



Jay Scheib : 123 Orchard Street, #42, Somerville Massachusetts 02144 : 1-917-612-2137 : jayscheib@jayscheib.com : http://www.jayscheib.com

# THE TEMPEST by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

My notes about the play and notes about a production

Prospero gives up the power to open graves and raise the dead, conjure powerful storms, free spirits trapped in trees, exact torture remotely in the form of cramps, pinches, etc.—in short, Prospero gives up powers associated with the Gods or with Nature herself, in order to become a politician in Milan? Should that not make us laugh?

The plot line of *The Tempest* is a complex thing, filled with the tragedy of revenge, with romance, and comedy. I propose making a play which is about Prospero's sadness. Prospero will forfeit his daughter to the world. Though she will marry royalty, Prospero will never again watch as she falls asleep, stirs in dreams, or gasps in surprise at some new thing. He will give up his powers and bury his magic in the earth, he will grow old, be a grandfather, and die a politicians death with a state funeral and endless eulogies..

And so back to Milan, Prospero will go, revenge he will have. But it will be bittersweet.

*The Tempest* is a romantic tragedy —like many of Shakespeare's historical tragedies, the play centers itself around a violent transfer of power. I think that *The Tempest* is the only play by Shakespeare in which the deposed not only survive, but return, forcibly, to power. The engine of this play is revenge and in the end, though he loses his daughter, Prospero regains Milan. Caliban regains his island. Ariel's work has set her free. She disappears into the very air. Miranda gets love and that's no small thing in this brave new world.

The story of the play is complex. It tries to contain

everything and lacks restraint. Shakespeare makes use of numerous narrative devices to move the story ahead—as though a different tool is required to realize each idea. The play is episodic, giving it a peculiarly cinematic feel. Similar in style to Goethe's *Faust Part 2*, *The Tempest* crosses conceptual boundaries and dramatic genres. The driving energy of the play lies in the transitions. At the end of act four, for example, Shakespeare sends dogs after Caliban and company, thereby contrasting the beautiful erotic of the previous scenes with a very tangible violence. The dogs clear the stage and, through the chaos, act five is revealed.

In Shakespeare's time, it was well known that the Spaniards were using war dogs to hunt, kill, intimidate, and otherwise torture the natives of the new world. Scores of prints from the 16th century depict the cruelties of this common practice. Today these illustrations seem all too familiar as images from Iraq slowly make their way to the general public.

I am, of course, interested in making such resonances as subtle, eloquent, and complex as did Shakespeare.

I propose to make *The Tempest* as rich in action and image as the text that Shakespeare wrote. I propose a play in which Ceres, Iris, and Juno appear as Rubens would have painted them. I propose a *Tempest* in which the love between Miranda and Ferdinand is deepened through Prospero's torture of Ferdinand—though torture was a failure in the case of Caliban.

I propose a revenge tragedy that speaks in a time when revenge guides public policy. I propose a revenge tragedy that is filled with romance.

## Problem Solving: Caliban, Setebos, Patagonia

"Forthwith the captain had the fetters put on the feet of both of them. And when they saw the bolt across the fetters being struck with a hammer to rivet it and prevent them from being opened, these giants were afraid. But the captain made signs to them that they should suspect nothing. Nevertheless, perceiving the trick that had been played on them, they began to blow and foam at the mouth like bulls, loudly calling on Setebos (that is, the great devil) to help them."

From Antonio Pigafetta's *Magellan's Voyage - A Narrative Account of the First Circumnavigation* (1524)

How the offspring of an Algerian woman and some kind of sea creature came to worship the Patagonian god Setebos is no small bit of mathematics. References to the new world run throughout this work. Though I am interested neither in a colonialist reading of Caliban nor in the noble or ignoble savage—both the cannibals of Montaigne and the giants of Magellan's tour inspire me to consider the attempts at making those peoples extinct. And this word, extinction, describes my pursuit.

Caliban on the eve of extinction. The last of his kind. Sad. Alone. As unaware of the stakes of

his existence as anyone. But different. I am drawn to the making of a creature—singular, half-remembered and nearly extinct, hailing from the new world, or this world, forgotten.

The creations of Matthew Barney, Charlie White, Goya, or the strange and indistinct shape of Turner's *Sunrise with Sea Monster* (above right) all inspire me greatly.

A monster, some hybrid which is vaguely like us (like me), somehow like we used to be, and still are, something somehow so so foreign, strange enough to be almost appalling, and familiar enough for us to be afraid.





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### ROMANCE AND THE STORMS

*The veritable tradition in great things is not to repeat what others have done, but to rediscover the spirit that created these great things - and creates utterly different things in different times.* Paul Valéry

*There is another world, and it is in this one.* Paul Elouard

*The Tempest* is no ordinary storm. I recall being 15 years old and walking miles through a field—back and forth across an enormous field—picking up pieces of our neighbor's home which had been demolished by a large scale tornado and strewn across more than 100 acres. The house had been utterly redistributed. Only the basement remained where the family had managed to survive (under the stairs.) The father had leapt, at the last moment, into their car, and the following morning he woke approximately half a mile away in a ditch—unhurt and still in the car, but covered in mud. He had no memory of how he got there. The proportions of this storm contested my understanding of reality. Nature rarely proves so radically unreal. Weeds and straw were embedded in the trunk of a tree like spears—or, like Ariel.

