

Spider-Man, The Lion King and life on the creative edge

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(Music) ["Oedipus Rex"] ["The Lion King"] ["Titus"] ["Frida"] ["The Magic Flute"] ["Across The Universe"] (Applause) Julie Taymor: Thank you. Thank you very much. That's a few samples of the theater, opera and films that I have done over the last 20 years. But what I'd like to begin with right now is to take you back to a moment that I went through in Indonesia, which is a seminal moment in my life and, like all myths, these stories need to be retold and told, lest we forget them. And when I'm in the turbulent times, as we know, that I am right now, through the crucible and the fire of transformation, which is what all of you do, actually. Anybody who creates knows there's that point where it hasn't quite become the phoenix or the burnt char. (Laughter) And I am right there on the edge, which I'll tell you about, another story. I want to go back to Indonesia where I was about 21, 22 years, a long time ago, on a fellowship. And I found myself, after two years there and performing and learning, on the island of Bali, on the edge of a crater, Gunung Batur. And I was in a village where there was an initiation ceremony for the young men, a rite of passage. Little did I know that it was mine as well. And as I sat in this temple square under this gigantic beringin banyan tree, in the dark, there was no electricity, just the full moon, down in this empty square, and I heard the most beautiful sounds, like a Charles Ives concert as I listened to the gamelan music from all the different villagers that came for this once-every-five-years ceremony. And I thought I was alone in the dark under this tree. And all of a sudden, out of the dark, from the other end of the square, I saw the glint of mirrors lit by the moon. And these 20 old men who I'd seen before all of a sudden stood up in these full warrior costumes with the headdress and the spears, and no one was in the square, and I was hidden in the shadows. No one was there, and they came out, and they did this incredible dance. "Huhuhuhuhuhuhahahahaha." And they moved their bodies and they came forward, and the lights bounced off these costumes. And I've been in theater since I was 11 years old, and performing, creating, and I went, "Who are they performing for with these elaborate costumes, these extraordinary headdresses?" And I realized that they were performing for God, whatever that means. But somehow, it didn't matter about the publicity. There was no money involved. It wasn't going to be written down. It was no news. And there were these incredible artists that felt for me like an eternity as they performed. The next moment, as soon as they finished and disappeared into the shadows, a young man with a propane lantern came on, hung it up on a tree, set up a curtain. The village square was filled with hundreds of people. And they put on an opera all night long. Human beings needed the light. They needed the light to see. So what I gained and gathered from this incredible, seminal moment in my life as a young artist was that you must be true to what you believe as an artist all the way through, but you also have to be aware that the audience is out there in our lives at this time, and they also need the light. And it's this incredible balance that I think that we walk when we are creating something that is breaking ground, that's trying to do something you've never seen before, that imaginary world where you actually don't know where you're going to end up, that's the fine line on the edge of a crater that I have walked my whole life. What I would

like to do now is to tell you a little bit about how I work. Let's take "The Lion King." You saw many examples of my work up there, but it's one that people know. I start with the notion of the ideograph. An ideograph is like a brush painting, a Japanese brush painting. Three strokes, you get the whole bamboo forest. I go to the concept of "The Lion King" and I say, "What is the essence of it? What is the abstraction? If I were to reduce this entire story into one image, what would it be?" The circle. The circle. It's so obvious. The circle of life. The circle of Mufasa's mask. The circle that, when we come to Act II and there's a drought, how do you express drought? It's a circle of silk on the floor that disappears into the hole in the stage floor. The circle of life comes in the wheels of the gazelles that leap. And you see the mechanics. And being a theater person, what I know and love about the theater is that when the audience comes in and they suspend their disbelief, when you see men walking or women walking with a platter of grass on their heads, you know it's the savanna. You don't question that. I love the apparent truth of theater. I love that people are willing to fill in the blanks. The audience is willing to say, "Oh, I know that's not a real sun. You took pieces of sticks. You added silk to the bottom. You suspended these pieces. You let it fall flat on the floor. And as it rises with the strings, I see that it's a sun. But the beauty of it is that it's just silk and sticks. And in a way, that is what makes it spiritual. That's what moves you. It's not the actual literal sunrise that's coming. It's the art of it. So in the theater, as much as the story is critical and the book and the language, the telling of the story, how it's told, the mechanics, the methods that you use, is equal to the story itself. And I'm one who loves high tech and low tech. So I could go from -- For instance, I'll show you some "Spider-Man" later, these incredible machines that move people along. But the fact is, without the dancer who knows how to use his body and swing on those wires, it's nothing. So now I'm going to show you some clips from the other big project of my life this year, "The Tempest." It's a movie. I did "The Tempest" on a stage three times in the theater since 1984, '86, and I love the play. I did it always with a male Prospero. And all of a sudden, I thought, "Well, who am I gonna get to play Prospero? Why not Helen Mirren? She's a great actor. Why not?" And this material really did work for a woman equally as well. So now, let's take a look at some of the images from "The Tempest." (Music) (Video) Prospera: Hast thou, spirit, performed to the point the tempest that I bade thee? Ariel: I boarded the king's ship. In every cabin, I flamed amazement. Prospera: At first sight, they have changed eyes. Miranda: Do you love me? Ferdinand: Beyond all limit. HM: They are both in either's powers. Trinculo: Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. (Music) Looking for business, governor? Caliban: Hast thou not dropped from heaven? Stephano: Out of the moon, I do assure thee. Prospera: Caliban! Caliban: This island is mine. Prospera: For this, be sure, tonight thou shalt have cramps. Antonio: Here lies your brother no better than the earth he lies upon. Sebastian: Draw thy sword. And I, the king, shall love thee. Prospera: I will plague them all, even to roaring. Ariel: I have made you mad. Prospera: We are such stuff as dreams are made on. and our little life is rounded with a sleep. (Music) JT: Okay. (Applause) So I went from theater, doing "The Tempest" on the stage in a very low-budget production many years ago, and I love the play, and I also think it's Shakespeare's last play, and it really lends itself, as you can see, to cinema. But I'm just going to give you a little example about how one stages it in theater and then how one takes that same idea or story and moves it into cinema. The ideograph that I talked to you about before, what is it for "The Tempest"? What, if I were to boil it down, would be the one image that I could hang my hat on for this? And it was the

