Egon Schiele.

My trip to Asia became a seminal story in my life ... I once took a trip to an area where tourists don't go. 30 or so old men in full costume did a dance though no one was watching. Strange sounds came out of them. I wondered, 'Who did those old men dance for?' Whatever religion or belief you subscribe to, I knew that this was god. Later, when it came to arguments about budgeting in *The Lion King* whether we should use real beads or plastic fake ones, I knew they had to be real even if the audience couldn't tell the difference. I knew that the people wearing the beads would know and that the spirit and soul of craftsman would be in the fabric and materials.¹⁰⁹

Indonesia thus substantiated both an extrinsic (social) and an intrinsic (spiritual/teleological) *raison d'être* for theatre, which continue to propel her in her work. Taymor laments the trivialization of art in North America, banished to the 'Arts & Leisure Pages' of the paper:

Why isn't it arts and ... the-most-important-thing-in-your-life? Because in Indonesia, art at that time -- I don't know what it's like now -- was, is the most fundamental thing. To be able to dance in an all night topang performance in Bali is what you do to survive as a human being. You don't just do it to be in your leisure spare time. ... I finally saw a culture where it really meant a complete difference, that these performances were the very act of devotion.¹¹⁰

When Taymor quips that theatre is her skin,¹¹¹ it is in this sense of being essential to survival, of being the mediating membrane that sublimates experience into meaning. Without the transforming power of art, the organism dies, if not bodily, yet ethically and spiritually. Thus for Taymor, “transformation becomes the main word in my life.”¹¹² When reified in performance, it becomes a metaphor of transcendence:

“Transformation” is the *modus operandi* of *The Green Bird*. Settings change at the pace of a film: a bird turns into a prince, statues become flesh and blood, apples sing as sirens, waters dance, a villainous queen morphs into a turtle, and Love and Virtue conquer Vanity and Greed.¹¹³

Taymor's own transformational journey in Indonesia did not proceed as an idyllic waking dream, a nostalgic transfiguration of native life by a privileged tourist. It was more of a trial by fire. She learned to overcome linguistic and philosophical barriers to collaboration; intercultural tension; gender and post-colonial politics; repression, illness and natural disasters. She almost lost her leg to gangrene,¹¹⁴ and had a near-fatal bus accident with her troupe on the eve of their tour of *Tirai*, but they persevered, recovered and completed the tour.¹¹⁵ Ironically, while Julie Taymor was having a mystical experience on a Balinese volcano, the Indonesian government was bloodily annexing East Timor, with the tacit

¹⁰⁸ as Bill Moyers calls her.

¹⁰⁹ from Taymor's speech to the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, August 10th, 2000; cited by Scott Slaven, “An Evening with Julie Taymor,” <<http://emmys.redlinemedia.com/activities/2000/taymor.htm>>. Taymor gives a more detailed account of the event, and its significance to her, to Bill Moyers (2002).

¹¹⁰ to Bill Moyers (2002)

¹¹¹ to Gold (1998)

¹¹² to Moyers.

¹¹³ Taymor in *Playing with Fire*, 209.

¹¹⁴ *Playing with Fire*, 17.

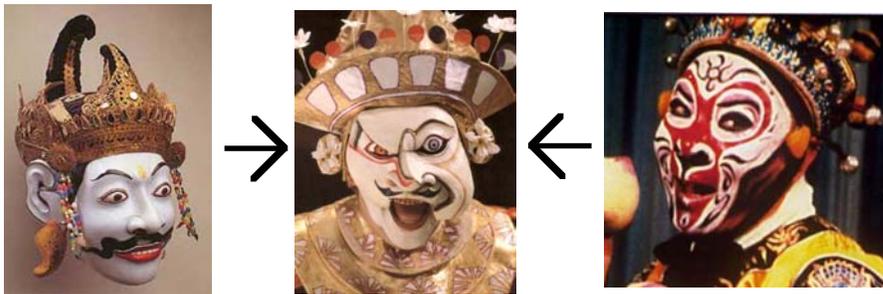
¹¹⁵ Julie Taymor, “Teatr Loh, Indonesia, 1977-8,” *TDR (The Drama Review)* 23(2) (1979): 63-76.

complicity of the United States.¹¹⁶ Except for (or despite?) a brush with authorities over the content of *Way of Snow* (1976),¹¹⁷ Indonesian politics seem to have affected Taymor very little.

