

# JULIE TAYMOR BY EDDIE IZZARD



**IN EVERYTHING DIRECTOR JULIE TAYMOR HAS CREATED, SHE HAS TAKEN A LEAP. NOW SHE DARES TO CENTER HER LATEST MOVIE, *ACROSS THE UNIVERSE*, ON THE CATHEDRAL OF POP MUSIC: THE BEATLES CATALOG**

In directing films like *Titus* [1999] and *Frida* [2002] and lavish stage shows like *The Lion King*, Julie Taymor has proven herself a visual innovator and a true original. With *Across the Universe*, she takes a number of bold risks: It's a musical about the '60s told using the most sacred works in the pop music canon—Beatles songs; it features a mostly unknown group of young actors (alongside cameos by famous performers like Bono and Salma Hayek); and it's sprinkled with mind-bending visuals and showstopping set pieces. Here, actor and comedian Eddie Izzard—who plays circus master Mr. Kite in

the film—catches up with the director.

**EDDIE IZZARD:** Just so you know, it's a little intimidating interviewing you.

**JULIE TAYMOR:** And I'm thinking, I have to be funny and clever.

**EI:** So I take it you're happy to get the movie out there.

**JT:** Oh, definitely! It took a while, and it was a lot of work, but it's as important now, considering everything that's going on [in the world], as it was a year ago.

**EI:** So how did this strange baby begin?

**JT:** Well, the idea of doing a Beatles musical came from Peter Gelb, who used to run Sony Classical. He said, "Would you like to do a musical for Broadway? We have access to the whole Beatles catalog." I jumped at the idea. There was no story. I asked Salman Rushdie to collaborate with me. But very shortly after that, Peter moved to the Metropolitan Opera, so it didn't go anywhere. I found out that Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, the screenwriters for the film, had a three-page synopsis, which I read.

**EI:** Would you think of doing this now as a Broadway musical?

**JT:** The whole time we were shooting, the choreographer, Danny Ezralow, and I were saying, "This would make a good theater piece." It will take me a while, though. I've got [a stage version of] *Spider-Man* next. I'm excited about that. But I do think *Across the Universe* would transfer. We had 5,000 people in the film. It would be great to figure out how to do it with 30!

**EI:** The *Superman* that's coming—

**JT:** *Spider-Man*. [laughs]

**EI:** *Spider-Man*, *Superman*, they're all—

**JT:** Oh, they're so opposite. *Superman*'s a good-looking, brawny tough guy, while *Spider-Man*'s a poor, pathetic nerd.

**EI:** Did you always know your comic books?

**JT:** Well, I know them now. We're far along. The book, the songs, and lyrics are written—[U2's] Edge and Bono wrote 15 fabulous songs. We're probably going to open in a year and a half.

**EI:** In some of the articles I read to prepare for this, you were quoted as saying that in your early years you would join all these theater companies, and you were always the youngest person. [Taymor laughs] Did you know instantly what you wanted to do?

**JT:** I didn't really think, Oh, I'm going to be an

Above: Julie Taymor wears a tunic by DONNA KARAN COLLECTION. Tank top by DKNY. Necklace and bracelet by TENTHOUSANDTHINGS.



ress. Or, I'm going to be a director. I started acting when I was 10 or 11 in Boston Children's Theatre. I loved dressing up and playing characters. Then I went to mime school when I was 16, in Paris. That was where I really became inspired to work with objects—puppets, masks. I didn't intend to be a director until I was in Indonesia at the age of 21 on a fellowship. When I got there—I was staying for three months but I stayed four years—I saw theater in its original context, in its original form, in a place where there was not a lot of television or movies. People were performing theater at festivals, for birthdays, for coming-of-age ceremonies such as tooth filings, for religious purposes, for drought. I was so taken with what I saw that I started my own theater company with Indonesian, Balinese, and Sundanese mask dancers and actors. We used language, but you didn't have to understand the language to follow the story. I am still interested in how art transcends cultural differences and our huge cultural divide.

**EI:** If I were to do my stand-up in Iceland or Australia or wherever and talk about the No. 159 bus to Streatham in South London, people would say, "Where is Streatham?" "What's a 159 bus?" So I talk about larger subjects, like the bees, which are everywhere.

