

“A Local! A Monster!”: Harmful Tropes of Indigeneity in Thomas Adès’s *The Tempest*

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is generally identified as a text concerned with colonialism. Before the events of the play take place, exiled Milanese Duke Prospero is left on a ship with his daughter Miranda to die. He finds refuge on an island, where he is helped by its inhabitants: the spirit Ariel and Caliban, son of Sycorax the witch. Prospero binds both Ariel and Caliban to his service and rules over the island despite Caliban's claims to autonomy.

Caliban is a complicated figure who is at once violent, grotesque, pitiable, and enslaved. Caliban's ethnic background is unclear in the play, and in postcolonial critique it is his circumstances that undeniably link him to the colonized subject. Various productions portray him as nonhuman, part monstrous, North American Indian, Black, or vaguely indigenous.

Thomas Adès's 2004 opera based on Shakespeare's play avoids obvious musical categorization and creates a new, otherworldly soundscape. Largely lyrical and easy to listen to, Adès's score is punctuated by the piercing vocal acrobatics of Ariel, highlighting her inhuman power. The music creates a dreamy, magical backdrop for the story, and the music that Caliban sings is beautiful and full of pathos. Unfortunately, a wholly pleasant listening experience is disrupted by the opera's trading in tropes of indigeneity in its text and adaptation while avoiding a deeper discussion of the colonial themes of the work. The 2012 Metropolitan Opera production of Adès's work makes this visually obvious through its costuming and staging choices. This essay examines these tropes and their possible interpretations.

Background on Thomas Adès's *The Tempest*

The Tempest, composed by Thomas Adès with a libretto by Meredith Oakes, was commissioned by the Royal Opera, Covent Garden and premiered there in February of 2004.

Based on the 1610 play by William Shakespeare, the opera follows the original plot with only minor deviations.¹

It has been produced many times since its premiere in Covent Garden: in Copenhagen, in Santa Fe, in Covent Garden again in 2007, in the Quebec City Opera Festival, and finally with the Metropolitan Opera. The Metropolitan Opera's 2012 production was directed by Robert Lepage with costumes by Kym Barrett, and this paper focuses on that production. The Met's 2012 portrayal of Caliban is a particularly egregious example that shows the repercussions of the opera's avoidance of postcolonial discussion.

Adaptation

Critical reception of the opera generally has been favorable, although some critics take issue with Meredith Oakes's choice to depart from Shakespeare's verse. Alex Ross is kinder than many in this regard and concludes that many of her choices, though not as beautiful to speak, are much better suited to melodic diction in singing due to her use of long vowels. What Oakes chooses to retain and add in regard to Caliban is significant, as will be discussed later.

Ross's review mentions Caliban only to praise his aria, "Friends Don't Fear," writing "this is ravishing music in purest A major, though the notes of the scale blend together in everchanging, shimmering combinations. The effect is of light flooding the scene, of warmth rushing in."² Many reviews of the opera follow this same structure and stick strictly to the music and libretto rather than approaching adaptation. Of those who mention Caliban, all stick to offering commentary on the loveliness of his music and avoid discussion of his characterization entirely.

¹ Nicholas Ivor Martin, *The Opera Manual*, (Music Finders, Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2013, 596.

² Alex Ross, "Musical Events: Rich and Strange - A 'Tempest' Opera by Thomas Adès," *The New Yorker* 80, no. 2 (2004): 98-99.

In his analysis of the opera, Michael Ewans helpfully lays out the places in which the opera diverges from the play. He explains that much of the comedy surrounding Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban is cut in the opera.³ Despite these cuts, the exchange involving Caliban and alcohol remains and is expanded. The most significant departure comes in the epilogue, which is given to Caliban instead of Prospero (fig. 1).⁴

Because of this change, “Caliban becomes a far more important character – firstly by interacting with the whole court, not just with Stephano and Trinculo, in II.2, where he has two important arias; and second, by replacing Prospero as the deliverer of the Epilogue.”⁵ By giving Caliban most of the epilogue, Prospero’s final significant moment is lost, and Caliban sings the final word of the opera. If we believe that one goal of Adès and Oakes’s recreation of the characters is “the need to make each character credible in a contemporary opera,”⁶ at least with Caliban they have not succeeded. Caliban gains significance, but fails to progress out of the past in any way except in the beauty of his music.