Other Asian Influences

Between trips to Indonesia, Taymor spent a month in Japan studying *noh* theatre and *bunraku* puppetry.¹¹⁸ By the time she designed *The King Stag* in 1984, she had broadened her visual references, and developed a process for creating a very specific, yet wholly imaginary, ‘ethnic’ look and feel without appearing merely derivative:

The oriental aspect of the play allowed me to experiment with a variety of styles from all parts of Asia - Japan, the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, India, and China. The unifying factor was the blending and juxtaposing of the forms so that not one costume was recognizable as coming from a specific place. European details such as the white ruffled collars were thrown in to bridge the continents.¹¹⁹



Asian Blend?

far left: contemporary
Ramayana mask (Bali)
middle: Asian-looking mask
from King Stag.
right: Monkey makeup from
Beijing Opera

Every costume, moreover, was hand-coloured with patterns inspired by Japanese kites. *The King Stag*, like *The Lion King* after it, exemplifies how Taymor’s vision of multiculturalism has become embedded in her creative process, with the goal of achieving a formal universality without collapsing into homogeneity. The work shimmers with wide-ranging allusions while appearing aesthetically entire. It is as if Julie Taymor had revitalized the politically threadbare Indonesian national motto, “Unity through Diversity,” into a visual metaphor for a utopian global village. It is this potential depth and dimensionality of form that corroborates Taymor’s claim that “spectacle is storytelling.”¹²⁰ Unfortunately, Taymor’s own immense visual literacy may not be commonplace in North America, where pictures are expected to entertain and words, to carry a (linear) message. So, Taymor being a consummate entertainer as well as a poet, it is hard to assess how much of the poetry is actually getting through. Nevertheless, she appears to have succeeded in tapping into her audience’s imagination, if one is to believe her claim that the most common response from adults who see *The Lion King* is, “The giraffes came on and I burst into tears.”¹²¹ The audience is reacting to a particularly effective example of Taymor’s *double event* technique, which evolved into a central feature of *The Lion King* aesthetic.

The Double Event

Taymor does not, to my knowledge, mention a specific inspiration for the double event. Its principal manifestation in *The Lion King* consists of the human manipulator being in full view, while aesthetically and dramatically integrated with the action of her puppet. Taymor would have encountered visible puppeteers on any number of occasions, such as the object animations of Mme Citron, the Bread and Puppet parades, children playing with dolls, the Indonesian *dalang*,¹²² and the *bunraku* master,¹²³ among others. With the possible exception of the

¹¹⁶ After the departure of the Portugese in 1975, East Timor declared independence. Indonesia immediately invaded and annexed the tiny country, eventually killing almost a third of its population. The United States repeatedly hindered UN attempts to intervene. See eg., Matthew Jardine, with Noam Chomsky, *East Timor: Genocide in Paradise*, 2nd. ed. (Odonian Press, 1999).

¹¹⁷ because of a slogan painted on a prop, the troupe was suspected of being Communist dissidents. *Playing with Fire*, 15.

¹¹⁸ *Playing with Fire*, 17.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 86

¹²⁰ to Gold (1998). Italics mine

¹²¹ to Schechner, 52. (The author of this paper confesses to having had the exact same response to that extraordinary sight.)

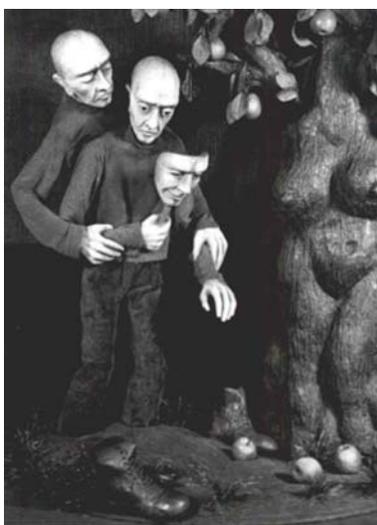
¹²² shadow-puppeteer.

¹²³ the central puppeteer, who is not covered entirely in black. At least his face is visible, and he may be costumed as well.

bunraku master, however, no attempt is generally made to draw attention to the active relationship between puppet and manipulator; instead, the human presence is, by convention, tolerated, ignored or, in the case of an exceptional performance, temporarily forgotten. Even though potentially fascinating to watch, the puppeteer remains at a distance, conceptually and, usually, physically, in order not to draw focus.¹²⁴ One possible exception may have been the puppetry of Henk Boerwinkel, which Taymor briefly witnessed in Amsterdam, on her way to Asia.¹²⁵ His recent work bears a remarkable resemblance, in some aspects, to Taymor's, including the 'doubling' of performer and puppet. Back in 1974, Taymor saw what she describes as a one-minute long, *haiku*-like work, that made enough of an impression to be considered worth mentioning twenty years later.



far left: Javanese Wayang Golek rod puppets.
left: the Operator plays herself, *Way of Snow*.
above: bunraku performance.
below left: Henk Boerwinkel's puppetry.



