



"The State Totters": The Tempest (dir. Karin Coonrod) at La MaMa Theatre

by Matthew Zarnowiecki. Written on 2014-11-01. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Tempest* (2014, La MaMa Theater Company, USA).

LA MAMA THEATER, DURING A SEASON-LONG PRESENTATION OF PLAYS CALLED “LA MAMA Earth,” presented a triptych of *Tempests*. The series is called “*Tempest 3: The Tide is Rising*.” The first, entitled *Tempest*, directed by Karin Coonrod, ran from October 2 to November 2. The second ran November 20-23, and was presented by the Mokwha Repertory Company of Seoul, Korea, and is directed by Tae-Suk Oh. The third, *Nella Tempesta*, ran December 11-21 and was presented by the Italian Motus Theater, under the direction of Daniela Nicolo and Enrico Casagrande. In promotional materials, these three *Tempests* are positioned as the “centerpiece of [the] La MaMa Earth season,” and are meant to reflect global environmental concerns, especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. But Coonrod appears not to have gotten this message. Evidently, neither did the directors of the other two productions. The Mokwha and Motus companies have other agendas than the environment, as their productions reveal. These they confidently take up, with fascinating results. Coonrod does not. Also, as the sole American director, and given the prime, first position in the triptych, it is surprising and disappointing that she has so flagrantly ignored La MaMa’s behest. Her silence on this theme is strange at least, and at most it is depressing and guilt-inducing: the tide is rising, but the rest is silence. Not only do we seem to be ignoring political solutions to global warming, but we’re also ignoring the issue in artistic productions, even when urged.

Coonrod’s *Tempest* begins with an arresting, but not watery, visual image: a silver globe, punctured with holes, swings suspended just over the stage. Light streams from the holes, creating a bobbing, swaying feeling as the beams strike the audience. For a moment, then, we are nauseated by the feeling of being on a ship tossed by the ocean, a ship that may be the “great globe itself.” The hope arises that this image will set the tone for the rest of the play: we are marooned together on a global island – fragile, damaged, and swinging dangerously off-course.

But the rest of Coonrod's production does not make good on this initial image. She advances no overtly political, social, or even aesthetic statements. With respect to environmentalism, such a statement might require a thorough reexamination of the original play. Shakespeare's *Tempest*, if anything, celebrates the unlimited bounty of the natural world, not its fragility or danger. There is no sense of the sea's Sandy-like malevolence, since, after all, the tempest with which the play begins is under Prospero's careful management and control. Prospero, with all his autocratic power, certainly could be made to stand in for the worst of our human fantasies of controlling nature, particularly just before he gives up these powers: "I have bedimmed / The noontide sun ... and by the spurs plucked up / The pine and cedar." But Coonrod never pushes the comparison.

As well, she makes no overtly political statements about the play's meditations on colonial rule and slavery. It is unclear whether the politically blank slate she presents is a conscious choice, or only the result of not pursuing any one choice. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present one, the play has become a contested site of post-colonial criticism and theatrical adaptation. By far the most important and influential of these adaptations is Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest (Une Tempête)*, 1969), a complete re-writing of Shakespeare's play into an extended confrontation between colonial master, Prospero, and his slave Caliban. Césaire's Caliban is a post-colonial figure, a man fit precisely to his time, reborn into political consciousness and revolt through debates with Prospero and the more intellectual, but equally revolutionary, Ariel. One could wish that the casting of this *Tempest* (with Reg E. Cathey as Prospero and Miriam A. Hyman as Miranda) purposefully represents the fulfillment of Césaire's Negritude movement. But I don't think so. Coonrod in no way accents race, ethnicity, or colonial power throughout the play, despite her Caliban being a white man whose face is smeared and sooty and who is dressed in an all-black costume, and despite her Prospero being a towering black man with a rich, baritone voice. The edge of race-based tension is somehow filed down and dulled throughout their interactions. If anything, Coonrod's color-blind and multi-cultural casting seems to insist, despite constant and devastating evidence to the contrary, that we are in fact living in a post-racial America.

Rather than wresting *The Tempest* into a brave new world of political action, or launching the play into the fearful new world of rising sea levels and temperatures, Coonrod's version seems consciously designed to be a standard, even staid, version of the play, against which the Korean and Italian versions might be set into relief. Under Coonrod's direction, no part of the play has been particularly accented or omitted. The overall impression is a completely serviceable version of the play, unlikely to disappoint, but equally unlikely to enthrall. Its choices and effects seem to be plucked somewhat haphazardly. The effect is a pastiche rather than a unified

vision of disparate parts. It is closest to what Frederick Jameson dismissively calls the pastiche of “complacent eclecticism” (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke UP, 1991: 18). Far from an artful and conscious assemblage, it is instead closer to a hodge podge, or even a gumbo or stew: anything near at hand is thrown in.

Reg E. Cathey’s Prospero is a grand, masterful figure whose finest moments are those when he exerts his magical and rhetorical power. Cathey is less able to convey the few subtleties of this role, particularly Prospero’s gradual dissolution, weakening, and relinquishing of power. Whereas Prospero falters just as all of the plots and theatrical effects converge near the end of the play, Cathey never seems quite able to moderate his voice and posture. Miriam A. Hyman’s Miranda, though, is much more affecting. She’s better able to trace through the range of responses her role requires: horror at seeing the shipwreck, curiosity in hearing her strange history, loathing fear of Caliban, instant love with Ferdinand, puzzlement at her father’s treatment of their love, and the wonder and admiration, from which she takes her name, at seeing all the beautiful creatures who have come awash on her island. Slate Holmgren’s Caliban is another standout performance of this production. He is engagingly repellent, not only in venomously cursing his cruel master Prospero, but also in trying to convince his new masters Stephano and Trinculo to do their job: murder Prospero to become rulers of the island. Holmgren makes us feel Caliban’s urgent pathos: he knows what needs to be done to regain the island, but he is powerless to carry out the real work of revolt.