The image shows a musical score for Caliban's epilogue. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a fermata and then singing "Who ___ was ___ here Have they dis-ap-peared?". The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, and the bottom staff is a lower vocal line. The score includes dynamic markings *pp* and *ppp*, and the instruction *espress. sempre*. The time signature is 4/4.

Figure 1. Thomas Adès, *The Tempest: An Opera in Three Acts*, Op. 22, score, libretto by Meredith Oakes after William Shakespeare, (Faber Music Ltd., 2007) 123.

³ Michael Ewans, “Thomas Adès and Meredith Oakes: The Tempest,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 3 (2015): 234.

⁴ *Ibid.* 234.

⁵ *Ibid.* 235.

⁶ *Ibid.* 248.

Caliban's final words in the opera are not the same as Prospero's in the play. At the end of the play Prospero announces the end of his magical power and dominion and asks to be set free. The opera ends with Caliban questioning all that has happened, asking if it was all a dream, while Ariel sings offstage. Caliban sings his own name, situating himself with the ocean and the island. This conclusion can be read as a happy ending for Caliban and Ariel, as they are left alone to live autonomously once again. However, this suggests that they suffer no lasting effects or harm as a result of Prospero's enforced authority; that is a fairytale which does not engage with the reality of colonialism.

Concerning Lepage's Production

In the 2012 production, Robert Lepage (of *Ring* machine fame) creates a replica of La Scala on the island, complete with oversized spotlights and rigging. At face value this appears to be a theatrical metacommentary. While Daniel Drew writes favorably of what he calls "Thomas Adès's operatic transformation of the story, with a sleek libretto by Meredith Oakes and ambitiously self-referential creative direction by Robert Lepage,"⁷ he goes on to say "this "Milan-ification" of Prospero's island more or less undoes much of the effect of recent postcolonial readings of Shakespeare's play... We wind up right back in Europe, and if that usefully sidesteps the now overfamiliar postcolonial reading, the effect remains ambivalent and risks a certain flattening."⁸ The doubly operatic setting is not solely responsible for this sidestepping, but certainly contributes to it.

Lepage's choice of setting separates us visually from any postcolonial reading, but a complete divorce is impossible with a text so rife with themes of colonialism and burdened with such costuming. Drew describes this by writing "[t]here seems to be a touch of bad faith implicit

⁷ Daniel Drew, "Power Exchange: Thomas Adès's *The Tempest*," *The Opera Quarterly* 30, no. 1(2014): 157.

⁸ *Ibid.* 159.

in that staging decision, which, for me, seemed more or less detachable from Adès's musical agenda."⁹ Lepage's choice to build a replica La Scala seems little more than a sanitized, safe option, easily swallowed by opera audiences. Though this self-conscious setting might add meaning to some other opera, this is not the one.

Of the Lepage staging, Heather Weibe writes, "Robert Lepage's production is palpably earthbound by comparison and oppressively tasteful... It looks to the familiar past rather than the imagined future."¹⁰ She also comments on the metatheatrical focus, and writes of Lepage "inflecting them with the weight of the nineteenth-century operatic tradition. But Lepage doesn't subject these themes to any scrutiny."¹¹ Although Weibe discusses Prospero's costume, she does not touch at all on the troubling costume, movements, and language of Caliban. Majel Connery writes that Lepage's staging lacks elaboration, comparing it unfavorably with Giorgio Strehler's heavily conceptual 1948 production of the play, in which Ariel soars on an overlarge and intentionally visible harness until being set free, when Prospero releases him.¹²

Lepage's La Scala set is not the most egregious part of the production, but it draws attention to itself without conveying any particular message or feeling. Assuming Prospero has built this replica of La Scala, this had the potential to mirror colonial activity as he imitates the structures of his home in the colonized territory of the island, but this is never addressed. While the towering opera house is visually appealing, it does not connect to any broader themes of the work. It does not contribute to the opera as a whole and further obscures an already confused message.

