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Later Shakespeare

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# A Critical Review of

# *The Tempest* (BBC Version)

# Directed by John Gorrie

From 1978 to 1985, BBC Television produced a series of television adaptations of all of Shakespeare’s plays. The series, created by Cedric Messina, was a rare financial success; however, many critics complained that the productions were too traditional, the BBC avoided innovation, and the series was an overall disservice to Shakespeare. Yet the BBC version of *The* Tempest is generally regarded as one of the better productions of the series. After watching this production for myself, I decided that while this version of *The Tempest* is certainly not extremely creative, it does have a generally good cast, decent direction, and an overall quality that makes it worth watching for any fan of *The Tempest.*

## The Acting

With one or two slight exceptions which I will talk about later, I enjoyed all of the performances in *The Tempest*. The main praise that I have for the acting in this production is that everybody plays very well off of each other and every actor behaves like a real person. Rather than falling into the trap of having a sterile, static environment with actors who deliver lines with dramatic (read: deadpan and monotone) quiet and finality, the actors here speak in human tones and are for the most part very animated.

This is driven home in the first scene with the nobles of Milan and Naples arguing with the Boatswain in the midst of a violent storm at sea. The boatswain doesn’t call out his directions; he screams them out, he belts them out with force and authority and a hint of desperation. The nobles don’t just chastise the boatswain; they scream at him with indignity and frustration. Seeing such lively interaction between the actors (and motion as well; the arguments move about the ship as the boatswain must constantly manage his sailors) sets up a standard of quality for the rest of the play. And though the characters are never quite so animated again (being in the middle of a storm can put a spring in your step after all) they do remain dynamic.

### The Shipwrecked Nobles

Going into specific characters, I will start off by talking about Gonzalo. John Nettleton plays Gonzalo like a man who is wise with age and knows it, and always feels that he is right—and because he knows that he is wise, he speaks in a wiser-than-thou manner that ironically drives every other character to disregard his words. I think this was a good move. By making Gonzalo almost annoying in his constant spewing of sagely advice, it gives credible reasons for the other characters to disregard his warnings through annoyance. Nettleton gives Gonzalo a good measure of serious intent in his facial expressions and tones of voice, complementing his wise manner well.

Alonso is a rather unremarkable character, but he was that way in the play as well. Since his character is defined by his quiet melancholy, there really isn’t much that an actor has to do to make him work.

Antonio and Sebastian are very similar characters, so I will talk about them together. Antonio (Derek Godfrey) and Sebastian (Alan Rowe) both make very good snarkers with the proper hints of contempt, smugness, and chuckling in their voices. As they make fun of Gonzalo, you can hear the condescension in their voices and see it in their faces. Yet when he needs to be serious, Godfrey’s Antonio does a very good job presenting himself as a smug snake satisfied with his stolen position in life and an advisor corrupting Sebastian with treacherous logic. Rowe’s Sebastian as well does a good job acting reluctant, withdrawn, and slow on the uptake at first, then slowly becoming excited as he allows himself to be swayed by Antonio’s logic. Both men do their roles justice.

### The Fools

As the comic relief characters, Trinculo (played by Andrew Sachs) and Stephano (played by Nigel Hawthorne) manage to bring different styles of acting to their performances to counterbalance the serious performances of the nobles. When first introduced, Trinculo goes about his business with such carefree nonchalance that it defuses tension almost instantly and sets the stage for comedy. The way Sachs strolls along with a relaxed posture and speaks casually to himself even after having survived a shipwreck is very effective at establishing him as a carefree fool. Hawthorne as Stephano introduces himself somewhat differently; rather than being nonchalant, he is cheerful. He sings sea shanties to himself while drinking, and takes great interest in investigating and “curing” the “monster” (Trinculo and Caliban) he discovers upon entering the scene. The way he laughs his way through a disaster grants him some semblance of control over his environment, establishing him as the dominant half of the pair.

Yet both actors use different methods to set themselves up as fools and cowards. Trinculo’s carelessness serves as a good contrast to his panic when he believes himself to be haunted by the spirit of a dead Stephano, breaking the calm illusion that he had previously set up and proving himself a fool. Stephano, on the other hand, establishes his own foolishness by convincing himself that he has found some deformed monster. At the same time he proves his cowardice by fearing the “monster” he has found when it simply speaks his name.