**EI:** I love the bees!

**JT:** Bees are the most wonderful, complex, crazy beasts out there. Do you feel as

though you're still an actress?

**JT:** No. I stopped when I was 21 or 22. That's when most people begin. But as a director I think it's very good to have had that in my background.

**EI:** So directing is the thing that really drives it all?

**JT:** Directing and creating the story. I love to start projects from total scratch or from a short story or a novel. I often design as well. I directed *The Magic Flute*, and I designed the costumes and co-designed the puppetry and masks, as I did in *Lion King*. With film I don't design, because it's just too much work, but I have a lot of visual ideas. The circus scene in *Across the Universe* was a combination of animation, live action, and CGI. But I don't like visual effects to look slick. In *Frida* and *Titus* and in this movie, the visual effects feel like they've been handmade. And they have been for the most part, even if we still use computers to put them together.

**EI:** What about casting? Do you take suggestions from all sides?

**JT:** It took us months to cast the six principals, especially Jude [played by Jim Sturgess]. I love that the six young people are fresh faces. Jim is an unknown actor, and he's the lead—along with Evan Rachel Wood—singing 10 Beatles songs and carrying a very big movie. Evan is a phenomenal actress, as was seen in *Thirteen* [2003], but basically she's still young and new. So the audience really can believe in these people. Then with you, Bono, Salma Hayek, and Joe Cocker, I had some familiar faces doing unfamiliar things. Was it new for you to sing and do this kind of circus-master act?

**EI:** It was. In the recording studio, I stood in front of you and said, "How do you want to do it?" And you said, "What do you want to do?" Then we sort of put it down really quickly. I was thinking, How is this going to go? It's speak-singing. I think we recorded it three times, and you put together the best bits.

**JT:** That's right, because your strength is your improvisation. I love to collaborate and take advantage of an actor's strengths. I can have a specific idea, but I think it's better to put it in your back pocket and to open yourself up to what the actor gives you. It was probably harder for you when you had to lip-synch.

**EI:** I didn't realize I had to lip-synch all that

stuff until the day before, so I went to sleep listening to myself on headphones. I had it on all night. Lip-synching the music is somewhat hard, but lip-synching ad-libs is really tricky.

**JT:** I've seen some very funny footage, and you don't look particularly happy. Someone asks you if you're having fun, and you say, "I'm having postponed fun—in six months it will have been fun." [laughs]

**EI:** I was watching *Frida* last night because I hadn't seen it, and I was thinking of the two artists [Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera] working together and you and [Taymor's husband, the composer] Elliot [Goldenthal] working together. What's that like? You've done it a few times, so I take it you can deal.

**JT:** We worked together for five years before we even looked at each other, meaning that we love working together. That was a big turn-on—and it still is. We don't always agree, but he's done almost everything I've done in the theater—unless I work with dead musicians like Wagner, Strauss, Mozart, or Stravinsky. There were some crisis moments on *Titus* because I had loved the temporary score so much, and all the temp music was Elliot's from other films. But I think the final score of *Titus* is far superior to the temp track. *Frida* is so different. He was really able to adjust. I think that's one of the things we share. I don't want to have to keep repeating myself. I notice that you're the same way. You're doing less stand-up now and more serious acting.

**EI:** Yeah. I've found that comedy is very druggy. Comedians are like the dealers and audiences become users. I have to control people's expectations and not really release much comedy when I act. If one wants to explore, I think one should push it.

**JT:** Exactly. *The Lion King* is the main commercial success I've had, but I'm as much a *Titus* person as I am an *Across the Universe* or a *Lion King* person. If I only did colorful musical comedies, I would go nuts. It's just not where my heart is.

Eddie Izzard is currently in production on Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie* and will then begin shooting the second season of FX's *The Riches*. Above: Julie Taymor wears a jacket by PURE DKNY. Cosmetics by YVES SAINT LAURENT. Hair products by KÉRASTASE PARIS. Styling: TURNER. Hair: MATTHEW MONZON/Exclusive Artists. Makeup: DEBORAH ALTIZIO/Exclusive Artists. Special thanks: THE SPACE INC. STUDIOS. Fashion details page 191. Photos: DANIELLE ST. LAURENT.