sand castle, the idea of nurture versus nature, that we build these civilizations -- she speaks about it at the end, Helen Mirren's Prospera -- we build them, but under nature, under the grand tempest, these cloud-capped towers, these gorgeous palaces will fade and there will -- leave not a rack behind. So in the theater, I started the play, it was a black sand rake, white cyc, and there was a little girl, Miranda, on the horizon, building a drip castle, a sand castle. And as she was there on the edge of that stage, two stagehands all in black with watering cans ran along the top and started to pour water on the sand castle, and the sand castle started to drip and sink, but before it did, the audience saw the black-clad stagehands. The medium was apparent. It was banal. We saw it. But as they started to pour the water, the light changed from showing you the black-clad stagehands to focusing, this rough magic that we do in theater, it focused right on the water itself. And all of a sudden, the audience's perspective changes. It becomes something magically large. It becomes the rainstorm. The masked actors, the puppeteers, they disappear, and the audience makes that leap into this world, into this imaginary world of "The Tempest" actually happening. Now the difference when I went and did it in the cinema, I started the actual movie with a close-up of a sand castle, a black sand castle, and what cinema can do is, by using camera, perspective, and also long shots and close-ups, it started on a close-up of the sand castle, and as it pulled away, you saw that it was a miniature sitting in the palm of the girl's hands. And so I could play with the medium, and why I move from one medium to another is to be able to do this. Now I'm going to take you to "Spider-Man." (Music) (Video) Peter Parker: ♪ Standing on the precipice, I can soar away from this. ♪ JT: We're trying to do everything in live theater that you can't do in two dimensions in film and television. PP: ♪ Rise above yourself and take control. ♪ George Tsypin: We're looking at New York from a Spider-Man point of view. Spider Man is not bound by gravity. Manhattan in the show is not bound by gravity either. PP: ♪ Be yourself and rise above it all. ♪ Ensemble: ♪ Sock! Pow! ♪ ♪ Slam! Scratch! ♪ Danny Ezralow: I don't want you to even think there's a choreographer. It's real, what's happening. I prefer you to see people moving, and you're going, "Whoa, what was that?" (Music) JT: If I give enough movement in the sculpture, and the actor moves their head, you feel like it's alive. It's really comic book live. It's a comic book coming alive. (Music) Bono: They're mythologies. They're modern myths, these comic book heroes. PP: ♪ They believe. ♪ (Screams) (Music) (Applause) JT: Ohhhh. What was that? Circus, rock 'n' roll, drama. What the hell are we doing up there on that stage? Well, one last story, very quickly. After I was in that village, I crossed the lake, and I saw that the volcano was erupting on the other side, Gunung Batur, and there was a dead volcano next to the live volcano. I didn't think I'd be swallowed by the volcano, and I am here. But it's very easy to climb up, is it not? You hold on to the roots, you put your foot in the little rocks and climb up there, and you get to the top, and I was with a good friend who was an actor, and we said, "Let's go up there. Let's see if we can come close to the edge of that live volcano." And we climbed up and we got to the very top, and we're on the edge, on this precipice, Roland disappears into the sulfur smoke at the volcano at the other end, and I'm up there alone on this incredible precipice. Did you hear the lyrics? I'm on the precipice looking down into a dead volcano to my left. To my right is sheer shale. It's coming off. I'm in thongs and sarongs. It was many years ago. And no hiking boots. And he's disappeared, this mad French gypsy actor, off in the smoke, and I realize, I can't go back the way that I've come. I can't. So I throw away my camera. I throw away my thongs, and I looked at the line straight in front of me, and I got down on all fours like a cat, and I held with my knees to either side of

this line in front of me, for 30 yards or 30 feet, I don't know. The wind was massively blowing, and the only way I could get to the other side was to look at the line straight in front of me. I know you've all been there. I'm in the crucible right now. It's my trial by fire. It's my company's trials by fire. We survive because our theme song is "Rise Above." Boy falls from the sky, rise above. It's right there in the palm of both of our hands, of all of my company's hands. I have beautiful collaborators, and we as creators only get there all together. I know you understand that. And you just stay going forward, and then you see this extraordinary thing in front of your eyes. Thank you. (Applause)