⁹ Ibid. 159.

¹⁰ Heather Weibe, "Prospero's Ossified Isle: Thomas Adès's *The Tempest*," *The Opera Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2014): 167.

¹¹ Ibid. 167.

¹² Ibid. 163.

Postcolonial critique and *The Tempest*

Many scholars have examined the play through a lens of postcolonialism, but this criticism has not been applied to the opera. Adès's *The Tempest* tidily sidesteps engaging with these ideas by making vague references that lack specificity. In the play Caliban's ethnic identity is unclear; at various moments Shakespeare describes him as Algerian, compares him to many different animals and monsters, and links his parentage to the devil.¹³ Regardless of his background, Caliban's function and treatment in the story connects him to colonized subjects. Tom Lindsay explains the typical postcolonial view of this figure, writing "for postcolonial and new historicist critics, Caliban variously symbolizes the experience of colonized subjects, or exemplifies early modern attitudes toward the Irish or the indigenous cultures of the Americas."¹⁴

Prospero's relationship to the island is an example of settler-colonialism. After coming to an already occupied island, Prospero and Miranda live there while Prospero exerts his authority over its previous inhabitants. Shakespeare implies that before Prospero's arrival, Caliban lived freely and was self-governed.¹⁵ The descriptions of Caliban's lifestyle also link him to stereotypes of indigenous populations, as Lindsay writes, "Caliban did more than live an outdoorsy lifestyle while subsisting on the natural resources of his home. When he met other people, he accommodated his formerly solitary lifestyle and utilized his island's resources according to an apolitical ethic of egalitarian sharing."¹⁶ These ideas of living close to and in harmony with nature and sharing the resources of the land with new arrivals hearken back to the idea of "the Good Indian."

¹³ Michael Ewans, "Thomas Adès and Meredith Oakes: 'The Tempest,'" *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 3 (2015): 244.

¹⁴ Tom Lindsay, "'Which First Was Mine Own King': Caliban and the Politics of Service and Education in 'The Tempest,'" *Studies in Philology* 113, no. 2 (2016): 399.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 400.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 402.

In his book *Native American Identities*, Scott Vickers explains that Native American characters are often assigned stereotypical characteristics which he separates into “positive” and “negative” stereotypes.¹⁷ A few lines from his “positive” list which apply to Caliban are,

“Glamorized as the Noble Savage, representing a lost or vanishing human species deemed worthy of emulation or sustained nostalgia;
Seen as a harmless, childlike race in need of paternalistic guidance, self-improvement, education, civilization, conversion, and/or patronization...
Considered to be a subservient yet honorable character, capable of assisting the dominant culture in the fulfillment of its destiny”¹⁸

And a few from the “negative,”

“‘Murderous,’ ‘rapacious,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘one-dimensional,’ ‘naked,’ ‘heathenish,’ ‘wooden,’ ‘full of gibberish,’ or ‘devilish’...
Has no historical or cultural reality, and thus must really be as portrayed by the defining entity, without recourse to self-defense, testimony, or other inalienable rights to autonomous selfhood; and/or
Is, by biblical definition or inference, a ‘child of the devil’ and a hostile Other.”¹⁹

Caliban is assigned many of these characteristics in both play and opera. He freely helps Prospero and offers help to the later arrivals, he is “educated” in return, and he has specific knowledge and closeness to the island itself. He also exemplifies many of the negative stereotypes. He is an attempted rapist, his manner of speaking and physical appearance are insulted by the other characters, and Prospero in particular describes Caliban as a devil, a demi-devil, and a child of the devil throughout the play.²⁰ In Act 1, Scene 2, Miranda addresses Caliban as a “savage... whodst gabble like / A thing most brutish.”²¹ The opera seems to be of two minds regarding this treatment of Caliban. Some of the language retained from the play and added to the libretto reinforces these tropes and contrasts with the music Caliban sings, which

¹⁷ Scott Vickers, *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature*, (1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 5.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2012), 2.2 383, 4.1 211, 5.1 327.

