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Taymor Meets the Monster



Assembling the opera *Grendel* in Los Angeles has been a gargantuan challenge By Eileen Blumenthal

Heroes need monsters. Minotaurs, cyclopes and gorgons provide the proving ground for mythic overachievers, serving as adversaries against which they can measure and define themselves. In this tradition, Beowulf journeyed from Geatland to prove himself by engaging the monster Grendel, who had been wreaking murderous havoc on the Danish King Hrothgar and his thanes. Outwrestled and killed in a thousand-year-old epic poem, Grendel has now returned. This time he has shown up at [Los Angeles Opera](#) and the [Lincoln Center Festival](#), testing the mettle of composer [Elliot Goldenthal](#), director [Julie Taymor](#) and about 200 other courageous artists.

And a formidable beast this *Grendel* is. Goldenthal's music slides in and out of tonality, shifting time signatures and bounding between dense, percussive threat, rich lyricism and even parody. Plus, the singers must perform it mainly in Old English. [George Tsypin](#)'s dramatic set includes a colossal moving wall of (fiberglass) ice and earth with a huge center section that pivots to form subterranean caves and steeply pitched mountainsides—a forbidding landscape for the characters and challenging if not treacherous footing for the performers. And Taymor's direction, probably her most ambitious and cinematic stage work yet, features characters and settings from half-scale to gigantic, blends animated film with live action, and includes buildings (and occasionally characters) getting torn to pieces.

Somehow the cast of 18 soloists, 48 adult chorus members, 10 child chorus singers, 20 dancers and two dozen puppets must bring this epic to life, without smashing into one another, sliding off key or falling off a glacier.

Less than two weeks before *Grendel*'s Los Angeles premiere, the quest still seemed perilous and of heroic proportions. L.A. Opera's fourth-floor rehearsal spaces at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion teemed with activity. The children's choir worked on frolicking in one room; dancers created a multi-species massacre with choreographer Angelin Preljocaj in a second; Taymor and conductor Steven Sloane worked on tempi and blocking with the various incarnations of Grendel in a third. (Plus, surreally, arias from L.A. Opera's next offering, *La Traviata*, lilted out from a fourth.) On the stage downstairs, the set—several days late—was not even partly assembled. Movements practiced on flat, rehearsal-room floors had yet to be tried on its rough, raked platforms. One final puppet, a giant dragon that spanned the full opera stage, was still on its way from Oregon. (Mezzo-soprano [Denyce Graves](#) would recline on its tongue.) The last of Goldenthal's orchestrations had arrived just two days earlier, his work delayed by a serious head injury last December, and the director and singers had yet to hear a full orchestra play *any* of the music.

For some of the artists, the outlook seemed iffy. "There is no way half of this is going to happen," one dancer commiserated to another. Taymor, working nonstop, appeared just mildly daunted. "Eric [Owens, playing Grendel] is going to be in a flying harness to walk up a mountain," Taymor explained at one point. "He's totally game. I hope it works. But if it doesn't, I'll figure out something else." She just focused on the tasks at hand. If Plan A didn't work, she'd make a Plan B on the fly. Or C.

By five days before the scheduled opening, rehearsals were in the theatre with full orchestra and chorus. Taymor and two dozen collaborators and assistants, most wearing headphones, sat at a long work table in front of row L, working on laptops (all with different displays) and communicating with performers and two dozen more artists, technicians and stage managers all around the theatre. Bar by bar, Sloane was fine-tuning the musical interpretation: the horns should cut their crescendo where the monster is stalking; the women's dirge should sound totally "transparent," with no vibrato. The title character now seemed a worthy adversary, as [Eric Owens](#)'s formidable stage presence and magnificent voice filled the opera house.

Through it all, everyone assiduously ignored the 500-pound gorilla in the middle of the room—or, more precisely, the 40,000-pound, 48-foot-wide, 28-foot-long, 9-foot-deep white trapezoid in the middle of the stage. Tsypin's set was now assembled, but the computer that controlled its 26 motors kept crashing. The entire trapezoid was meant to rotate 200 degrees, changing from its "ice" side to its "earth" side. Various platforms were supposed to fold down, and an 8,000-pound central section was supposed to pivot on a horizontal axis, raise and lower, and move forward and back—sometimes all at once. At one point during the rehearsal, the engineers did get the big center cutout to pivot. As it

tilted back from the horizontal into a more and more terrifying rake, Owens strode up to the peak from which Grendel looked down at the humans—finally giving everyone a glimpse of what this monster of a set was aiming to achieve. But that was its only moment of functionality. Everybody kept working and everybody kept their cool during rehearsal. But afterwards Taymor despaired privately, "This thing is not going up." She looked ashen.

