

United in Their Love of the Outsider

By DON SHEWEY

IN 1980, a mutual friend arranged for the composer Elliot Goldenthal to meet the director Julie Taymor, saying, "I know a person whose work is just as grotesque as yours." The match-making worked. Their shared appreciation for oddball extravagance and the mythologically fantastic led them into both a romance that has lasted almost 20 years and a creative partnership that spans the worlds of theater ("Juan Darién") and cinema ("Titus").

Their most recent collaboration is the movie "Frida," directed by Ms. Taymor and starring Salma Hayek as the painter Frida Kahlo and Alfred Molina as her husband, the muralist Diego Rivera. These two tempestuous "sacred monsters," the most famous and influential Mexican artists of the past century, fall right into the category that Ms. Taymor and Mr. Goldenthal find most intriguing.

"We've always gravitated toward chronicles of the outsider — someone who, being outside, has a very deft way of observing and personalizing existence," Mr. Goldenthal said. Ms. Taymor agreed: "People on the outside help us look again at what we take to be normal."

"Frida," which opened Friday in New York and Los Angeles, begins with the horrendous bus accident in 1925 that left Kahlo bedridden and pain-racked for years at a time and ends with her death in 1954. Mr. Goldenthal's original score features guest vocals by Latin American stars like Caetano Veloso, Lila Downs and the 90-year-old Chavela Vargas.

In the two decades since they were identified as grotesque-ophiles, Ms. Taymor, 49, and Mr. Goldenthal, 48, have built impressive careers, together and separately. Ms. Taymor spent her formative years studying puppetry, mask making and movement-based theater in Bali and Java. A 1991 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation grant for her work as a theater director and designer, she is best known for staging the megahit Broadway version of "The Lion King," for which she won the 1998 Tony Award for best direction of a musical (she was the first woman to do so). In 1999 she made her Hollywood film debut with "Titus," an adaptation of Shakespeare's cheery little wartime drama of severed tongues and children baked into pies.

Meanwhile, Mr. Goldenthal was composing film scores. Since Gus Van Sant's 1999 "Drugstore Cowboy," he has created soundtracks for more than 20 films, including five directed by Neil Jordan, two of which earned Mr. Goldenthal Academy Award nominations ("Interview With a Vampire" and "Michael Collins"). Along with ballets ("Othello," for American Ballet Theater) and orchestral works ("Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio," for the Pacific Symphony Orchestra), Mr. Goldenthal has composed music for nearly every one of Ms. Taymor's stage and movie projects since 1984, including "Fool's Fire," a film treatment of Edgar Allan Poe's story "Hop-Frog" in which the only actors not encased in Bosch-esque mask-heads were midgets and dwarves.

They were equal partners in creating "Juan Darién," the 1988 adaptation of Horacio Quiroga's fable about a jaguar cub transformed by a woman's compassion into a human boy. The production, which played three sold-out runs in New York and toured extensively, won rave reviews and awards both for Ms. Taymor's mask-and-puppet-based staging and for Mr. Goldenthal's score, a carnival version of a Requiem Mass sung in Latin and Spanish. It also epitomized their shared impulse to preserve the eccentricity, the sexuality and the cross-cultural anomalies often left out of artworks based on history or myth.

"I come from the suburbs," Ms. Taymor, who grew up near Boston, said in a recent interview, "and I went at a very young age to Sri Lanka, then to Indonesia. A lot of my journey has been about going away from America and feeling comfortable in very different places. Elliot grew up in Brooklyn. He didn't have to go anywhere to get a mixture of Haitian,



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Julie Taymor and Elliot Goldenthal in their studio; on the wall is a reproduction of Diego Rivera's "Orgy."

Their tale of Frida Kahlo gives

Julie Taymor and Elliot

Goldenthal another chance to consider the notion of normal.

Jewish, Latino, Italian and African-American musics. We've both digested inspiration from many sources to arrive at a personal vision. The high and the low, the sacred and the profane — we incorporate those dualities as artists, and we like that about each other."

"Frida" is in some ways a departure for the Taymor-Goldenthal team. In contrast to anthropomorphic fairy tales and stylized myth-based spectacles, it is a true story based on real people. The film shows how the often bedridden Kahlo used her confinement to create self-portraits that reflected the vivid interplay of her internal and external lives. Her work drew her into the orbit of Rivera and other artists, as well as political activists and numerous

male and female lovers (including Leon Trotsky) before her death at 47.

