



This is a repository copy of *Review of Shakespeare's The Tempest (Directed by Jamie Lloyd) at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 14 December 2024.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/226402/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Mold, G. (2025) Review of Shakespeare's The Tempest (Directed by Jamie Lloyd) at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 14 December 2024. *Shakespeare*, 21 (1). pp. 230-233. ISSN 1745-0918

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2025.2461220>

© 2025 The Authors. Except as otherwise noted, this author-accepted version of a journal article published in *Shakespeare* is made available via the University of Sheffield Research Publications and Copyright Policy under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Review of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Directed by Jamie Lloyd) at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 14 December 2024

Jamie Lloyd is a director known for his minimalist staging and his ability to make theatre attractive to young and diverse audiences as his headline-grabbing recent, modern production of *Romeo and Juliet* (2024), designed to unsettle, illustrates. His latest venture, *The Tempest*, does not stray from this chosen aesthetic. The play took place in a seemingly post-apocalyptic landscape indicated by the set design, a vast stage filled with great mounds of black rubble resembling coal refuse. A large garage door occupied the backdrop, which initially left me wondering if it was supposed to be visible, unacknowledged throughout the performance; however, in one of the final moments, as Ariel was liberated, the lights surrounding the door flickered to life, and it opened just enough for Ariel to slip beneath and exit the stage. The play opened with a black drape descending in front of the stage, plunging the room into complete darkness, allowing the audience's eyes to adjust to the forthcoming dark, shadowy scenes. As the storm began, thunder cracked and lightning illuminated the now-translucent fabric, casting an eerie backlight that revealed the barren landscape and Sigourney Weaver's poised Prospero. The material blew and shifted, billowing into the shape of a ship's sail, before eventually disappearing, unveiling the full scope of the space. The set design, lightning and music worked together to produce a truly striking opening, captivating with its bleak and imposing scenery. The dark landscape revealed was always hazily lit with a soft dreamlike lighting, adding to its haunting allure. 'Stripped back' might not be the term for a stage so clearly devised; however, its scarcity, evoking a crumbling civilisation, I suggest, left the production heavily reliant on its actors and their ability to fill its space; a necessity and expectation that the characters did not fully meet.

A gender-swapped Prospero is by no means remarkable on today's stage, a trend popularised by Julie Taymor's 2010 film adaptation where Prospero is played by Helen Mirren. Historical female Prosperos, although different in their interpretations, all retain Prospero's domineering essence. Mirren's Prospero was androgynous and firm, in charge of the island, whilst other recent female Prosperos have opted for different approaches; Alex Kingston's Prospero for Elizabeth Freestone's 2023 RSC production leant into femininity and displayed a caring, maternal yet controlling nature and Harriet Walter's Prospero for Phyllida Lloyd's Donmar trilogy (2018) was lonely and regretful but highly respected. Weaver's Prospero, however, was a passive character. This came as a result of the combination of her performance, which lacked nuance and depth, failing to fully embody the complexity of Prospero's character, and the staging, which featured Prospero staying seated in a lone chair for the majority of the performance. She watched over the action from afar but rather than seeming to administer it, appeared as an unassertive spectator, seeing events unfold. Before attending the performance I heard in an interview with Weaver and Selina Cadell (Gonzalo) conducted by Samira Ahmed on BBC Radio 4's Front Row (25 November 2024) that Weaver had hoped that the gender-swapped role would speak to how 'it's much easier to toss out a woman ruler in those days and her female heir'; however, the insignificance of her character, in a play where she should reign, inhibited the intention of her snubbed and subjugated woman role. Equally, the character was not dominant in any of her one-dimensional relationships with Miranda, Ariel or Caliban, whose stage presence continually

overpowered her own. Prospero's meekness resulted in Mason Alexander Park's Ariel posing as the play's lead, framed as the true force behind the tricks they played. His Ariel is one of the more serious interpretations of the role I have seen. Wearing platinum blonde hair, a spiky feathered collar, a corseted waist and oversized black trousers, this Ariel rejected the whimsical and playful traits often associated with the character, in favour of a more dramatic and solemn approach. The spectacles Ariel created, much like the staggering set design, enchanted in their epic proportions. As Ariel's spells were cast, giant iridescent sheets floated in the air across the width of the stage, bewitching those necessary and Ariel, on a rigging system, flew to the top of the stage, further elevating their already commanding presence, positioning them as a figure of authority in contrast to Prospero.