²¹ *Ibid.* 1.2 427.

grants him greater humanity. The 2012 production worsens the situation by playing into stereotypes of Native American costuming.

Costuming

In the Metropolitan Opera's 2012 production Caliban wears red and black paint on his face, feathers in his hair, and matted black fur around his limbs. Various buttons, beads, and more feathers are attached to a red cloak and tied into his fur (fig. 2). In a *New York Times* article preceding the production, costume designer Kym Barrett explains the inspiration behind some of her designs, but does not mention Caliban.²² Regardless of intent, the visual effect of these elements is a mimicry of inaccurate stereotypes about Native American dress, which are especially harmful on a possibly nonhuman or magical character.



Figure 2. Alan Oke as Caliban at the Metropolitan Opera. Photograph by Ken Howard. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p012zb7j/p012zcqz>.

²² Clinton Cargill, "Dressing 'The Tempest' (Kym Barrett)," *The New York Times*, 2012, 54.

Adrienne Keene, who teaches at Brown University and is a member of the Cherokee Nation, explains that “for generations Indigenous peoples were prohibited, in many cases by law, from practicing our cultures... Through these laws and policies, our abilities to control and maintain our cultures were restricted, and the explicit messages were that Indigenous cultures were wrong, backward, and "savage.””²³ Because of this history, representation of Indigenous peoples as less than human or uncivilized is particularly harmful.

Caliban’s costume has many similarities to Johnny Depp’s portrayal of the character Tonto in the 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*. Depp was primarily inspired by a painting by Kirby Sattler (fig. 3). Keene says: “The thing about Kirby Sattler, a non-Native painter, is that he relies heavily on stereotypes of Native people... with little regard for any type of historical accuracy.”²⁴ Sattler himself said that the characters he painted came completely from his imagination and are not intended to be an accurate representation of real cultures.



Figure 3. Kirby Sattler, *I Am Crow*, <http://kirbysattler.sattlerartprint.com/nativeamericanpaintings.html>.

²³ Adrienne Keene, "Engaging Indigeneity and Avoiding Appropriation: An Interview with Adrienne Keene." *English Journal* 106, no. 1 (2016).

²⁴ Adrienne Keene, "Johnny Depp as Tonto: I'm Still Not Feeling 'Honored.'" *Native Appropriations* (blog), April 24 2012, nativeappropriations.com/2012/04/johnny-depp-as-tonto-im-still-not-feeling-honored.html.

The similarities between this imagined portrait of a Native American man and Caliban's 2012 costume include: black face paint, especially around the eyes and down the cheeks,²⁵ draping fur around the shoulders, and feathers around his head and in his hair. Keene describes Tonto's look as "a mish-mash of stereotypical Indian garb, a Plains-style breastplate with a southwest-style headband... random feathers and beads—but the face paint that makes him look evil, forlorn, and angry all at once is a nice touch."²⁶ Caliban's costume includes many of these elements, with added furry limbs and buttons. *The Lone Ranger* movie faced backlash over its portrayal of Tonto; although Caliban's costume employs many of the same tropes and was created at a similar time, *The Tempest* 2012 has not faced the same scrutiny.

In another article, Keene writes that the problem with this kind of stereotyping "is that we as Indigenous peoples are constantly situated as fantasy creatures... we fight so hard every single day as Native peoples to be seen as contemporary, real, full, and complete human beings and to push away from the stereotypes that restrict us in stock categories of mystical-connected-to-nature-shamans or violent-savage-warriors."²⁷ Caliban's fur-covered body affects him in a similar way, further separating him from obvious humanity. Caliban's costume in combination with the text reads as an evocation of the feeling of an Indigenous character without explicitly stating it and dealing with the complications of such a statement.

Caliban's status as human/inhuman

Throughout the opera, Caliban's importance in the structure is increased, Lepage's staging comes to no clear conclusion, and Caliban's costume reproduces many harmful

²⁵ Caliban has additional red face paint, which is an unfortunate addition.

