Fool's Fire: The Genius of Julie Taymor

An Exhibition at the Center for Puppetry Arts

January 22 - July 12, 1999
Best known for her visually stunning and emotionally powerful direction of THE LION KING on Broadway, Julie Taymor brings her boundless imagination to directing and designing productions ranging from theater to opera and film. This exhibition of masks and puppets offers a rare look behind the scenes of Taymor’s genius in her first film, FOOL’S FIRE, based on the Edgar Allan Poe short story “Hop-Frog.” Taymor conceived, directed and designed the costumes and puppetry for FOOL’S FIRE, which premiered at the American Film Festival in Park City and aired on PBS in March 1992. The film won the “Best Drama” award at the Tokyo International Electronic Cinema Festival.

“Edgar Allan Poe’s short story was the perfect vehicle to harness the highly visual and stylized directions I had been pursuing in the theater to a fantastical black comedy of revenge, replete with a fabulist plot, lush color and grotesque characterizations,” says Taymor.

Set in a medieval kingdom, the story tells of the captive dwarf, Hop-Frog, who is forced to play the court jester to a corpulent and oily king and his seven equally despicable ministers. Hop-Frog tolerates his miserable lot until one day another captive is brought to court to be a plaything of the king, the diminutive dancer, Trippetta. Hop-Frog falls deeply in love with Trippetta and in order to avenge the cruel treatment that she receives at the lustful hands of the king and his ministers, he devises a wicked plot which culminates in their total destruction by fire.

In order to emphasize the point of view of the dwarf, the outsider, and the inhumane treatment he received as the court toy, all of the characters in the film - with the exception of Hop-Frog, his family and (all human actors) - are rendered using fantastical Bosch-like puppetry and masks. This choice in some ways forces the audience to identify with the tormented Hop-Frog and to accept and root for ultimate retribution for his suffering.

The combining of mask and puppetry definition with 35-mm film offered marvellous potential in creating the shifts and transitions and solving the demands of the dramatics and events of the genre. For the use of blue screen compositing techniques, thus creating a vast landscape while fulfilling the demands of the script.

Two years in the making involved a collaboration of artists, craftsmen and technical director, oversaw which were subsequents. Months of work on bodies, and designing and building allowed for intricate details.

Taymor is currently directing Shakespeare's Richard III, which was the focus of the Hospers film distribution schedules.
- with the exception of Hop-Frog, his family and Trippetta (all human actors) - were rendered using fantastical, Bosch-like puppetry and masks. This choice allows and in some ways forces the audience to identify with the tormented Hop-Frog and to accept and root for the ultimate retribution he delivers.

The combining of high definition with 35-millimeter film offered marvelous potential in creating the surreal transitions and solving the demands of the dramatic scale and events of the grandiose finale. Through the use of blue screen, miniatures and matting techniques, the imagery was layered, thus creating a vast and highly stylized landscape while fulfilling the dramatic needs of the script.

Two years in the making, FOOL'S FIRE involved a collaboration of more than 200 artists, craftsmen and technical wizards, including the production designer G.W. Mercier, the composer Elliot Goldenthal, and the director of photography Bobby Bukowski. After Taymor sculpted more than a dozen characters in clay, Michael Curry, the character technical director, oversaw the creation of plaster molds which were subsequently turned into foam latex positives. Months of work ensued in refining the heads and bodies, and designing and building the mechanisms that allowed for intricate expressions.

Taymor is currently directing a feature film adaptation of Shakespeare's TITUS ANDRONICUS, starring Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange, with major distribution scheduled for 1999.
The last image of the film shows Hop-Frog manipulating a Pegasus puppet with small figures of himself and Trippetta escarpng to freedom. For the first time in the story, Hop-Frog is huge, towering over the tiny world that no longer controls him. • On the Cover: Close-up of the king.

Fool’s Fire: the Genius of Julie Taymor
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