"Normally, I would never do an artist's story," said Ms. Taymor. "How do you talk about creativity without being overly simplistic?" She was seated at the table in the airy modern kitchen of the duplex near Union Square that serves as office, studio and living quarters for her and Mr. Goldenthal, while he ladled take-out soup into mugs for lunch. "But I was attracted to this movie because Frida's paintings were autobiographical. You could make them come to life in a more subjective, whimsical way and get out of that linear biopic mode. And because her style is both sophisticated and naive, you could use puppets and animated computer graphics to break out of the framework of dreary naturalism."

As usual, Ms. Taymor relied on Mr. Goldenthal as a collaborator. On "Titus," she had adopted a conventional filmmaker's relationship with a composer: during the editing, she had created a temporary soundtrack using excerpts from Mr. Goldenthal's scores for other movies; the idea was to approximate the rhythms and emotional tone that she wanted for each scene requiring music. But, as Mr.

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Goldenthal explained, "that squashes the composer's creativity, because it doesn't allow you to explore the 10 wrong decisions before you stumble on the thing that really works great."

Ms. Taymor added: "Even though he excelled and went way beyond the temp music, it wasn't a pleasant or healthy working situation. So I promised him on 'Frida' that we would start from scratch."

They agreed that they did not want a full orchestral score, partly because they were working on a smaller budget than they had for "Titus," but also because they felt "Frida" was more of a chamber piece.

"Because Frida spent so much time in bed and in her room," Mr. Goldenthal said, "I wanted to compose music that could be played by the number of musicians who could fit in the room, as if they're serenading her. Most of the time there are four or five or maybe six musicians."

Ms. Taymor also knew she wanted the film to include a lot of singing. "I'd read that Diego and Frida had a friend named Concha Michel who was a singer," she said. "She didn't make any recordings, but clearly music was a big part of their social circle." In the film, the Mexican singer Lila Downs plays a character loosely based on that friend and serves as a kind of Greek chorus figure. Mr. Goldenthal wrote a song specifically for Ms. Downs to sing during a party scene in which Frida dances a lascivious tango with the photographer Tina Modotti, played by Ashley Judd.

Just as Ms. Taymor devised ways to convey Kahlo's surrealistic picture-making imagination (including a dazzling if macabre animation sequence created by the Quay brothers to represent her experience of undergoing surgery), Mr. Goldenthal's melodic, guitar-based score is tuned to the intimacy of the characters' emo-



Peter Sorel/Miramax Films

Alfred Molina as Diego Rivera and Salma Hayek as Frida Kahlo, the tempestuous artists in "Frida."

tions rather than to the drive of the story's events.

"Most composers have a house style," Neil Jordan said by telephone from Dublin. "You never get that with Elliot. He approaches films through the characters, the undertow of the movie, rather than papering the film with sounds."

Part of what drew Ms. Taymor to "Frida" was its portrayal of a complicated and unorthodox relationship between two artists who, for all his notorious womanizing and her unabashed bisexuality, were committed to each other.

"When you ask what their love was based on, it wasn't just about sexuality or physical attraction," Ms. Taymor said. "These were two people who really did support each other as artists. I strongly identify with that.

Elliot and I worked together for five years before we became involved on another level."

The two of them have never officially become husband and wife. "I say we've spent 20 years being happily unmarried," Mr. Goldenthal said. "Julie's late father used to refer to me as his 'son-out-law.' Actually, I think of us as Ozzie and Harriet."

"Only I'm Ozzie," Ms. Taymor said immediately.

"I'm not Harriet," Mr. Goldenthal said adamantly.

Ozzie and Ozzie? They both laughed. Whatever they call their partnership, it's destined to continue for the foreseeable future. Although a screenplay already exists for a long-planned film of "Juan Darién," they want their next film to be "The

Transposed Heads," an adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella about a woman who gets her wish to have her brainy husband's head grafted onto the sexy body of his best friend. They are planning a live-action musical of "Pinocchio" for Disney, although Ms. Taymor said they have "not completely nailed how we're going to make it equally wonderful for adults and for children."

But now that "Frida" is done, the collaborative effort closest to the front burner may be "Grendel," an opera based on the Beowulf legend that's supposed to be performed at the Los Angeles Opera in 2005 and at the Lincoln Center Festival after that.

In other words, back to the grotesque. □