²⁶ Adrienne Keene, "Johnny Depp as Tonto: I'm Still Not Feeling 'Honored.'" *Native Appropriations* (blog), April 24 2012, nativeappropriations.com/2012/04/johnny-depp-as-tonto-im-still-not-feeling-honored.html.

²⁷ Adrienne Keene, "'Magic in North America': The Harry Potter Franchise Veers Too Close to Home." *Native Appropriations* (blog), March 9 2016, nativeappropriations.com/2016/03/magic-in-north-america-the-harry-potter-franchise-veers-too-close-to-home.html.

stereotypes about Native Americans. Caliban's status as a character is still as unclear as in the Shakespeare. Ewans comments on the need to update Caliban's character from the original play, writing "[s]uch a cruel, class-ridden and almost certainly racist portrayal of Caliban would not be acceptable to a twenty-first-century audience, and accordingly Oakes and Adès reshape the character."²⁸ Although I agree that Caliban deserves an update, the opera does not fully deliver. The updates Ewans praises as evidence of Caliban's portrayal are not all improvements. He writes that "for all the blackness visible in Barrett's costume for him, Caliban in the opera is in many ways a likeable character. His 'monstrosity' is mentioned, but is lightly handled in both the text and the music."²⁹

As the kids say, there's a lot to unpack there. To Ewans, Barrett's costume is part of Caliban's much-needed modernization, not a hindrance to it. He also sees the scene in which Caliban meets the castaways not as a mockery of a stereotype surrounding alcohol, but an opportunity for Caliban to show his "natural generosity."³⁰ Ewans's review itself plays into stereotypes, writing that Caliban "reintegrates himself with Nature," and "the music lets us understand that all is well with him. We hear in the closing bars of the opera a gradual, profound merging of both Ariel and Caliban back into nature."³¹ Whatever problems I may have with this portrayal, Ewans is correct in his description of the music. In the opera, the beauty of Caliban's music grants him the pathos and humanity that his costume and treatment in the libretto do not. This peaceful resolution provides a fantasy within the opera, where colonizers leave of their own accord and colonized subjects return to their lives unscathed.

²⁸ Michael Ewans, "Thomas Adès and Meredith Oakes: 'The Tempest,'" *Studies in Musical Theatre* 9, no. 3 (2015): 244.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 244.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 244.

³¹ *Ibid.* 246.

Caliban is granted pathos through his music, but his costuming leans into tropes of monstrosity as well as stereotypical Native American costumes. Throughout the opera, Caliban is compared to various animals. Jeffrey Wilson proposes this as Shakespeare's satirization of language surrounding the racialized other, writing "the costumes of demon, monster, humanoid, and racial other come from decontextualized attention on the epithets aimed at Caliban, the selective reader failing to see that these remarks characterize the interpretive errors of the Italians much more than they do the physical body of the islander... without careful attention to evidence, difference is exaggerated to make what is difficult to interpret into something radically strange, even unnatural and inhuman."³² This is a fascinating reading, but unfortunately the opera legitimizes what Wilson views as satire by dressing Caliban in a pastiche of stereotypes and fur. Because Caliban is deliberately othered through his costuming, the insults levelled by Trinculo and Stephano are not proven ridiculous examples of their own prejudice; they just seem like garden-variety jerks pointing out obvious physical difference.

In the play Caliban is repeatedly identified as deformed, but this deformity seems to be purely aesthetic. Wilson writes that because of this, "Caliban's deformity is more purely a problem of the social construction of corporeal aesthetics."³³ It affects how he is perceived, but not how his body functions. Wilson links this idea to the idea that appearances indicate moral value, writing that "here "goodness" imprints beauty on the body, and "ill" ugliness, because the obvious and important distinction between physical appearance and ethical judgment has been erased."³⁴ This brings us to a possible positive reading of Caliban in the opera. Because his costuming identifies his difference and emphasizes ugliness but Caliban is also presented as a more sympathetic figure, the distance between moral value and physical appearance is increased.

³² Jeffrey Wilson, "Savage and Deformed," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 31 (2018), 147.

³³ *Ibid.* 148.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 152.

