Taymor and Bate on Djimon Hounsou’s Caliban

The casting as Caliban of Djimon Hounsou, born in Benin, West Africa, might suggest that this movie will offer a reading of The Tempest that emphasizes racial oppression and colonial dispossession. The play was written at the dawn of the British Empire. It draws on information about the Virginia settlement and the shipwreck, near Bermuda, of the colonial governor. The dynamic of Caliban’s enslavement and the ironic reference to a “brave new world” has made The Tempest a key text in the story of empire and subsequently of postcolonialism.

Some viewers may make these connections, but Taymor has absolutely resisted the temptation to foreground them in a polemical or didactic way. She is too interested in the dynamics of the relationships between the characters, in the poetry and its supporting music, in the colors and textures of the environment, above all in the transformational magic of art itself, to be distracted by “politically correct” reading.

Where Hounsou’s African inheritance genuinely is relevant is in the area of magic. In Benin, witchcraft is still real. In the movement of his body, the play of his words, the darkness of his imagined fears, he taps into a dimension that cannot be contained by the constraints of Western rationalism.


In casting an African in this role, one automatically brings to the forefront the obvious themes of colonialization and usurpation that clearly were part of Shakespeare’s worldview, derived from stories culled from explorations to Africa and the New World.

But in order to truly serve Shakespeare’s unique vision of this character, one must go beyond sociopolitical commentary achieved through a casting choice. Djimon Hounsou went through a four-hour makeup ordeal every day to achieve the look of his Caliban. His skin was made to resemble the island’s cracked red earth and black lava rock, with raised scars of obscenities he had carved into his flesh.

The nickname “Mooncalf,” endearingly coined by Stephano for Caliban, suggested the white circular moon that frames his own blue eye, which in itself was motivated by the notion that he is the whelp of that “blue-eyed hag,” Sycorax. The “calf” part of the equation is delivered in the maplike patches of white on black skin that add to the “otherness” of this unique racial mash-up. The webbing between his fingers adds that touch of monster fantasy that speaks to the “strange fish,” as Trinculo calls him. All in all, this Caliban, both beautiful and grotesque, is the island; Nature personified.

In casting Djimon Hounsou in this role we were privileged to have not only a great actor but one who brought with him experience, belief, and respect for the power of white and black magic. His personal stories of sorcery in his country, Benin, were both inspiring and harrowing. There was never any question in Djimon’s mind that the figure Helen [Mirren] was playing, the sorceress, could control Caliban. He is the “natural” that Prospera tries and fails to reform in her nurturing. Their clashes leave the audience discomfited, unsure as to whom to root for, as Shakespeare never chooses sides. Djimon’s Caliban is multifaceted: he can be physically threatening and violent in one scene and naïve and puppylike in another. He is comedic, foolish, elementally human, and profoundly tragic, bestowed with the innate intelligence to speak some of the most elegant and moving poetry of The Tempest.