



**FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY**

# Prospero's Book

*Prospero's Books* is a version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* starring John Gielgud. Shakespeare's play centres on Prospero, Duke of Milan, who has been deposed by his brother, Antonio, supported by Alonso, King of Naples, and now lives on an island with his daughter, Miranda. Opening with a storm in which the corrupt brother and his courtiers are shipwrecked on the island through Prospero's magic. *The Tempest* shows Prospero's staging of an action in which he intends to take his revenge on his usurping brother.

Initially approached by Gielgud, who has cherished the idea of putting the enigmatic drama on screen for some time, Greenaway rapidly transformed the play into his own idiosyncratic vision. The film picks up on a brief mention in the text of 24 books from his library which Prospero is permitted to take into exile. These desert island volumes become an abstract counterpoint to the story, like the number count from one to 100 in *Drowning by Numbers*. While remaining faithful to Shakespeare's text, Greenaway has put the words of all the characters into Prospero's mouth for the first two-thirds of the film.

The results are fascinating, and sure to polarise viewers of Greenaway's work even more than any of his previous films.

## **Peter Greenaway on 'Prospero's Books'**

One of the reasons we have called the film *Prospero's Books* rather than *The Tempest* is to indicate to an audience that it is not a straight attempt to reproduce a familiar text. One of my many interests was to pursue the 24 books that Gonzales, Prospero's loyal courtier, supposedly put into the bottom of the leaky vessel in which Prospero was sent out into exile. That idea, I suppose, really holds the material together.

And it seemed quite logical from there to consider *The Tempest* very much as a text, as something written. So what happened in the end is that I made the 24th book *The Tempest* itself. So the whole film is structured around the idea of Shakespeare/Prospero (Gielgud) sitting in his cell on the island writing the play that you see.

The first word of the play is 'Bosun', which is a very interesting word because it is one that is never written down. It was used by seamen who were basically illiterate, so that when they came to write the word down it was 'boat-swain'. It's a nice opening point about the topsy-turvy use of oral and written language.

So the film opens with Gielgud sitting at his desk experimenting with the word 'Bosun', and you see it written up on the screen many times. The evocation of that word in conjunction with the first book of the film, which is the Book of Water, supposedly put together by Leonardo da Vinci, sets the film off. Right at the beginning, then, the audience knows we are at the origins of the play, and I make no attempt at straight illusionism.

At the end of the film the books are all destroyed. What happens, then, is that the apocryphal books – which of course never exist – are created in the first

minute and destroyed in the last minute of a two-hour film. They are there only for the film, which I think is an intriguing idea.

*Following this so far? Good. Because it gets worse. In addition to the labyrinthine complexity of its narrative, Prospero's Books is visually the most dense of Greenaway's films, thanks largely to the first extensive use of high definition television (HDTV) processes for the big screen. HDTV uses twice as many lines as conventional television to achieve better resolution, higher contrast and a wider range of colours. The resulting image – which also has a wide, cinema-like screen ratio – can be manipulated using all the sophisticated techniques of video editing: slow motion, superimposition, and animation.*

*Shot on 35mm film, Prospero's Books is being edited using a combination of conventional film techniques and television post-production. Greenaway has edited three separate versions of the film which run in parallel and will ultimately be mixed together into a single two-hour narrative. He has spent a month in Japan using state-of-the-art HDTV editing facilities provided by the television company NHK. In order to test the potential of the technology, NHK contributed about £2 million worth of editing time free of charge (representing more than the entire production budget of about £1.5 million).*

*The high definition techniques allow Greenaway to unite the sumptuous cinematography evident in The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover with the sophisticated image manipulation of his television production of Dante's Inferno. Greenaway is wary of the film being seen as a 'technological freak', but believes he has only scratched the surface of the technical possibilities.*

Working in conjunction with Tom Phillips on *A TV Dante*, there seemed to be a way through television to engender a whole series of new ways of making pictures, which I was much more familiar with in terms of painting and draughtsmanship than I was with cinema. It was an ability primarily to reorganise the screen ratio, to play with colour in a way you can't in the cinema, and to extend and reshape the elements of the pictorial imagination, which you can do easily in painting. There was a time when I believed that the cinema had an ability to use all the letters of the alphabet and TV could only use the vowels. I don't believe that to be the case any more; I think TV has its own vocabulary, its own alphabet. So what I wanted to do in *Prospero's Books* is to make the first tentative steps towards an expanded cinema which uses television vocabulary but still hangs on to the cinematic idea of creating images which are bigger, noisier, louder, more engulfing than you are.