However, this reading is harmed by the lack of reinforcement in other characters' appearances. For example, Miranda, the other figure representing innocence, is shown as a young woman in a pretty dress, while Ariel's otherworldly costume reflects her inhuman morality and magical powers. While Shakespeare "treat[s] Caliban's body as the expression of his behavior,"³⁵ the opera further confuses itself by sometimes challenging this idea, but failing to consistently separate morality from appearance.

Despite the comparisons to animals, Wilson explains that Caliban in the play is human, just an othered human.³⁶ Prospero describes him as having a human form, but does not recognize him as equal to himself. Wilson writes, "But if Caliban is a human being, a dirty and disgusting savage, an uncivilized man in need of education and civilization... then why does Prospero later stigmatize Caliban as a deformed bastard born of the devil?"³⁷ At first Prospero educates and civilizes Caliban according to his own ideals, an act that again references colonial history, but he later turns against and stigmatizes him.

According to Wilson, that stigma grows out of fear and danger, specifically Prospero's inability to control Caliban and his attempted rape of Miranda. Wilson argues that Caliban's worst act, which causes Prospero to turn on him and call him inhuman, actually solidifies his humanity.³⁸ Rape, after all, is a human crime, and Caliban's attempt does not make him a devil or subhuman. There are many possible routes to take with Caliban's costume that could make strong points about the prejudice of other characters, the difference between physical beauty and morality, and Caliban's humanity. The opera fails to reach a thoughtful conclusion and instead falls back on inherited clichés.

³⁵ Jeffrey Wilson, "Savage and Deformed," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 31 (2018), 153.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 159.

Comparison with other operas including indigenous characters

European opera has a long history of unfortunate characterization of indigenous figures, tangling exoticism, orientalism, and colonialism. A few works relevant here are Purcell's *The Indian Queen*, Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*, and Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*. Michael Pisani identifies the portrayal of indigenous characters in the first two, writing "[i]n Baroque discovery operas, then, it was almost exclusively in the dance numbers where any unusual stylistic markers could be found."³⁹ In Purcell's *The Indian Queen*, the titular queen Zempoalla herself never sings. While this is not uncommon in this era of English masque, it means that Zempoalla's music is not differentiated in any particular way.

In his opera *Les Indes Galantes* Rameau refers to "*Les Indes*" broadly in a general reference to all faraway, exotic places. Neither work discerns between different groups, which range from Peruvians to Mexicans to North Americans. Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* includes only two minor Indian characters and quotes a few broadly American melodies. Caliban is similarly broadly exoticized in 2012 without being given any specific identification. It's made clear that he is "other" in some way, but the text, along with his costume's mix of Native American tropes and fur, does not deign to clarify.

Caliban in the libretto

Much of the language of the play is changed in the libretto, but the most important changes relating to Caliban take place in Act 2, scene 2 when he first meets the shipwrecked court. Here are a few examples of their language; the court as a group refers to Caliban as "A monster! A local!... He mumbles! He gestures... He likes us / He speaks gently / He's ugly / He's friendly."⁴⁰ Sebastien, Stephano, and Trinculo hurl insults, calling him "savage loon,"

³⁹ Michael Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 37.

⁴⁰ Meredith Oakes, *The Tempest: An Opera in Three Acts*, (London: Faber Music Limited, 2004), 24.

“credulous monster,” and “weak besotted creature.”⁴¹ Here the court is torn in their perception. Caliban is both a monster, and friendly; he mumbles, but he speaks gently. This language prompts the audience to confront the Court’s prejudice and Caliban’s obvious humanity. However, this possible effect is undercut in the 2012 production by Caliban’s problematic costume. His humanity does not make such a statement when it is encumbered with shaggy arms and legs.