Caliban deserves special mention here. As he spends most of his time in the play with Stephano and Trinculo, I have grouped him in with them as “the fools.” However, he stands apart as well as one of the most singular and powerful performances in the production. Warren Clarke brings a certain power to his performance of Caliban by overacting in just the right amount. When he first appears, he switches rapidly from scowling, whining resentment of Prospero to wicked, chuckling, grinning pleasure at the prospect of having his way with Miranda. From there his cursing glee turns to pathetic cowering and sniveling in fear of Prospero’s threats. All the while Clarke does this in a very hammy, over the top fashion. Playing Caliban this way works because Caliban is a barely-educated, mutated, wicked, savage thing. He is not a subtle creature, and so he only works well when the actor playing him chews the scenery, which is exactly what he did.

Warren Clarke’s overacting is especially notable when Caliban accepts Stephano as his new master on the beach. He almost runs around in excitement, singing horribly and pounding sticks on the ground to emphasize his joy at the prospect of freedom. Caliban may not be pretty to look at, but you feel pity when he cowers and disgust when he revels. These are the marks of a truly good performance.

### The Lovers

Compared to the rest of the characters spoken about so far, Ferdinand and Miranda are rather dull. They aren’t terrible, but the actors portraying them do not go any extra miles to put life into the performances. Both of them have all the appropriate skills down to portray the Shakespearean lovers, giving declarations of love with proper breathless gasps and openly gaping wondering gazes. Yet their acting feels forced and fake. Of course, it is entirely possible that I am biased. I personally dislike the tropes that characters like Ferdinand and Miranda depend upon to exist: love at first sight, lightning fast marriage, the fact that these two are really more plot device than character, and every other criticism that has been brought forth by countless students against this kind of *Romeo and Juliet*-esque love. Suffice it to say that it would take a pair of truly extraordinary actors to make me enjoy Ferdinand and Miranda, and the two actors playing the parts in this production are not that extraordinary pair.

Special mention must go to Pippa Guard who plays Miranda. Before assuming the role of stereotypical gasping lover, she had some potential as a character unburdened by the curse of Shakespearean romance. Overall, I felt that she gave a performance that was *alright*. Nothing truly special, but nothing horrible. I didn’t like how she tended to simply stare at Prospero in fascination rather than play off of him.

This was especially notable in the first scene that she was in, when Prospero tells Miranda of their noble background. The text shows that Prospero repeatedly charges Miranda to pay attention, which suggests to me that *something* should be distracting Miranda to elicit such an admonition. Yet Pippa Guard is staring attentively at Prospero the entire time. It is entirely possible that this is a writing or directing error, but the actress could have fixed this problem herself by improvising the character’s actions and reactions. So overall I found the performance of Miranda rather middling.

Christopher Guard plays Ferdinand the same way. As he is being drawn around by Ariel, he tends to stare straight ahead into space as he is “looking” for the source of Ariel’s singing, rather than actually looking around. It makes Ferdinand seems rather clueless as he follows Ariel’s song. Cluelessness can work in some cases, but even a clueless character can look around for a disembodied voice. Generally Ferdinand and Miranda were nearly identically average in their performance.

### Prospero and Ariel

I feel that Prospero and Ariel belong to a group all on their own. They are the two characters who manipulate everybody else in the play, masterminding every event from the play’s beginning to its conclusion. It is jarring, therefore, that this most important pair of characters gives us the absolute best *and* the absolute worst performances of the play.

Michael Hordern as Prospero gives what I believe is the best performance of all. As a foil to Caliban’s overacting, Hordern relies on subtlety to give his character power. This is appropriate, since a former ruler and well-learned sorcerer would be a man inclined to thoughtful subtlety. It also helps to preserve the idea that he is the mastermind behind everything, matching his daughter with Ferdinand and leading the shipwrecked nobles about with tricks before forgiving them. And by making Prospero a thoughtful man, Hordern makes it more plausible that he would not give into rage and forgive his Antonio and Alonso at the end.

However, that does not mean that Hordern’s Prospero cannot be threatening when he needs to be. Though rare, the moments when Prospero threatens curses and pains upon his enemies (especially Caliban) show his darker side. He uses pauses to give weight to his words, and a serious, purposeful quiet tone of voice to convey his menace. Prospero’s thoughtfulness combined with his menace makes him feel like the powerful and cunning sorcerer that he is.

On the other hand, Ariel (played by David Dixon) was a huge disappointment for me. When I read *The Tempest* in its original text form, I imagined Ariel as a complicated character. Ariel to me is a powerful spirit with dignity and mystery to match; yet being forced to serve Prospero to earn his freedom, he must swallow his pride and perform tasks that would seem menial to a spirit of the air. In Ariel’s first appearance, describing his success at summoning a powerful tempest yet not harming a single soul, I always imagined him smirking, hardly concealing smugness at how he was able to achieve such a feat. Then being threatened by Prospero when he pushes for his freedom, Ariel is forced to play the part of servant.

