JE: 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.

EL: So how did this strange baby begin?

JE: 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.

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

JE: 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!

EL: The Superman that’s coming—

JE: Spider-Man. [laughs]

EL: Spider-Man, Superman, they’re all—

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

EL: Did you always know your comic books?

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

EL: 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?

JE: I didn’t really think, Oh, I’m going to be an...
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.

El: 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.

El: 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?

El: 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.

El: 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]

El: 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. That's what 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 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 both... 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.

El: 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.