Day by day, bit by bit, electricians and technicians chipped away at the glitches crippling the set. But two days before opening night, with the set *still* not fully working, the premiere was postponed to nearly two weeks later. (All this added about \$300,000 to the show's already unprecedented \$2.8-million budget—"one-and-a-half *Aidas*," as the L.A. Opera management describes it.)

Moreover, as singers and dancers began to populate the set, a new problem emerged. It became clear that the footing and drop-offs really were treacherous. Taymor and Preljocaj did an 11th-hour revision of the staging so that at least performers were not on the set as it moved.

But the 20-ton monster balked even at the (rescheduled) final dress rehearsal. Within seconds of the first notes, a grating screech resounded from center stage: The slowly pivoting center platform, apparently misaligned, was starting to rip off adjacent pieces. The show stopped. The set was adjusted. The performers restarted the act from the beginning—and, at last, *Grendel* came gloriously to life. But an hour in, the show halted again—and Taymor and Preljocaj raced backstage. A dancer had fallen off the back of the platform and was injured badly enough to require an ambulance. Resuming a quarter of an hour later, the opera played to the end with no further mishaps.

And when Goldenthal's *Grendel* finally opened, 10 days later, the only calamities were the intended ones: the havoc that the title monster wreaks on the Scyldings and, eventually, Grendel's demise at the hands of Beowulf. So in the end, hero prevailed over monster.

Notwithstanding its dramatic, nail-biting finish, this *Grendel* has been in the making some 26 years—since the day Taymor and Goldenthal met, in 1980. (They soon became and remain a couple.) That very first day, they recall, they discussed creating a musical staging of **John Gardner's** 1971 novel *Grendel*. Both were already drawn to Gardner's darkly comic, philosophical *Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern-Are-Dead* retelling of *Beowulf*—from the viewpoint of the monster. Gardner's *Grendel* was an outcast full of self-awareness and even poetic insight, but trapped by his grotesque form and horrific appetites. Observing the human society that fears and loathes him, Grendel sees its hypocrisy, its belief in a set of agreed-upon lies. And he comes to understand its need for him, for a monster, to define its sense of community and morality. Even if he could clean up his act—quit butchering humans and leave them in peace—people would find another monster to replace him, or else make one up. They need an "evil" to define themselves against. Moreover, he realizes, he needs them. He must hold back and not slaughter them all at once, or he'd have nothing left to do: "I'd have to move."

Both Taymor and Goldenthal felt drawn to Gardner's theme of the outcast, the non-human who in some ways understands the people who scorn him better than they do themselves. *Juan Darién* (1988), their first major collaboration for the stage, explored similar terrain: A jaguar cub, transformed into a human child by a mother's compassion, was found out and tortured by "civilized" society until he reverted to his bestial origins. "Trying to understand 'the other' is a theme that I'm attracted to," Taymor says. "We fabricate enemies because the people in power find that a way to control and manipulate. That's always been true, but I find the subject even more resonant now. Phrases like 'axis of evil' and 'crusade' have become rallying calls for missions against 'the other.'"

And just as the *Beowulf* epic presents Grendel's monstrousness in biblical terms (he is "of the race of Cain"), so, too Taymor says, religion today is used to demonize people whose behavior or beliefs or background may be different. "Muslim fanatics and Christian fundamentalists have perverted the essence of their ideologies. Religious fanaticism is just extraordinary in an age of reason—when with all our means of communication we should be able to see the world as one world. *Grendel* speaks to the complete failure to deal with 'the other.'"

Of course, a big part of *Grendel's* draw, Taymor says, was that "it offered us an incredible canvas for what we think we can do as artists." The pair considered making it into musical theatre or a rock opera, and even thought about staging the whole show on ice. Taymor tried first, though, adapting it as an opera libretto, and Goldenthal composed the first 20 minutes. They immediately recognized that this genre had the weight and resonance they wanted. Renowned music director Seiji Ozawa read the score and encouraged them to see it through as a full-scale opera, not to compromise and do it small. When an initial commission (around 1990, by the **Brooklyn Academy of Music**) fell through for lack of funding, Taymor and Goldenthal decided to hold out for another chance to do *Grendel* the way they wanted to.

Meanwhile, Taymor, who had previously worked mainly on small-scale works, began directing operas, including Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, with **Ozawa**; *The Magic Flute*, with **Zubin Mehta**; *Salomé*, with **Valery Gergiev** at the Kirov; and *The Flying Dutchman*, at Los Angeles Opera. She made the feature films *Titus* and *Frida*. And her *Lion King*, on Broadway, earned her the first best-director Tony ever given to a woman for a musical. Goldenthal worked on large-scale symphonic works and film scores, getting four Oscar nominations and winning for his *Frida* score. The pair became stars, two of the most sought-after artists in their fields.