Where contemporary productions tend to designate comedy and mischief to Ariel and sobriety to Caliban, in a presumed attempt to handle the colonial associations with care, Lloyd's production reversed this balance as Forbes Mason's Caliban performed as a bald-headed, high-spirited comical character. He lived within the rubble and crawled out when called, revealing his outfit of black leather pants, black gloves and little else. Caliban frequently thrust his hips and created hissing noises which, coupled with his costume, painted him as a sexualised pest, brought further into relief when the character chided Prospero for preventing his rape of Miranda. The combination of his sexual deviance and the comical performance that goes with it fell in poor taste. Grotesque as the character may have been, his coding as silly and amusing added uneasy overtones to the predatory aspect of his role, resembling more of pantomime villain than an abused slave, although still taking up Prospero's space. This move, however, made Prospero's treatment of her slave more comfortable to witness as a spectator. Many previous productions have cast black actors in the role (for example, Trevor Nunn's 2011 *Tempest* for the Theatre Royal Haymarket) with postcolonial readings that emphasise colonial tensions and social resonance. In contrast, Lloyd shifted the focus and attempted to make Caliban's sexual violence a central part of his character, dramatising the gendered power relations instead, substituting a more typical exploration of the 'other'. The effects of this approach were undermined by the humour tied to his behaviour, which diluted the gravity of the actions that characterised him as problematic.

Caliban's revealing costuming, with its sexualised connotations, stood in contrast to Prospero's white shirt and waistcoat, signalling formality and accomplishment, as well as Miranda's chainmail-appearing hooded jacket. The characters who arrive from Naples were further distinguished by their individualised variations of suits, all in childlike shades of blue - fit for a nursery - which I interpret as a colour rarely worn by people outside of magical or fictional realms. The colour dispute between their apparel and the dark, rugged setting they found themselves in contributed to the dreamscape quality of the piece, introduced by Jon Clark's aforementioned misty lighting design; it suggested that the land they arrived from could have been an abstract space or an otherworldly wonderland, reminding me of the Globe's carnivalesque and cartoonish *Taming of the Shrew* (2024).

Whilst the costumes brought intrigue and colour to the production, which I argue was necessary considering the production's minimalist scenery, the performances from the actors and the staging led the play to feel continually stunted. As I noted, the relationships between the characters lacked depth and sincerity; in addition to that, the characters hardly moved around the stage. Aside from Ariel's ascensions and Caliban's hunched movements

around the space, the characters remained fairly stationary and only used one small area of the large set, leaving the striking mountains unincorporated as the cast remained only at the foot of them. Trinculo (Mathew Horne) and Stefano's (Jason Barnett) entrance introduced a dynamic shift, injecting energy and movement into the scene as Caliban and Trinculo rolled around together whilst Stefano stumbled behind. Their performances also stood out, bringing a refreshing burst of vitality to the production. The penultimate scene featuring the play's resolution, typically one performed with emotion and reflection, highlighting the cathartic weight of the reconciliation of the relationships, felt oddly detached. It featured Prospero standing in the centre of the stage, reciting her monologue with her eyes fixed on one position in the audience, as though reading from an auto-cue, whilst the rest of the cast walked slowly around her in a circle. Even when movement was occurring, then, there was a present sense of disconnect. The stilted performance and static nature of the staging made the scene feel like a formal exercise rather than a climactic, emotionally charged moment of resolution, matching the energy of the rest of the production.

Lloyd's minimalist approach extended to his use of props, or rather, the absence of them. In place of physical props, the production relied on imagined ones, so for example when Prospero threatened Ferdinand - 'For I can here disarm thee with this stick' -, Prospero only held up her hand. If this theatrical choice was made with the hope of allowing the focus to land on the language and performance, then the acting let it down; the vision did, however, encourage a level of imagination from the spectators, inviting audience members to conjure images themselves, further highlighting the slightly surreal atmosphere of the production, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, an idea that the production never quite fully committed to. Where most props were entirely absent, Act 3 Scene 1 provided a unique digression. When Prospero forced Ferdinand to move heavy logs in order to prove his dedication, in this version, Ariel became the logs, standing back to back with Ferdinand who leaned forward to raise Ariel from the ground before Miranda took over. Rather than the removal of the logs leading to a focus on Ferdinand and Miranda's relationship, the attention was placed on Ariel, usually not so prominent in the scene. This, in turn, emphasised Ariel and Prospero's control over the events and its deceptive nature, as well as Miranda and Ferdinand's innocence and naive perception of the task.

In conclusion, Lloyd's *Tempest* presented a striking and visually arresting production, but one that ultimately faltered in its execution. The austere set design and surreal atmosphere provided an intriguing interpretation of the play but the performances failed to fully occupy the space on several different fronts. Despite its visual ambition, the lack of dynamic movement, emotional depth and engaging relationships among the characters, with the exclusion of Trinculo and Stefano's stellar contribution, hindered the production's overall impact, resulting in a *Tempest* that left much to be desired.