It's a terrible admission to make, but I do feel for me that cinema has somehow ceased to be a spectator sport. I get tremendous excitement out of making it rather than out of watching it. I suppose on another level it is like trying to regain those first days of the cinema when the audience rushed out because they thought that the waves coming in were going to wet their feet.

The play would certainly seem to start off as a revenge drama, with Prospero in the first five minutes ranting about his past and vowing revenge. But then two-thirds of the way through, almost without prior warning, the situation is broken open completely and there is a moment of truth when Prospero decides to forgive everybody. We have actually used this as a pivotal moment in the film, and for my purposes I am very happy with that sudden change of heart. But you must not be misled into thinking that this is psycho-drama. It is a drama of conceits and allegories and metaphors, and under these terms a

sudden change of heart can no doubt be seen to be relevant to all the other concerns of the play.

There is a deliberate amalgamation or confusion between Shakespeare. Gielgud and Prospero – they are, in effect, the same person. It is Shakespeare's last play, his farewell to illusionism, his farewell to playing games, his farewell to all this anti-naturalism. Gielgud at 87 is obviously near the end of his life, and he has had an incredibly long theatrical career. So in terms of English classical theatre, it is his goodbye to illusionism, to costumes, to dressing up, to playing games. And of course within the confines of the play itself this is exactly what Prospero does – in the famous last speech he actually turns to his audience and begs their forgiveness and abandons his magic before he leaves the stage.

**Peter Greenaway talks to Adam Barker, *Sight and Sound*, May 1991**

## A Walk Through Prospero's Library

Greenaway revisits the opening of *Prospero's Books*.

---

### PROSPERO'S BOOKS

*Director:* Peter Greenaway

*Production Companies:* Allarts Enterprises, Cinéa, Caméra One, Penta Pictures

*In association with:* Elsevier-Vendex Film Beheer, Film Four International, VPRO, Canal+, Nippon Hoso Kyokai

*Financial Assistance:* Eurimages Conseil de l'Europe, Stichting Produktiefonds voor Nederlandse Films, Heldring & Pierson Pierson

*Executive Producers:* Kees Kasander, Denis Wigman

*Producer:* Kees Kasander

*Producers (NHK):* Yoshinobu Numano, Katsufumi Nakamura

*Co-producers:* Philippe Carcassonne, Michel Seydoux

*Associate Producers:* Masato Hara, Roland Wigman

*Production Manager:* Karin van der Werff

*Production Co-ordinator (France):* Brigitte Faure

*Production Co-ordinators (Netherlands):* Sophie Lambo, Kayo Yoshida

*Location Manager:* Marty De Boer

*Assistant Directors:* Gerrit Martijn, Sophie Fiennes, Edith Hazelbach, Paul Marbus