When Stephano and Trinculo sing to Caliban asking for help, they ask him to teach them, “How to plait our hair with mud... How to gaze with gaping mouth / Wild vague and stupid.”⁴² They proceed to offer him alcohol as an intentional ploy, unlike in the play. In the opera Gonzalo even questions their plan, saying “The creature’s / Not used to liquor / Is it prudent / To tempt him to it?”⁴³ Despite this, Stephano and Trinculo continue on, goading Caliban into drinking more. Caliban and the court both remark that the drink “It burns in him / With tongues of fire / It lifts him up / Higher and higher.”⁴⁴ Next Caliban sings his beautiful aria “Friends Don’t Fear,” and his most dehumanizing moment is immediately followed by his most humanizing (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Thomas Adès, *The Tempest: An Opera in Three Acts*, Op. 22, score, libretto by Meredith Oakes after William Shakespeare, (Faber Music Ltd., 2007) 60.

⁴¹ Meredith Oakes, *The Tempest: An Opera in Three Acts*, (London: Faber Music Limited, 2004), 24.

⁴² *Ibid.* 24.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 26.

So what are we meant to take from this? While Trinculo and Stephano do give Caliban alcohol in the play, the circumstances are different. Shakespeare has Caliban take the liquor from Stephano, who has been drinking it himself. Much of the most leading language is added to the opera: “a monster! a local,” “plait our hair with mud,” Gonzalo’s objections to the offering of alcohol, and all mention of the liquor burning and resembling fire. In the play, it seems that Caliban is familiar with alcohol already, as he recognizes what it is. He does get drunk, but he is at least aware of what he’s drinking, and Stephano and Trinculo’s actions seem bumbling rather than calculated.⁴⁵ In the opera, the alcohol is a deliberate ploy by the Court to secure help from an already amenable Caliban.

Caliban's fur-covered body, feathers, beads, and makeup combine with his pawing arms and gaping mouth and more troubling treatment of alcohol in the libretto to create an unsavory and dehumanizing caricature that undermines the beauty of his music. The opera adds leading references to the treatment of Native Americans by colonizers, but rather than make a point, it plays these for laughs.⁴⁶

Comparison with other relevant productions of *The Tempest*

Other productions have challenged and reworked the colonial elements of Shakespeare’s text, and Aimé Césaire’s play *A Tempest* and Zen Zen Zo’s 2009 production reckon with Caliban in very different ways. Aimé Césaire, an author, poet, and politician from Martinique, wrote a postcolonial adaptation of *The Tempest* in 1969 in which race relations are brought to the forefront. Césaire said that the collective experience of history, specifically the history of

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2012), 2.2.

⁴⁶ And unfortunately it succeeds. Horrifyingly, on the live recording on Met Opera On Demand you can hear a loud audience laugh after the line “A monster? A local!”

colonialism, creates his Blackness. Césaire also wrote that colonization weakens and dehumanizes both the colonizer and the colonized.

This belief is shown at the end of *A Tempest*, when Prospero has become listless and weak. Césaire's work openly "positions Caliban as the hero figure."⁴⁷ This change is similar to the opera's elevation of Caliban's importance, but has substance behind it. Steven Almquist writes that "the potential these writers found in appropriating *The Tempest* was neither contrived nor arbitrary, for the figure of Caliban--marginalized and virtually imprisoned on the island, presumed to have been culturally illiterate before the Europeans' appearance, and alienated from his own sense of self through linguistic and physical control--was a dramatic reflection of an all-too-familiar experience."⁴⁸

Almquist explains the old idea that *The Tempest* is Prospero's play, but Césaire's adaptation is centered around Prospero's multiple attempts to gain authority and control. Césaire pushes back against the idea of Caliban's "gabbling" by creating a Caliban who is a Black slave. He speaks Kiswahili, and Prospero's inability to understand him is due to his own lack of knowledge.⁴⁹ In the end of Césaire's play, Prospero's speech is confused and muddled, followed by Caliban's distant song. In the opera Caliban also has the final word, but Prospero has no downfall. While Césaire confronts the effects of Prospero's colonization, the opera avoids this and ends with no lasting change to Ariel and Caliban's life.