Taymor's double event evolved quite clearly throughout her oeuvre. In *Way of Snow* (1974-75), a masked actor manipulates a rod puppet of herself.¹²⁶ For *The Haggadah* (1980), Taymor describes a doubling that is not yet simultaneous, but a sequential transformation or reassignment of a character or object:

Pharaoh is a serpent *and* a procession of armies. A tablecloth is transformed into the Red Sea. Through the simple movement of a few performers, a banal object that appears to be only what it is metamorphoses into a symbolic or mythic event ... operating only through suggestion, relying on the poetic participation of the audience, [which] is to me the very essence and prerogative of the theatre.¹²⁷

In *The King Stag* (1984), puppeteers in plain view manipulate large, kite-like animals, precursors to the cheetahs and zebras in *The Lion King*.¹²⁸ The operators of the life-size *bunraku*-style puppet in *The Transposed Heads* (1984) are visible on stage, but are still conventionally 'disguised' in black.¹²⁹ This is clearly the precursor, via Mr. Bones in *Juan Darién* (1988)¹³⁰, of Timon (1997).¹³¹ In *Liberty's Taken* (1985), regular actors, masked actors and life-size puppets interact in the same physical and conceptual space.¹³² In the opera *Oedipus Rex* (1992), larger-than-life characters are represented by sculpted heads and hands that are part of the singers' costumes, while at the same time the singers' features remain,

¹²⁴ when interacting with the puppet, such as pretending to be in conversation with it, the puppeteer does enter the action, but as a *second* character rather than as an aspect of the puppet.

¹²⁵ *Playing with Fire*, 13.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹²⁷ *Playing with Fire*, ill. p.72.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, ill. p.87 and *LK:Pride Rock...*, ill. p. 34, 159, 162.

¹²⁹ *Playing with Fire*, ill. p.110

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, ill. p.133

¹³¹ *LK:Pride Rock ...*, eg. ill. p. 145

¹³² *Playing with Fire*, ills. pp.95ff

by necessity, visible.¹³³ The urn-like heads prefigure the lioness' appearance.¹³⁴ The character of Oedipus is embodied by two performers at the same time, the Singer (wearing the prosthetic head and hands) and the Dancer (vulnerable in his partial nudity).¹³⁵ The prototype for Zazu is the *Green Bird* (1996),¹³⁶ the first time Taymor's puppeteer is both visible and speaking,¹³⁷ albeit far less expressively so than the Zazu team.¹³⁸



1. *The Green Bird* (1996) 2. *Zazu* (*The Lion King*, 1997).
 3. *Transposed Heads* (1984) 4. *Mr Bones* (Juan Darién, 1988) 5. *Timon* (*The Lion King*).
 6. *Tanaka as Oedipus* (1992) 7. *Lioness mourns* (*The Lion King*) 8. *Jocasta* (*Oedipus*).
 9. *Stag puppet* (*The King Stag*) 10. *Cheetah puppet* (*The Lion King*).

¹³³ *Playing with Fire*, eg. ill. p.164

¹³⁴ as does the use of ribbons as blood/tears. While the ribbons appear, in *Oedipus*, on the performer's face, in *The Lion King*, they have become part of the 'mask'.

¹³⁵ adding up, in fact, to a 'triple' event, which may be why Taymor has not attempted this manoeuvre again, so far.

¹³⁶ *Playing with Fire*, ill. p.208.

¹³⁷ Schechner, 43-44.

¹³⁸ *LK: Pride Rock...*, ill. p.186

The double event is designed to stimulate the spectator's imagination into actively participating in the creative process. It is based on Taymor's firmly held tenet that

when you get rid of the masking, then even though the mechanics are apparent, the whole effect is more magical. And this is where theatre has a power over film and television. This is absolutely where its magic works. It's not because it's an illusion and we don't know how it's done. It's because we know *exactly* how it's done.¹³⁹

In a sense, Taymor is turning the assumption behind the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* upside down: instead of taking the viewer out of the spectacle in order to provoke intellectual analysis, the act of exposing the process is used to engage the viewer through a heightened (and thus more vulnerable?) imaginative state - "*that's why people cry.*"¹⁴⁰ Both Brecht and Taymor were inspired by Asian theatre, Brecht in particular by the legendary Beijing Opera performer Mei Lanfang.¹⁴¹ Ironically, Taymor's *double event* may approximate the Beijing Opera aesthetic more closely than Brecht's *alienation effect*. The contemporary Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian¹⁴² describes the effect of a celebrated female impersonator on his audience thus:

