

He pretended to be an airline security guard, searching their luggage and then frisking them while he described their torture. The words are horrific, but can be hilarious. Here they were neither, merely a gag, in every sense of the word.

Thankfully, with the return to Sicilia, the seriousness resumed. I admired the miming of the reunion between Leontes and Polixenes and the discovery of Perdita's heritage, as described in the text but not always visually rendered. I was rather awed by the candlelit procession through Paulina's gallery to Hermione's sitting statue. And the finale was exquisite. After Hermione's lines—"You gods, look down, / And from your sacred vials pour your graces / Upon my daughter's head" (5.3.122–24)—no more words were spoken. (I admit I did not miss the forced pairing of Paulina and Camillo). Instead, Leontes, kneeling, tentatively embraced his wife, and the rest of the court approached and joined them in an odd but strangely moving huddle.

That image might have been enough of an ending for some, but then Mamillius emerged from behind the stack of crates, crossed slowly down to the gathering, and reached out his hand as if to touch his father's head. I couldn't tell if he made contact, but if so, there was no reaction, and the prince turned to join the figure of Time, waiting upstage. This reminder of the lasting cost of Leontes's unfounded jealousy prevented any facile satisfaction possible in the conclusion: this tale does not, or should not, have a purely happy ending.



### *The Tempest*

Presented by the **Royal Shakespeare Company** in collaboration with **Intel** and **The Imaginarium Studios** at the **Royal Shakespeare Theatre**, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK. November 28, 2016 – January 21, 2017. Directed by Gregory Doran. Production design by Stephen Brimson Lewis. Digital character creation by The Imaginarium Studios. Video by Finn Ross. Lighting by Simon Spencer. Music by Paul Englishby. Sound by Jeremy Dunn and Andrew Franks. Movement by Lucy Cullingford. Costume supervision by Ed Parry. With Elly Condron (Iris), Joe Dixon (Caliban), Daniel Easton (Ferdinand), Caleb Frederick (Mariner), Samantha Hay (Ceres), Tony Jayawardena (Stephano), Matthew McPherson (Francisco), Joseph Mydell (Gonzalo), Oscar Pearce (Antonio), Mark Quartley (Ariel), Jenny Rainsford (Miranda), Darren Raymond (Boatswain), Simon Russell Beale (Prospero), Joe Shire

(Master of the Ship), Oliver Towse (Adrian), Simon Trinder (Trinculo), James Tucker (Alonso), Tom Turner (Sebastian), Jennifer Witton (Juno), and others.

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As far as famous firsts go, being the first Shakespeare play to be reviewed in *New Scientist* is perhaps a fairly unique milestone in production history. That theater technology would reach the point that it is considered cutting-edge science is perhaps not a development anyone foresaw, but that is what Greg Doran's 2016 production of *The Tempest* has achieved. The RSC, Intel, and The Imaginarium Studios have produced a *Tempest* designed to inspire awe and wonder. It is perhaps a symptom of the times rather than of intent that this was a *Tempest* more informed by issues relating to modern science fiction than any other in recent memory. It is perhaps reflective of modern science fiction that this production, like that genre, is at its best when there are no effects, no grand technologies, simply actors on a stage showing us what it means to be human.

It cannot be denied that the show's digital projections were stunning. These effects were bolstered by the flooring, a glorious transparent structure supported on polycarbonate "fins" which bore a mosaic that shifted and glistened with light and colour in every new setting. Tropical paradise shifted to barren wasteland or burning hellfire in an instant as light and color danced across the stage. Prospero's island felt truly like another world: one which was tied inexorably to the whims and wills of its master. When Prospero ended the nuptial celebrations with his remembrance of Caliban's plot, the ground, for the first time, became barren. Was this due to Caliban's treachery, or to the realization that he was truly to lose his daughter? Whatever the cause, it was Prospero's mood that shaped his realm: when he repented of his hunger for vengeance, broke his staff and pledged to drown his book, the floor turned black. The cracks shone bright blue, like frozen lightning. The one fault with such superb projections was the RSC's continued inability to understand sightlines for a thrust stage. The huge bows of the wrecked ship jutted out from the wings: a choice that, coupled with an insistence on projecting onto the distant back wall or—bizarrely—a curved screen lowered two thirds of the way downstage, left the audience to either side of the stage decidedly underserved by this central element of the production.