Contemporary physical theater company Zen Zen Zo's 2009 production differentiates Caliban and Ariel from the other characters by portraying them through butoh, a form of Japanese dance. Each character is created by six actors dancing together. Natalie Lazaroo

⁴⁷ Steve Almquist, "Not Quite the Gabbling of 'A Thing Most Brutish': Caliban's Kiswahili in Aimé Césaire's 'A Tempest,'" *Callaloo* 29, no. 2 (2006): 589.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 590.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 598.

explains that “the performance makes its postcolonial attempt by illuminating the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, aiming to bring the marginalized characters of Caliban and Ariel to the centre and challenge the hegemony.”⁵⁰ By separating both Caliban and Ariel so clearly from the rest of the cast, *Zen Zen Zo* highlights their treatment in the text. Caliban and Ariel’s difference becomes powerful as “the Butoh/grotesque body of Caliban serves as a revolt against the oppressive forces that seek to limit him, a revolt against a 'socially accepted' body.”⁵¹

In contrast to this, the costuming chosen by *Zen Zen Zo* for the Caliban is near nudity accented by fur and facepaint. This unfortunately reflects many of the same negative stereotypes as the 2012 opera and similarly falls back on regurgitated visual tropes about Indigenous populations. In both instances Caliban’s costume separates him from the other characters, but it does not empower him, and in the case of the *Zen Zen Zo* production, this undermines the other points of their adaptation.

The *Zen Zen Zo* and Césaire adaptations offer differing examples of how transformative versions of Caliban can engage with postcolonial critique. Of course Adès and company are not required to tackle any particular subject, but to adapt a text like *The Tempest* is necessarily to engage with the violent history of colonialism, racism, and slavery. Failure to address that history reads as its tacit acceptance. Especially in the 2012 Metropolitan Opera production, the end result of this lack of clarity is a reproduction of harmful stereotypes. An adaptation of *The Tempest* means reckoning with Caliban’s original treatment in Shakespeare in some way, and in that area this production is too confused to succeed.

⁵⁰ Natalie Lazaroo, “These Things of Darkness: A Postcolonial Experiment in *Zen Zen Zo*’s *The Tempest* (2009),” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 3 (2013): 380-89.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 380-89.

Conclusion

Many stagings of *The Tempest* have attempted to challenge the colonialist mindset inherent to Shakespeare's text, with varying degrees of success. The triumph of Thomas Adès's music for the opera is obscured by a lack of any conclusive reworking of Shakespeare's outdated Caliban. This is especially prevalent in the Metropolitan Opera's 2012 production. In the opera, the enslaved, vaguely indigenous Caliban remains monstrous in staging and in relation to the other characters, but is granted human pathos through the music. Robert Lepage's staging retreats to a place of safety, while Kym Barrett's costuming literally paints Caliban as a stereotype of a Native American. This regurgitates visual tropes of indigeneity without critique, reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

While Adès and Oakes center Caliban in the narrative by allowing him the final word in place of Prospero's epilogue, the first encounter between Caliban and the court is altered and made more violent. The audience is left uncertain of how to feel about Caliban, who is both predatory and piteous. Ambiguity in a character can be wonderful, but in this particular instance it reads as a confused approach to a figure necessarily burdened by historical context. Artists who engage with these types of stories have a responsibility to their audience and to their own work to handle them with thought and care.

Because the opera and the 2012 production in particular lack clarity, Caliban is reproduced as an exaggerated version of Shakespeare's Caliban: he's more monstrous, more pathetic, more grotesque. Western opera's depictions of indigenous figures of the past have relied on vaguely exotic imagination, and because Adès's *The Tempest* fails to make a convincing statement about Caliban, the mixed messages of the music, language, and costuming combine to dehumanize him and contribute to this troubled history.

(Additional note: It is worth mentioning that in a sketch for the costume (fig. 5), Caliban is covered in something more akin to scales. This fits closer with some remarks in the play comparing him to a fish. In the illustration, his face is in shadow, so he may or may not have face paint. He certainly is not wearing the feathers, buttons, and beads of the final costume. The main body of the essay doesn't include this partly because I'm addressing the final production, and also because the only source I could find for this image was a blog, so I could not verify its authenticity.)



Figure 5. Kym Barrett and Felipe Sanchez,
<https://sarahdeming.typepad.com/spiralstaircase/2012/10/adess-tempest.html>

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