Bloom questioned Shakespeare's title, *The Tempest*. Why not *Prospero*? I find *The Tempest* a great title and I will focus on the storm. The storm of prosperity, of politics, of the marriage of Europe and Africa, the storm of love at first sight—the storm of

theater-making, and the storm of first times. Impossibly high wind, hail, rain that falls in sheets, typhoons, hurricanes, dust-devils, earthquakes (tsunami)—natural disasters—the world of *The Tempest*.

I am interested in the beauty of big storms that sweep across the plains. Storms that you can see from far away, storms which grow closer and closer. The anxiety is extraordinary—slow, deliberate, extraordinary. I am moved by this kind of slow anxiety. I will exacerbate the wait, the anticipation—develop the suspense. *The Tempest* is an entertaining, if volatile, look at the politics of power. By exposing the fissures which form within the beautiful image—I hope to release the subversive commentary existing in the text. As in the works of Delacroix, Velazquez, or Sigmar Polke, I am interested in developing a deep and luscious visual approach to the work—amplifying its beauty, including the social complexities in the frame (with a nod to the excessive erotic of court masque and pageantry), and playing deeply the romance.

*The Tempest* has no use for genre. The concept of romance as the combination of tragic and comic elements along with the marked refusal to adhere strictly to a particular genre is, in this case, a great advantage. Romance attempted through an appeal to nature in its most extreme states—nature when it defies the usual conceptions of Reality and throws our perceptions into relief. This is *The Tempest*. The brutality of a tornado punctuated by a breathtaking green sky, or devastating baseball sized hail stones dazzling as they melt in the sun. I am interested in pursuing an abstraction of the play. I am interested in working like Hitchcock—revealing the story through smartly framed montage, clearly and classically, with an close reading of the text, and a taste for suspense.

### ON CASTING, ON THE TEXT

An exceptionally diverse cast. No race the same. Which is the advantage of working in the US. I think that building a world where diversity is so apparent that no particular minority / majority dynamic remains will make it possible for a NEW WORLD to be the equivalent of an OVER-LOOKED WORLD. And so this is my thought on

casting this play—No race the same. I think of Prospero probably in his late forties or early fifties. Miranda and Ferdinand both at the first acceleration of hormones.

Shakespeare calls for circa twenty-five actors to make the play. I think that it is doable with a smaller number. Combining the camps of Sailors and Spirits is an obvious choice, and perhaps losing Adrian and Francisco lands me with a smooth 16 performers.

Ariel is a bigger problem than Caliban.

Caliban is called a monster upwards of 45 times. He must be a monster. But what is Ariel? "Spirit" means almost nothing. What a great problem.

Or, how to make a Jester. I try to imagine G. Bush bringing Jon Belushi to visit V. Putin and bringing Eddie Murphy to dine with J. Chirac and discuss certain political problems. This play offers rich difficulties.

The text cut to 100 minutes precisely.





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## BRIEF COMMENTS ON DESIGN

*It is not down in any map; true places never are.*  
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

*Wise is he who enjoys the show offered by the world.*  
Fernando Pessoa

*In its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating.*  
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

*...torture is the perfect example of an initiation into the reality of social practices.*  
Michel de Certeau, *The Institution of Rot*

My sense of direction with regard to designing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, revolves around the realization of several of the big actions stipulated in the text.

Two characters fly: Ariel as the Harpie and Iris (messenger of the gods.) Whether flying is achieved through puppets, 3D projection, or rigging is a conceptual matter—one that belongs to the design process. But they have to fly.

Ariel might fly as well. This I think is a more difficult matter and one that will have to be developed over time. Up front, I think of Ariel flying in the way that choreographer Elizabeth Streb flies: The flight of a performer is the exertion itself. Propulsion then is a particular attention to the effort itself of flying. The thrill of seeing Streb's dancers fly is the thrill of seeing them (and hearing them) attempt to face gravity down. Crashing gravity to the ground.

Pictured at right is your basic harpie. They are known to be ravenous, filthy, insatiable.

The images which I have included here give some sense of

where I would like to begin the discussion on designing *The Tempest*. I am deeply interested, as I mentioned above, in addressing the monsters, the goddesses, all the wild and extraordinary things, the excesses of court masque and the roughness of swamps, deserts, quicksand, the brutal genius of storms, the dogs, etc. These images suggest a palette. On this page, you see Rubens' *Diana*, and a detail from the *Judgement of Paris*. I provide them to inspire discussion of Juno, Ceres, Iris. The faun forcing himself onto the woman in blue might be a good Caliban reference. A 16th century engraving of an American native shows us what Europeans thought inhabitants of the new world looked like. The soldiers by Velázquez are an example of costumes for the Alonso party. The Sigmar Polke house on stilts, encased in a cube of light, might serve as a proposal for Prospero's cell. The pile of lumber at bottom suggests the scale Ferdinand's labour when Prospero forces him to perform the torture of carrying firewood.

As is always my mode of operation, I will capture something essential about Shakespeare's time, and exploit its remains where they are found in our own.



A Harpy, wings disclosed.