Finally, three years ago, Los Angeles Opera and the Lincoln Center Festival pooled resources to co-commission *Grendel*. Taymor brought in **J.D. McClatchy** to rework the libretto with her, and Goldenthal set about composing the remaining two-plus hours of music.

The artistic appeal of *Grendel* for Goldenthal and Taymor was not just its gigantic scope but its gigantic challenge—that it seemed well-nigh impossible to do. In his program notes, Goldenthal writes, "The challenge for me in *Grendel* was how to fashion what is essentially an internal monologue into a dramatic opera." How could the audience get "a variety of sonority" from one singer—and how could one singer's voice physically endure carrying, essentially, a whole opera? Brainstorming with Taymor, he decided to create three "shadow" Grendels—the (anti)hero's only companions—with different vocal ranges (the main Grendel is a bass). Now Grendel could sing duets, trios or quartets with himself and express his different dimensions. For example, when he briefly goes into a romantic fantasy, his tenor shadow sings the role. Goldenthal also integrated a range of musical idioms. Much of the score has a dark, often dissonant, contemporary-sounding richness. But not all. The epic's wannabe hero, Unferth, gets what Goldenthal describes as a comic Wagnerian allusion, "as if Siegfried walked into a longshoreman's bar at a Brooklyn waterfront." The all-wise dragon's backup singers (actually, sections of her tail) are like a trio of chirping coloratura Supremes.

In Goldenthal's dozen or so prior collaborations with Taymor, his soundscape has often been integral to the show's direction. For *Titus Andronicus* (1994) at New York City's **Theatre for a New Audience**, his curdled, snarled hurdy-gurdy music underscored some of the play's goriest moments—helping to implicate the audience in the theme of violence as entertainment, and helping to make the show one of Taymor's most successful and disturbing works. (Unfortunately, it had a limited run and was seen by very few people.) Their *Juan Darién* was a small-scale opera for non-operatic voices, through-sung with a libretto that Goldenthal and Taymor co-wrote.

But composing *Grendel* was totally different from these collaborations—and from writing film scores. "In cinema, you often have to write for

ten-second or one-minute sequences," Goldenthal notes. "But in the opera, you have to sustain musical ideas and contrasts over time for nearly three hours. There's a development of motifs that grow over two-and-a-half hours from small elements into a very complex structure. Plus there are so many layers to it: music, drama, the theatre craft, ballet, oratorio—they all come together in opera."

Grendel also presented tantalizing problems for Taymor as its librettist and director. First was the need to make an audience identify with a giant ogre terrorizing and eating human beings. Taymor decided, for a start, to have the monster speak contemporary English and his human adversaries speak mainly Old English, which a modern audience would not understand. She and McClatchy also made *Grendel* not only thoughtful but witty and, in a way, disarming. The story also presented huge practical issues: simultaneously showing icescapes, villages and subterranean lakes—with characters of various sizes traveling through and among them. George Tsypin's set pivots, hinges and rotates into a dozen different configurations to create tundras, caves and glaciers. And it allows for multiple, simultaneous settings—either different places or different views of the same place seen as if in split screen. The audience can see the Scyldings mourning and cremating their deceased leader on one level of the set—while the monster prowls the mountains above them. When the upper platform shows *Grendel* approaching the gold-filigree mead hall to wreak his havoc, the stage level simultaneously shows the interior of the hall, with humans carousing, oblivious to the imminent danger.

Creating a bigger-than-human character such as *Grendel*, of course, is old hat to Taymor. If the live-actor pool cannot provide performers of the appropriate proportions or species or visual style for her stage works, she designs and builds her own actors. Her cast members have ranged from rowdy schoolboy hand-puppets and inches-high shadow-puppet villagers in *Juan Darién*, to a stage-height combination madame and brothel in her picaresque American Revolution musical *Liberty's Taken*, to the colossal elephant that parades through the audience in *The Lion King*. She has sometimes made differently scaled versions of the same character to create the effect of seeing through different lenses. A superlarge-scale character has the effect of a cinematic close-up. Small-scale versions of the same characters seem to be in long shots, in the distance. Sometimes the same character appears on stage simultaneously in a long shot and a close-up—an effect like picture-in-picture. In fact, as a director of both live theatre and film, Taymor often adapts artistic devices from one into the other: Her theatre often replicates movie-like effects not only of lens changes but of pans and tracking shots, as she pulls the audience's attention across the stage. And her films often replicate the theatricality of a curtain rising. In *Fool's Fire* (1992), her television adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "Hop-Frog," she opens out panels of painted scenery and, even, has a rat gnaw away a leaf to reveal a scene behind the "curtain." In *Titus*, she brings the camera around corners or up from a ground-level focus to reveal action, creating, again, the eventfulness of something hidden being revealed. In *Grendel*, Taymor's live-stage cinematography directly underscores the theme. Her use of differently scaled action shifts the audience's empathy. For some encounters between the monster and the humans, a live singer incarnates *Grendel*, while the Scyldings are half-scale puppets whose tribulations have more humor than gravitas. In other confrontations, *Grendel*'s human adversaries are played by live singers and dancers, while he is a 15-foot-high (rod-puppet) monster. And when he is in full rampage mode, a 14-foot-high digital 3-D blowup of Eric Owens's head looms above the action with distorted images of his face projected onto it.