He felt happy for the applause ... not because he thought that they were cheering for Maid-in-Red, nor because he thought they were cheering him, Mr Zhang Junqiu. They were cheering Zhang Junqiu as Maid-in-Red. This is the basic mechanism in Oriental theatre ...¹⁴³

The audience is awed by the simultaneous parallel experience of actor and character in the form of actor-as-character. Taymor is literally working on a similar effect by revealing the puppeteer, so that we may enjoy the puppeteer-*cum*-puppet. Elsewhere Gao claims that Chinese performance aims to charm rather than move its audience, to stress the performance rather than manipulate the senses.¹⁴⁴ Julie Taymor undeniably aims to charm *and* move, while Brecht (in theory) stresses the performance and avoids the senses for ideological reasons. Brecht aims to de-humanize the spectacle in the sense of depriving it of sentimentality, to expose the ideas and motivations behind it.¹⁴⁵ Taymor paradoxically aims instead to humanize it by exposing its artifice, to make the experience more - rather than less - vivid. She observes that

[a]udiences relish the artifice behind theater. When we see a person actually manipulating an inanimate object like a puppet and making it come alive, the duality moves us. Hidden special effects lack humanity, but when the human spirit visibly animates an object, we experience a special, almost life-giving connection.¹⁴⁶

Taymor has managed to heighten this experience, or perhaps even to alter it qualitatively, by physically integrating the human being with the puppet in such a way as to make us immediately see the puppet as a visual manifestation of the puppeteer's imagination, or her will-to-create. Perhaps it is precisely the act of witnessing this resonant in-between state¹⁴⁷ that can jumpstart our atrophied adult imaginations.¹⁴⁸ Taymor's intentions are not at all modernist. While she insists on authentic beads, she paints masks made from space-age carbon graphite¹⁴⁹ to look like wood or

¹³⁹ to Schechner, 42.

¹⁴⁰ Taymor: "The fact that ... you're very aware of the human being with the things strapped on, ... that there's no attempt to mask the stilts and make them animal-like shapes -- *that's why people cry.*" in Schechner, 52.

¹⁴¹ cf. eg. Zhao, 39.

¹⁴² Gao has his own theory of the 'triplication' of the actor, also derived from his study of Beijing Opera.

¹⁴³ in an article from 1994, as cited in Zhao, 52.

¹⁴⁴ cited in Zhao, 48.

¹⁴⁵ nowadays, Brecht's (and Neher's) techniques have themselves become aestheticised. Does anyone equate exposed instruments and bare walls with intellectual integrity?

¹⁴⁶ in *LK: Pride Rock* ..., 29.

¹⁴⁷ which oddly resembles a kind of pre-technological, completely antithetical cyborg - an extension beyond human limits, effected by magic rather than machinery

¹⁴⁸ we recall that it is allegedly the adults who burst out crying at the giraffes, not the children. This author cannot presume to guess what goes on in the child's head.

¹⁴⁹ *LK: Pride Rock*, 56 (sidebar)





clay. Her shadow puppets are made from Lexan,¹⁵⁰ rather than leather. *Way of Snow* caused a peculiar controversy in Indonesia, when industrialization was represented in part by switching from leather to plexiglass puppets; the move was taken to indicate “the dilemma in which unique qualities are lost as old traditions are replaced with new technologies.”¹⁵¹ In the context of *The Lion King*, the authenticity of the materials used is no longer a meaningful issue.¹⁵² The double event is selectively applied, and is even partly an illusion. The skill and ingenuity of the puppeteers is authentic, but the non-technological appearance of the objects and surroundings is not. Taymor is not interested in letting the audience examine the hydraulics of Pride Rock,¹⁵³ the mechanism to rotate the barrels for the stampede,¹⁵⁴ or the ingenious animatronics of Mustafa’s and Scar’s masks.¹⁵⁵ Or, for that matter, in exposing the lighting instruments and the crew in the wings. The on-stage illusion of pre-industrial craftsmanship is too complete to tolerate these intrusions.¹⁵⁶ Even though she is concerned with the effects of revealing the performance process, Julie Taymor is not engaged in Brechtian, modernist or post-modernist issues of narrative, authenticity, illusion or subtext. She is a traditional theatre-maker with an exceptional aesthetic sensibility. Using any and every means available to her, she invites the audience to celebrate with her the *poetic* authenticity and resonance of performance, and to allow itself to be actively ‘charmed’ rather than passively ‘taken for a ride.’