*Casting (UK):* Karen Lindsay Stewart, Polly Hootkins

*Screenplay:* Peter Greenaway

*Based on the play* The Tempest *by:* William Shakespeare

*Director of Photography:* Sacha Vierny

*Camera Operator:* Chris Renson

*Technical Supervisor:* Hideichi Tamegaya

*Technical Director:* Masuo Yamaguchi

*Book Design:* Han Ing Lim

*Book Design (Grasswork):* Daniel Harvey

*Calligraphy:* Brody Neuenschwander,

Agnes Charlemagne, Ellen Vomberg

*Editors:* Marina Bodbyl, Marina Bodbyl

*Production Designers:* Ben van Os, Jan Roelfs

*Art Department Production:* Eljo Embregts, Wilma Schuemie

*Set Decorators:* Ben Zuydwijk, Rick Overberg, Wendy Valentijn

*Wardrobe:* Dien van Straalen

*Wardrobe (Milanese Ruffs):* Maggie McMahon

*Wardrobe (Milanese Hats):* Jacques Janssen

*Wardrobe (Prospero's Cloak):* Emi Wada

*Prospero's Creatures:* Ellen Lens

*Make-up:* Sara Meerman, Brigitte Pleizier, Anniek Widdershoven,

Mariël Hoevenaars, Gaby van der Meijden, Petra Harte

*Special Make-up Effects:* Sjoerd Didden

*Titles Processing:* Cineco B.V., Imagica D-Shop

*Infography:* Eve Ramboz

*Opticals:* Image Creations

*Music:* Michael Nyman

*Music Performed by:* Michael Nyman Band

*Ariel's Songs Performed by:* Sarah Leonard

*Music Producer:* David Cunningham

*Choreography:* Karine Saporta

*Choreography (Caliban):* Michael Clark

*Sound Recording:* Garth Marshall

*Sound Transfers:* Hackenbacker Sound & Video

*Sound Re-recording:* Edward Colyer, Brian Saunders

*Sound Editor:* Chris Wyatt

*Digital Sound Editing:* Nigel Heath

*Dialogue Editor:* Shirley Shaw

*Footsteps Artists:* Jack Austin, Jean Sheffield, Anneli Daniell

*Acrobatic Advisers:* Martine Le Roy, Stephane Dupre

### Cast

John Gielgud (*Prospero*)

Michael Clark (*Caliban*)

Michel Blanc (*Alonso*)

Erland Josephson (*Gonzalo*)

Isabelle Pasco (*Miranda*)

Tom Bell (*Antonio*)

Kenneth Cranham (*Sebastian*)

Mark Rylance (*Ferdinand*)

Gerard Thoolen (*Adrian*)

Pierre Bokma (*Francisco*)

Jim van der Woude (*Trinculo*)

Michiel Romeyn (*Stephano*)

Orpheo (*Ariel*)

Paul Russell (*Ariel*)

James Thierrée (*Ariel*)

Emil Wolk (*Ariel*)

Marie Angel (*Iris*)

Ute Lemper (*Ceres*)

Deborah Conway (*Juno*)

Mirale Jusid, Hélène Zellweger, Hélène Busnel, Florence Gielen (*dancers*)

UK/Netherlands/France/Italy/Japan 1991

125 mins

### A Walk Through Prospero's Library

*Director:* Peter Greenaway

UK 1991

23 mins

---

## FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

### Peter Greenaway: Pioneer of Cinema

Sat 5 Nov 12:00-17:00

**A Zed & Two Noughts** Sat 5 Nov 17:40; Sat 12 Nov 17:40; Mon 21 Nov 20:40; Sun 27 Nov 12:15

### The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation

Sun 6 Nov 12:40; Fri 25 Nov 21:00

**The Falls** Sun 6 Nov 14:40

### Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 1

Thu 10 Nov 20:40

### The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Sat 12 Nov 14:55; Mon 28 Nov 17:50

**A TV Dante: Cantos 1-8** Tue 15 Nov 18:20

**The Baby of Mâcon** Wed 16 Nov 20:30; Fri 25 Nov 18:00; Mon 28 Nov 20:30

### Experimental Sound and Vision: Found Sounds, Lyrical Loops and Landscapes

Thu 17 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by author and musician David Toop)

**The Belly of an Architect** Fri 18 Nov 18:20; Tue 22 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 15:30

**The Pillow Book** Fri 18 Nov 20:30; Thu 24 Nov 20:30; Tue 29 Nov 17:40

**Drowning by Numbers** Sat 19 Nov 14:30; Sun 27 Nov 18:00

**8½ Women** Sun 20 Nov 12:50; Wed 30 Nov 20:35

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

**Join the BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)