Taymor's creative team in conjuring this multifaceted universe includes artists with whom she has worked for 15 years. Tsypin has designed almost all of Taymor's major opera productions. Her most important collaborator, though, besides Goldenthal, probably has been the master puppet designer and engineer **Michael Curry**, with whom she has done half a dozen shows, including *Fool's Fire*, *The Magic Flute* and *The Lion King*. Curry is the one most responsible for turning her ideas into physical creatures that live performers can animate. "Julie has one of the most sophisticated aesthetics of anybody I've worked with," Curry says. "The term 'genius' is probably not wrong in her case. And many times she has an idea of how a puppet can be done—but sometimes not. Sometimes her thoughts are like vapor, just floating around, and I grab them and kind of pull them down to earth."

Taymor and Curry collaborate first of all on the actual design of the puppets. "Julie's a great sculptor, and she works a lot with us on sculpting models. But mostly she gives us verbal ideas. I do a lot of sketching, then we research. We've gone to a lot of museums together. For *The Lion King* we went to the zoo together." For *Grendel*, Curry says, he made 500 or 600 sketches.

Curry's other role—the one probably only he could play—is working out the mechanics and ergonomics of the puppets. "Julie does have a good sense of physics, but that's the area where I really shine. I love combining craft and performance and kinetics." Since keeping puppets, especially large ones, lightweight is key, Curry has studied the engineering of featherweight objects. He has analyzed the natural structure of grass and birds. He has researched and used construction methods devised for NASA spaceships, bulletproof vests and prosthetic limbs.

Another long-term collaborator important in creating the world of *Grendel* has been costume designer **Constance Hoffman**. "Michael and I work a lot from the stimulation of Constance," Taymor says. "When you work with Julie," Curry elaborates, "you have to be involved in every aspect. Costuming, puppetry, props, sets all overlap. It has to be holistically thought out or it's a failure. When you do it right, it's one image." Indeed, *Grendel*'s puppets, costumes and occasional masks do come together into one unified world that seems made of blistered, cracked leather and rich earth.

This is a visual universe that Taymor, Tsypin and Curry first explored working on *Oedipus Rex* in 1992. They see that show, and saw it even then, as a "rehearsal for *Grendel*." Taymor says, "All that exploration using the natural elements, cracked earth and stone—I did it in *Oedipus*, knowing that I was going to do it on *Grendel*."

Of course, Stravinsky's musical idiom is different from Goldenthal's. All the staging elements have been reconceived to visualize the sound world of *Grendel*. And, ironically, given all the Sturm und Drang surrounding *Grendel*'s set, Taymor has insisted that she does not want her staging, however spectacular, to distract from the music. She cut some staging effects to keep the focus on the sound and worried with choreographer Preljocaj that the staging not be "too movement-y," too busy. Fundamentally, she says, "Elliot is top dog on this show. An opera is the composer's work. It's *Mozart's Magic Flute*. The focus should be on the music."

Goldenthal's priority as well has been protecting the music. Although he and Taymor conceived the show together, Goldenthal says he did not let her hear the music (apart from the initial 20-minute sample composed decades ago) until he had composed two-thirds of it. "Basically, I wanted to finish the opera before Julie got involved." They have, of course, worked with each other as the production has taken shape—more than most composers and directors probably would. Still, Taymor says, "I give him my opinions, but I'm 100-percent supportive of whatever he wants." And Goldenthal's input about staging has focused on the acoustics—"how voices would carry across the orchestra pit when the singers were on top of or below the massive platform, that the dancers' footfalls could not make too much noise, that the set not move during delicate musical passages."

Taymor and Goldenthal both hope that his opera will live beyond this projection, that other artists will direct it. In fact, in the midst of trying to wrestle *Grendel* onto the stage the first time, Taymor mused, only half jokingly, that *she'd* be up for another go at it. If she were reconceiving it from scratch, she might like to try it without puppets. "I'm puppeted out," she said. Of course, staging a story that contains different-sized characters *without* puppets would be a new challenge. Of course.

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