



# Composer Elliot Goldenthal on Juggling Film, Theater and Ballet in One Year: 'It Keeps Me Refreshed'

6/20/2015 by [Scott Feinberg](#)



Elliot Goldenthal, flanked by Julie Taymor and Jessye Norman, at the New York Foundation for the Arts Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 2013.

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The Oscar winner's latest collaboration with his life partner Julie Taymor -- a filmed version of their 2013 staging of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' -- hits select movie theaters for one nightly only on June 22.

It's been quite a year for **Elliot Goldenthal**, a man widely known in music circles as "the thinking man's composer" and one of his generation's finest talents.

In just the last few months, the 61-year-old -- a student of **Aaron Copland** and **John Corigliano** who went on to become a rare nominations "EGOT," in that he has been nominated for or won an Emmy (one nom), a Grammy (three noms), an Oscar (four noms, including a win for 2002's *Frida*) and a Tony (one nom) -- has been on fully display across the various media.

He re-teamed with **Julie Taymor**, his life partner since 1980 and his most frequent professional collaborator ever since, on two projects: one, an off-Broadway production called *Grounded* that starred **Anne Hathaway**, which ran at the Public Theater from April 26 to May 24; and the other a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a version of which was performed on the stage in the fall of 2013, and is now coming back, having been filmed and edited with considerable amounts of new music, as a film that will screen in select theaters for one-night-only on Monday.

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Additionally, he revisited *Othello*, an opera based on Shakespeare's classic, which he was commissioned to write back in 1996 for the American Ballet Theatre to perform at New York's Metropolitan Opera in May 1997, and which was revived for three more performances at the Met in May to mark the ABT's 75th anniversary. That same month, he also released an album in May entitled *Symphony in G-Sharp Minor*.

Fittingly, he was honored with the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers' prestigious ASCAP Founders Award at its [30th annual Film & Television Music Awards](#).

**Having composed music for ballets, operas, stage plays and films, do you find that your experiences with each of the media are markedly different? And do you have one that you enjoy most?**

It's all music, which I've worked on my whole life, but everything is markedly different -- everything is *totally* different. A theater event, for example, changes every night -- an actor might recite his or her lines differently every night, and the speed they go is different every night, which effects the music. In a movie, it's set -- it's set now and it's set forever, since once you film it and once it's edited and once it's completely final-cut and once the music's added that's the end, and even after you've died it's gonna stay the same. So they're totally different animals. And a ballet is totally different, opera is totally different -- they all have to be approached with different sets of muscles. However, for me, that's a good thing because if I spend a half-year on a movie, then going to another medium like opera or orchestral music or chamber music keeps me refreshed so I don't have a stale feeling that some artists have when they do, you know, 50 or 75 movies in a row or only work on orchestral music.

**What is it like to revisit and revise your own work, sometimes years after you originally wrote it, as was the case with *Othello*?**

I don't keep track [of dates]. I gave up keeping track because I'm *always* revising things, I'm always going back to stuff. Nothing has an official date attached to it. Last year, I decided to turn a nearly two-hour work into a 34-minute symphony [*Symphony in G-Sharp Minor*] -- in other words, to take a piece that has all the components represented in a ballet, but edit it down to a functional symphonic work that can be performed without dancing. Its size -- 34 minutes -- is practical enough for a symphony orchestra to rehearse and present on a program with other pieces. If I just left them with various dances that stretched out for nearly two hours, I'd never get it performed on a concert stage.

## 'Devil Wears Prada' Stage Musical in the Works

**How did you and Julie Taymor first meet and begin collaborating?**

I met Julie in 1980 when she was working on various pieces for La Mama Theatre as well as The Public Theater here in New York. I was knocked out by her work and we met through a common friend and we worked together to try to develop -- and successfully developed -- various early theater works in our lives.

**What is it that keeps you working with many of the same collaborators over and over again, whether it's Julie or Michael Mann, Joel Schumacher or Neil Jordan?**

It's building up a book of vocabulary with a collaborator. You can say something in shorthand or understand what the other person is saying, vis-a-vis your past experience. It's like climbing a mountain with a person who's right above you or right below you -- you have to have experienced communication to feel safe to proceed.

**Is there one person that you've creatively clicked with above all others? I would assume Julie...**

Without a question. We've worked on nearly 20 projects, ranging from small theater to big-time theater to opera to cinema and things like that. But I've also felt very comfortable with my other collaborators. I did five or six movies with Neil Jordan, so obviously I felt very comfortable with him. They're different personalities.

**How did *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which you and Julie first did on the stage in the Fall of 2013, end up as a movie that will be coming out in June of 2015? And did the latter require further work from you in addition to the work that you did for the former?**

We did the theater version a few years ago inaugurating the Brooklyn Theatre for a New Audience. They built this theater and they wanted an inaugural piece to represent the intent of the theater, which is basically to present classical works, mainly Shakespeare, but other serious and classical works of theater too. [When we adapted that into the film version], I added about 25 minutes. The main difference? For the theatrical version, Shakespeare called for a number of songs in specific places, so the songs were the first things that I wrote, and then additional music underscoring the general ambience or locations, whether it be heightened reality or poetic reality, and the emotions - - pure love, poetic gestures, people being very agitated, running athletically on the stage, confronting each other in brawls. All of these things had to be represented or accompanied by music. So that was the thing that I accomplished in the theater. Then, when Julie wonderfully applied her cinematic art to the stage production, there were many, many reaction shots -- in other words, sometimes you look at the person that's talking, but other times you look at the person that's listening to the person that's talking, and the person that's listening has a totally different set of emotions than the person who's talking. For example, if I say to the person in front of me, "You're a stupid idiot," you can show me saying those words, but the effect that that has on the poor person

that I'm saying that to? That person is probably insulted or crushed or hurt or upset or angry or something, but it shows on one's face, and that emotion in the reaction is something that brought a whole new layer of emotions in the film that I had to attend to. I'd had to do that with two other projects with Julie: *Titus*, which we'd done on stage, and then I recomposed the entire score for the movie; and *The Tempest*, with **Helen Mirren**, which existed on the stage before the screen -- I'd say 90 percent I recomposed for the movie.

**And what about *Othello*? This is another project that required you to revisit and augment music that you'd written years earlier — in this case, nearly two decades earlier...**

Well, [back in the 1990s] the choreographer **Lar Lubovitch** was very interested in me to write a three-act narrative ballet based on *Othello*. It was a commission by the San Francisco Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre in both cities. The difficult thing was not so much the commission, because I had a year's time in which to write it. That's the good news. The bad news was they needed the first act about three months later because they needed time to rehearse, so I had to write it on the quick side. It was a beautiful experience. I wrote for dance in my life many times before as a young man, but in this situation you had a full ballet company comprised of 30 or 40 dancers, and you had to be cognizant of writing for full groups of dancers as well as moving the story forward with duets and trios and solos. Practically every second has to be worked out before hand -- what the dancers are doing on stage -- and you're writing for a full orchestra, as well, to accompany the emotions that Shakespeare set out as well as the human limitations of physicality. It was a joy to get to revisit it and make changes.

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