Of course, this is simply how I personally thought of Ariel in my head. He could be played any number of ways, and plenty of people would probably imagine Ariel having some affection for Prospero—after all, compared to Sycorax, Prospero is wise and fair. I did not know what to expect in terms of how Ariel would be portrayed in this production, but I was optimistic.

What I did *not* expect was that Ariel would be played like a creepy, subservient, wimpy, disturbing sex-symbol boy toy. Painted bronze and wearing *nothing* but a thong, David Dixon runs around daintily and speaks in an annoyingly high pitched voice. He stares at Prospero with a weird look of longing, almost like a begging dog, and never stops pulling the “duck face” expression.

The worst part, however, is that Ariel takes every chance he gets to splay himself out on the ground, stretch out, and strike a suggestive pose like he is a Playgirl centerfold. Now I am not a guy who is afraid of this sort of thing or gets weirded out by the idea of sexualized men. However, I do not think that this is at all the right place to do this sort of thing. I expect this kind of suggestive behavior from the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, not an air spirit. Now it is entirely possible that my own connotative understanding of a “spirit” is very different from what it was in Shakespeare’s time. But I maintain that this is not a good portrayal of Ariel. Even if we disregard the scantily-clad sex poses, Dixon’s boy-voice and perpetual begging duck-faced expression ruins his performance. In a production that is full of enjoyable performances, Ariel sticks out like a sore thumb of mediocrity.

## Direction

### The Set and Camera Work

One of the best things about this production of *The Tempest* is the generally consistent quality of the sets. For a low budget television adaptation of a Shakespeare play produced by the BBC, the sets are actually quite good. They range from beaches to rocky caves, from marshy woods to grassy woods. But the best thing about the sets is that they are real locations, which allows for some dynamic camera work. The only complaint that I could bring up is that most of the sets are rather flat and seem a bit too cleared-out; however, this isn’t a huge issue, and since it helps the actors have more freedom to move around I can live with it.

With real locations for the sets, the actors are able to move around, be animated, and physically express themselves. Meanwhile the cameras are able to sweep around and keep good angles on the characters as they move around. The ease of acting and filmmaking that having real locations to film on brings is a lesson often lost in the making of major movies these days, so it is nice to see actors that are able to move around and express their characters.

### The Costumes

For the most part, I didn’t have anything to complain about in terms of the costumes for this production. All of the noble characters have colorful, majestic, and fancy clothes, which is pretty much standard for Shakespeare. Stephano and Trinculo have appropriately dirtier clothes which also work, though I was somewhat put off when they emerged “filthy” from the marsh and looked absolutely the same as before they went in. Caliban’s excessively hairy body and giant cloak are fitting for a hideous deformed man.

My only complaint is with Ariel’s costume design. I have already spoken about how his acting is not fitting for what I expected of an air spirit and rather disturbing. It certainly doesn’t help when he is painted bronze with glitter and wearing nothing except for a man-thong (with what appears to be a STUFFED CROTCH). This costume can work in some circumstances; however, in this context, for this type of character, I felt that it was simply the wrong choice.

I expect an air spirit to be translucent and dressed in something that is light and billows out in the wind, like a loose Greek toga. In fact, they even made Ariel translucent when he was invisible. It would not have been difficult to dress him in a billowy costume, get a fan, blow it on him, and make him translucent. Making him look like a walking sex statue ruins the feel of the character from the very moment you see him; the disturbing performance was simply extra nails on the coffin.

### The Editing

When watching some older productions of Shakespeare plays, I sometimes have to deal with horrible editing: choppy transitions, sequences where characters teleport around during monologues, and seizures wracking the screen. Thankfully, this production of *The Tempest* uses tried and true simple fade-outs to transition from scene to scene. Scene transition is one place where conservatism tends to be more favorable than creativity, and it pays off here.

## Summary

Of all of the Shakespeare plays I have read, *The Tempest* stands as my favorites. The BBC version of *The Tempest* may have a hiccup here and there (and one terrible Ariel), but the majority of the actors manage to give nuanced, realistic performances full of life. Along with this are full, real sets that allow for some expansive camera work and animated physical acting. All of this adds up to a solid and faithful (if somewhat conventional) adaptation of *The Tempest*.