

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Tempest

William Shakespeare
Royal Shakespeare Company
Theatre Royal, Newcastle
(2006)

There's a note in the programme which tells us that the names Prospero and Faustus can mean the same thing, and the writer, Professor Jonathan Bate, goes on to draw parallels between Shakespeare's and Marlowe's characters which are very revealing, especially their abjuring of magic: "I'll burn my books," says Faust, whilst Prospero promises to "drown" his. This Prospero, played with extraordinarily powerful coldness by Patrick Stewart, is Faustian in many ways. Prospero controls everything: the weather, the sea, his servants, his captives and even his daughter, Miranda.

At one point in the long expository scene which follows the storm at sea, Prospero clicks his fingers and Miranda slumps forward in her chair, asleep, like nothing so much as the "victim" of a stage hypnotist. The audience laughed, but it is a chilling moment and indicative of the whole atmosphere of the production.

Director Rupert Goold (who has just taken over from Dominic Dromgoole as artistic director of the Oxford Stage Company, now renamed Headlong Theatre) hammers home this coldness by moving Prospero's island from the Mediterranean to the Arctic (complete, at one point, with the *Aurora Borealis*) and dressing the inhabitants of the island in Inuit-influenced costumes. Snow swirls around and lies on the bleak set (designed by Giles Cadle), coldly lit by Paul Anderson. As a metaphor it works well but certainly flies in the face of all expectation and does conflict at times with the text. In this setting we can accept Ariel being confined within a pine, but when Prospero threatens to pin him in an oak, it is hard to suspend our disbelief. And how can the isle be "full of music/Sounds and sweet airs that give delight" when the most common sound is the howling of the wind? And the music - in particular Ariel's songs - is far from sweet.

Goold subverts our expectations of the character of Ariel, too. We expect a spirit of the air, light and fleet of foot, and what we have is something reminiscent of *Shockheaded Peter*, German Expressionist cinema and Boris Karloff with a touch of Edward Scissorhands, in a long black almost priest-like gown, white make-up and a slow voice which is occasionally electronically distorted. This is not to say it doesn't work: it does, thanks to a scary performance by Julian Bleach, but it is a real shock

Most of the other characters are as one would expect - although I have to say that Ken Bones and John Hopkins, as Antonio and Sebastian respectively, bring more reality to their characters than in many a production I have seen - but Mariah Gale's Miranda lacks the girlishness which other actresses have brought to the part and, instead, there is more than a touch of autism in the early part of her portrayal, which is gradually allowed to fade away as Prospero loosens the tight control he exerts over her and his whole world. There is a moment of near-horror as, in her "Oh brave new world" realisation, she gazes with rapt admiration at the figure of her father's traitorous brother.

It is, however, the figure of Prospero who dominates. I have always thought of him as an ambivalent figure: not someone who is easy to sympathise with; one who, it could be thought, brought his deposition on himself; a man who is at ease threatening and inflicting pain. Stewart's Prospero has these characteristics in abundance and, even when he thaws, he is still colder than most men. What he becomes at the end is not a man who has been moved to pity and forgiveness but a man who is relinquishing control. He has manipulated nature and people to achieve his aims, the marriage of his daughter and Ferdinand and his restoration to his dukedom, and thus his revenge is complete: he can let go.

It is an unusual and thought-provoking take on the character and on the play, and Goold, ably assisted by a superb cast and some very clever ideas (like the storm at sea which is can be so unconvincing but here works well), convinces us, but at the cost of passion. This is a curiously passionless *Tempest*.

Philip Fisher reviewed this production on its transfer to the [Novello Theatre](#)

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)