

# Taymor-Made

**T**he kids attending the student matinee of *The Green Bird* at the spiffily refurbished New Victory Theater on 42nd Street have been primed by their teachers on how to behave during a show. But there's no need to tell them to sit still. For the next two and a half hours they are transported into the wildly theatrical, joyously magical world of Julie Taymor.

The kids, enthralled, enjoy the show hugely. But don't mistake this for children's theater. Afterward, she tells me with characteristic bluntness, "I don't believe in theater for kids. Good theater is for everybody."

If you've seen Taymor's work before—the Obie award-winning *Juan*

## The Green Bird and the Theater of Surprise

BY GERARD  
RAYMOND

*Darién*, her productions of *The Tempest* and *Titus Andronicus*, or her PBS movie *Fool's Fire*—you know her theatrical imagination never ceases to amaze, and her eclectic style, often incorporating puppets and masks, produces a visual enchantment that takes the breath away.

In Taymor's production of *The Green Bird*, 18th-century Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi's "philosophical tale for the theater," an enormous

winged serpent flies across the stage; masked characters trade scatological insults in the commedia dell'arte tradition; a gigantic stone head spouts philosophy; apples sing and water dances; a magic bird flies up into the air and then descends in a shower of feathers, transformed into a handsome prince.

*The Green Bird* is a production of Theater for a New Audience, which specializes in productions of Shakespeare that are not edited when presented to school audiences. But the schoolgoing and the adult audiences will often experience the same production differently. Large epic theater, Shakespeare and the classics, has the

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March 19, 1996 VILLAGE VOICE

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ability to work on several levels, Taymor explains. "Kids come and they get what they get." Adult audiences will probably discover more sophisticated jokes and ribaldry, tune in to the director's playful visual puns and anachronistic leaps of imagination, and more

thoroughly grasp Gozzi's moral philosophy. But you don't separate theater for children, says Taymor. "You don't clean up your act."

Well, at the New Victory, Taymor has had to add a figleaf. *The Green Bird* features a nude statue coming to life, but for the student matinees the actress playing the statue wears a white bodysuit. "We have naked statues everywhere in the world," Taymor says, not entirely happy about this concession to the Victory Theater's policy of programming for youth and family audiences. "It's much more beautiful when [the actress] is made up. I can't understand why something like that would be offensive."

Taymor's work, which now spans theater, opera, and film, isn't offensive, but it's not tame either. Witness the rude behavior of the clowns and the erotic cavorting of the wicked old queen in *The Green Bird*. The 43-year-old Boston-born artist's unique theatrical style springs from several sources. She studied mime and masks at the Jacques LeCoq school in Paris when she was a teenager, worked with experimental director Herbert Blau at Oberlin in the early '70s, and upon graduating, spent four crucial years in Indonesia, where she learned traditional techniques of dance-drama, puppetry, and mask making. In *The Green Bird*, Taymor integrates Japanese *bunraku* puppets, Indonesian shadow puppets, and masks, all of which she designed herself.

"I want theater to surprise," Taymor

continues. "You shouldn't be knowing what's going to happen the next moment. It should delight. And it should also not try to replicate naturalism." Gozzi's play is almost Taymor-made. "It's a terrific combination of psychological drama, total mystery and transformation, and pure theatricality," she says with obvious glee. "It's not just farce and slapstick, it has some subtle truths. You have these very sophisticated characters who are also archetypes—it's really almost like the first theater of the absurd. And it has a nice mean-spiritedness about it, which I like. It's very edgy."

Though it may cause consternation in some quarters, that last remark augurs well for Taymor's next venture, her biggest yet—the stage version of Disney's *The Lion King*, scheduled to open sometime next year at Disney's New Amsterdam Theater, across from the Victory on 42nd Street. You can tell she's on the verge of becoming a major player in the cultural scene—she's already been the target of gossip-column reports suggesting she's had trouble with the entertainment giant. But Taymor says so far so good. "I know they want me to do what I do, and even if I have a lot of money I still will hope to have that element of theater happening in front of your eyes." Cynics should heed Gozzi's advice and take all philosophy with a grain of salt. "If our fairy tale can turn a profit," the *Green Bird* says at the end of the play, "we'll conclude that such foolishness is the best philosophy of all." ♦