A little bit of Africa on Broadway (above left):

1. Senefu tribal mask (Ivory Coast, 1940s?).
2. Taymor’s sketch for a Trickster (Lion King).
3. Wildebeest (Lion King).
4. Senefu helmet mask (Ivory Coast)

If the shoe fits ... :

far left: Nail Figure used to store and administer magical/medicinal ingredients (Kongo peoples, Zaire, 19th century).¹⁵⁷

left: Taymor’s design for the shaman Rafiki, The Lion King’s own resident magician and healer.

¹⁵⁰ a tough plastic; Ibid., 116

¹⁵¹ recalls Taymor, in *Playing With Fire*, 56

¹⁵² except insofar as we might ponder their recyclability

¹⁵³ cf. Schechner, 43.

¹⁵⁴ *Playing with Fire*, ill. p.215

¹⁵⁵ *LK: Pride Rock ...*, ill. p.121/2

¹⁵⁶ The only explicitly mechanistic props in *The Lion King* are the gazelle wheels, and they seem out of place, due to their anachronism - nothing else in this world appears to have wheels.

¹⁵⁷ fittingly, the illustration was found in a book called *African Art in the Cycle of Life*.

Summary

This paper has aimed to establish some connections between Julie Taymor's mature work and the three major formative periods from her mid-teens to her mid-twenties. It was motivated by the notion that Taymor's fundamental techniques embody multiple, layered meanings at the practical, aesthetic, and metaphorical levels, that point to an underlying teleology of theatre. Let us briefly summarize the probable significance to Taymor of these techniques, in light of the research presented.

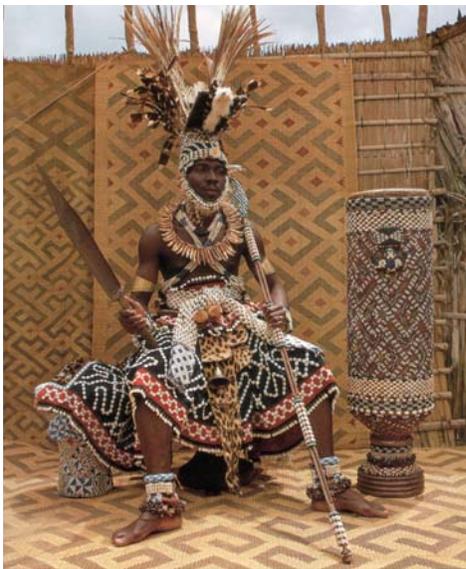
Juxtaposition is a basic visual device; a 'humanizing' strategy; a layering of meanings (comic, historic, philosophical); and a symbol of the dualistic nature of all things (halus/kasar; yin/yang; sacred/profane).

Transformation is a dramatic action that draws in the audience; illustrates a character's growth; illuminates an idea in unexpected ways; and points to the role of art (to effect transcendence) in the spiritual survival of the species.

The **Double Event** is a visual and conceptual trick, especially in puppetry, that engages and charms the audience, encourages imaginative participation, and embodies the essence of theatricality, revealing what is unique and magical about the medium.

The **Ideograph** can be a sketch, a symbol, an impulse, a mental image or a movement, that may or may not be part of the actual design or performance; as such, it is a creative tool. As a principle it predicates that an authentic first impulse is possible, that there exists a core essence in a character or thing. It thus implies a belief that this essence can be channeled through, and related to others via, the medium of performance - i.e. that there is Truth in Art.

This analysis of Juxtaposition, Transformation, the Double Event and the Ideograph demonstrates how apparently straightforward¹⁵⁸ techniques and processes may embody layers of meaning and traces of experience that are fundamental components of an artist's Ethos - that system of beliefs which is ultimately charged with lending some kind of purpose to creative activity. In Taymor's case, these concepts manifest themselves not only on a technical, semiotic and aesthetic level in her work, but also suggest a metaphysical - or at the very least, metaphorical - dimension to her process. For Taymor, design is not just a means to an end, a pretty vessel for an important message; her imagery communicates as eloquently as, if not more so than, her text. Moreover, she considers the act of performance itself both ontologically and culturally significant; hence the boundaries between entertainment and art, story and ritual, laughter and prayer, fact and myth become blurred or even - ideally - irrelevant,¹⁵⁹ in the shared experience of a poetic event called theatre. ■



Colours, textures and patterns are crucial in creating an authentic look and feel, as well as in unifying disparate design elements.

far left: Kuba king sitting in state (Zaire, 1971)

left: 'Lionesses' posing (The Lion King, 1997)

¹⁵⁸ simple concepts, perhaps - but brilliantly executed.

¹⁵⁹ cf. Taymor in conversation with Bill Moyers: "I think we've patronized our audiences long enough, you can do things that will bring people to another place and still get to them on a very daily-mundane-moving level, but you don't have to separate art from the masses."

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