The much-hyped motion capture elements of the production were also problematic. At various points, large and stunning projections of Ariel would appear, their movements linked to sensors on Mark Quartley's body suit. These were at their best when Quartley himself was visible on

stage alongside his projected avatar. Too often, however, there was a lag between the actor's movement and speech and those of the avatar.

For all the effort, splendor and technology, there was only one moment in the production where the effects genuinely served the story we were told. When reminding Ariel of his imprisonment inside a tree, Prospero brought down a gauze pillar around him and conjured up the arboreal incarceration once more. Quartley's Ariel twisted and writhed as projected roots and branches wrapped around him and spread across the stage. By the time Prospero had finished describing the imprisonment, the entire stage had become a twisted mass of bark and branch. Ariel's release brought genuine relief to him and to the audience. The moment was both visually stunning and vital to understanding the relationship between this Prospero and this Ariel: the relationship that elevated this production more than any technology could.

Central to this relationship was a question that has also inspired science fiction writers: how do we define a being as "human"? When the production began, Prospero was clear in his delineation. He and Miranda were human, Ariel and Caliban were not. When he re-imprisoned Ariel in the tree, it was not done out of malice or anger: he simply didn't think of Ariel as a person who could think and feel and suffer in the same way that humans can. As the production went on, we saw Ariel, the real Ariel (not his projected avatar), become more human than anyone else on stage. As he interacted with more human beings than simply his master and his daughter, Quartley's Ariel grew to understand the species more and more. Initially entirely dutiful in his service to Prospero, he looked almost guilty at the effect his harpy vision had at the end of the first half, as if he hadn't known that humans would react that strongly. When Caliban told Stephano and Trinculo his version of events, Ariel's first "Thou liest!" (3.2.42) was a genuine exclamation of outrage at Caliban's portrayal of Prospero. Only afterwards, realizing that he was invisible, did he gleefully set about turning the conspirators against each other. As the play drew to a close, Ariel sat watching, raptly trying to understand what he was seeing in these humans. As the sparkling visions of goddesses sang to bless Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding, Ariel leant forward, trying to sing along but not knowing the words. It may be Miranda who gets to say "O brave new world / That has such people in't" (5.1.186-7) but it was Ariel who was thinking it throughout this production.

As Prospero, Simon Russell Beale captured all the power and drive of a vengeance-obsessed sorcerer, but he also managed to find something much more powerful in the role: fatherhood. When Jenny Rainsford's

Miranda helped him off with his magic garment, he was no longer the shadowy figure seen at the edge of the stage raising the storm in the opening scene. He was just her dad: her dad with his hands in his pockets, awkwardly trying to admit to his teenaged daughter that parents are human and fallible too. Miranda, played wonderfully by Rainsford as strong-willed and independent, already knew this. She was a teenager, after all. But later, when she and Ferdinand sat talking, Ariel turned to Prospero and asked, innocently and curiously, "Do you love me, Master?" (4.1.48), and Prospero broke. Until now, all he had shown Ariel was himself as "Master," the vengeful sorcerer in the magic garment. Russell Beale stared for a moment, tragic realization crossing his face as he saw that when he had explained that he was fallible, that parents are human beings not gods, he had been talking to the wrong child.

This is a realization that science fiction has explored again and again, in *Frankenstein*, in *Blade Runner*, across the works of Isaac Asimov, and more recently in *Batman v. Superman*: the realization that something we previously thought inhuman is more human than we are. From the moment he saw this, Prospero's redemption was possible, and possible only through Ariel. When he forgave Caliban and handed him his broken staff, he did so with the knowledge that if Ariel could be human then maybe Caliban could, too. Before that, when lost in hatred for his betrayers, he had asked Ariel if his affections could truly feel tenderness for them if he saw their suffering. Ariel's response, "Mine would, sir, were I human" (5.1.19), struck Prospero like a lightning bolt. This thing that four acts ago he had seen as entirely alien had now proved more human and compassionate than he was. At first, all he could do was scream. Then he got down on his knees on the frozen lightning of the earth and broke his staff, abandoning the magic that had set him apart from humankind and from his own humanity.

For all the technology, all the sights and the spectacle, what made Doran's *Tempest* beautiful, what brought it into the future, what made it matter, was the relationship between two beings who learned together what it means to be human. In the final moments of the show, Prospero set Ariel free and Ariel's first steps were towards him. Prospero had to shoo him towards freedom, and in that moment, just as he was for Miranda, Prospero became something more to Ariel than a master or even a man. He was his dad: awkward, and human.



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