Variety

Composer Elliot Goldenthal Is Experiencing a 'Dream' Spring

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As far as working couples go, director Julie Taymor (http://variety.com/t/julie-taymor/) and composer Elliot Goldenthal (http://variety.com/t/elliot-goldenthal/) might be the most daring, experimental and sophisticated in the showbiz firmament. Their film, theater and opera collaborations combine complex soundscapes with highly stylized visuals.

Their latest phantasmagoria, Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — a filmed record of Taymor's staging of the play at the Theatre for a New Audience in Brooklyn that debuted at the 2014 Toronto Film Festival last September — is also different, despite the production's spare trappings.

"It was really simple onstage," explains Goldenthal, "just a few projections, and the audience surrounding the actors. It was mainly an actors' piece."

And yet the production — which is being presented event-style in approximately 85 theaters for one night only on Monday, June 22 — appears highly cinematic, bathed in stark, moonlight-blue lighting, and adorned with gorgeous costumes that bridge contemporary and period worlds with the spirit world of gods and fairies.

Goldenthal's music, too, bridges different styles and moods, with the unifying motif of gypsy or klezmer music, given the play's wedding celebration and play-within-a-play elements. This carnival-esque mood contrasts with the story's brooding quartet of young lovers searching in sylvan settings for the happily-ever-after.

As Goldenthal explains, he wanted something "boisterous, comedic, raucous and rambunctious" for that main theme, but he also wanted to create distinct worlds for the characters. "For the lovers I created a love theme that's a little Quixotic," he says. "When it game to the gods, Oberon and Titania, the sound is very unearthly and not grounded; (the sprite) Puck had a lot of comic percussion around her; and the fairies had a very sophisticated, ethereal quality."

During the play's quieter, more atmospheric moments, we hear the buzzing sound of a glass harmonica, which, as Goldenthal explains, is caused by the rubbing of champagne glasses.

He describes the music as "dispersed almost like fireflies around the light."

This is Goldenthal's third Shakespearean outing with Taymor, having previously teamed with her on the bigscreen adaptations "Titus" (1999)

and "The Tempest" (2010). And despite Taymor's knack for the fantastical, Goldenthal insists that his motivation is always grounded in character.

"The thing I'm concentrating on mainly in working with Julie or other

directors like Michael Mann or Gus Van Sant or Neil Jordan, is on the depth of acting — what the actor is emoting and saying. The emotion behind the eyes, the motivation behind the action. To me it's all about the acting. It has nothing to do with the visual aspects. If I composed to the visual aspect I lose the intent of the play."

Goldenthal is coming off quite a spring. In addition to "Dream," he also worked with Taymor on the play "Grounded," starring Anne Hathaway, that ran April 26-May 24 in New York; his three-act ballet "Othello" had its revival May 19-21 as part of the American Ballet Theatre's 75th anniversary season at New York's Metropolitan Opera House; Goldenthal's "Symphony in G Sharp Minor," which received the Orange County Register's Reger Award for "Best New Symphony," was released as an album; he was honored with the Wojciech Kilar Award at the Film Music Festival in Krakow; and he was given the Founder's Award by ASCAP.

As Oscar-winning film composers go (he won for the 2002 Taymor-directed "Frida"), Goldenthal is not as well known as John Williams, the late Jerry Goldsmith or even recent winner Alexandre Desplat, but his complex compositions, usually using an orchestra's full range, make him among the most respected. And he might be one of the few whose output in the theater and the concert stage equals his work in film.

The L.A. Times' Mark Swed called the 2006 L.A. staging of Goldenthal's three-act opera "Grendal" "the most ambitious, spectacular and successful new opera yet from Los Angeles Opera." And in his 1998 essay on Oscar-nominated scores, the New Yorker's Alex Ross wrote that despite the film medium's supposed limitations, "a fair number of composers — Danny

Elfman, Howard Shore, and Elliot Goldenthal come to mind — have managed to resist these formulas and write music that sounds fresh with each picture."

"It's important to me as a personality (to work in different formats), because I get a sense of freshness when I'm working with one medium and then all of the sudden I have to change to a drastically different medium," Goldenthal tells *Variety*. "It's like I'm going on a vacation somewhere and it's a complete change of pace, so it actually refreshes my other activities in other media."

In the meantime, Goldenthal says he's refining the album recording of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and doing revisions on an album version of "Grendel," which earned him runner-up status in 2007 for the Pulitzer Prize for Music.

"Opera is a really tough thing to produce because the economics are so painful," he explains. "It costs a lot to put the grand opera pieces out. Nobody makes money. So having it recorded is one way of keeping the document alive and fresh."

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