Some of the best scenes rely on the comedic brilliance of minor characters. The snappy comic timing of Earl Baker, Jr. (as Antonio) and Sorab Wadia (as Sebastian) helps to reduce the tedium of some of the minor scenes. Liz Wisan’s Trinculo is as mugging and hamming a Trinculo as can be, but her comic scenes with Caliban and Stephano (Tony Torn) reach beyond simply playing drunkenness for laughs. The trio bring these scenes off masterfully; their chemistry activates the play’s double comedy, which combines gross physicality and a punning, subtle text.

Visual effects, sound, and music are often at the heart of *The Tempest*. Other than the initial swinging globe, Coonrod is much more invested in sound and music than in spectacle. Sound suffuses this production, as it should. But throughout, the sound effects are enchanting and effective, while the songs are not. Elizabeth Swados’s music and the musical direction of Soo Yeon Lee meld into the most effective moments of this production, in which strange ambient sounds reverberate through the theater. Coonrod has actors whisper malevolently from offstage, and in several moments there are wonderful combinations of discordancy and harmony, achieved by a variety of instruments: tone-bowls, a lute, a bandoneon, many electronic sounds, and an instrument I had never seen or heard before: a waterphone. Its ghostly sounds remind us that “the isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs, that give

delight and hurt not.” We share in Caliban’s capacity for aural pleasures that emanate from unknown places, and then disappear back into the island.

The Tempest’s songs are also critical to our experience of the island’s magic. Ariel sings, both seen and unseen: for pleasure, to induce guilt, to warn against danger, and in the moment before his freedom, to signify both his and Prospero’s imminent transformations. Nearly all of these moments fall flat in this production, owing primarily to the pastiche of musical styles and genres Swados deploys. There’s everything from a pared-down Broadway musical style to a vocal jazz standard style, to a style approaching art song. None is very affecting. “Full fathom five,” which Ariel sings to Ferdinand as he first begins to weep for his father, can be invasively beautiful at its best. Here it comes off as simply mocking, and not a bit entrancing. Coonrod also has characters unexpectedly sing lines that are not marked as songs, so that the songs and emotions which *The Tempest* usually calls for are not there, while other songs unexpectedly intrude. One example of this strange idea is that Gonzalo (Ching Valdes-Aran), when droning on about the ideal commonwealth, is made to burst into song. This is uncalled for, at the most basic level: there’s nothing in the production, before or after, to motivate the outburst. We’re left scratching our heads, not at the strange, mysterious beauty of the sweet airs of the isle, but at the weirdness and incongruity of its songs.

The musical pastiche takes its greatest toll on Ariel (Joseph Harrington), who is required to sing a bit out of his range; he also gets no harmonious help from any of the rest of the island voices or sounds. Under the choreography of Cara Kjellman, Ariel’s magic seems to be manifest instead primarily in exaggerated, stylized movements. He flames amazement by languidly tracing steps around Prospero, and tricks all the hapless humans by dancing circles around their plodding bodies. But Harrington’s talent, so evident in *Billy Elliot*, is bizarrely constrained: rather than being a fully airy spirit, Coonrod puts him into black combat boots, and has him speak his lines as he gesticulates close into the faces of whoever is onstage. His movements are not so much spirit-like and airy as exaggerated and grossly human. The closest comparison, to my mind, is not any other recent Ariel, but instead the stylized movements of nineteenth-century Shakespearean acting portrayed in *Red Velvet*, a re-telling of the life of Ira Aldridge, by Lolita Chakrabarti and directed by Indhu Rubasingham at St. Ann’s Warehouse earlier in 2014. Meanwhile, another strange footwear decision encumbers the courtiers, who inexplicably all wear white high heels. Prospero is made to don them when he returns to his courtly garb, and Reg E. Cathey is quite obviously ill at ease in heels, which kicked right off for his curtain calls, so that indeed “the state totters.” But this makes Ariel, Prospero, and the rest of the courtiers all roughly equivalent in physicality and movement: they are either overly graceful or obviously

graceless. The physical direction is thus of a piece with the rest of the performance: a pastiche of effects, some hitting the mark and others not.

The end of this production confirms a sense of uncertainty (or at best, calculated silence), about either political or environmental stance. Prospero, at the close of the action, does hand his staff off to Caliban, inviting a post-colonial inflection. But it's all done rather unceremoniously, even surreptitiously: a quiet, understated retreat from power, rather than any real revolution. (Hong Kong 1997, perhaps, rather than Berlin 1989.) Giant circular fans blow pages all over the stage (in a visual effect borrowed from *Prospero's Books*, or perhaps more recently, from the RSC's *Winter's Tale* at the Park Avenue Armory in 2011), so that it is the wind, not the rising tide, that scatters away Prospero's books, his source of power. And the actors walk off the island, leaving the audience alone in a rectangular volume of hard, cold, fluorescent light that diminishes, then disappears, as the main doors close. If Coonrod were really concerned to tie *The Tempest* to the rising tide of global warming, she might have made much more of Prospero's vow: "And deeper than did ever plummet sound, / I'll drown my book." Instead, she leaves us with a quality of air and light entirely different from the punctured globe with which we started. The theater and *The Tempest* are empty. There is, at least, ample space for the two other La MaMa Tempests to occupy.