
ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

PUPPET LOVE

The artistry of Basil Twist.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Basil Twist, one of this country's premier puppeteers, is preparing a piece to Stravinsky's world-shaking ballet score "The Rite of Spring" for the Carolina Performing Arts festival "The Rite of Spring at 100," in Chapel Hill. At the end of February, I went to a deconsecrated church in Bushwick to see how the rehearsals were going. The

those people were in North Carolina. Whereas the theatre in Chapel Hill has fifty-five line sets (stage-wide pipes in the flies, from which you can hang props and curtains), the church had just one pole, installed on ropes by Twist's crew. But the cast was game. During the action, Twist stood behind a table, playing the score on a laptop, but he kept his

ting it to blow perfect smoke rings, until the stage manager ordered them back. She was the heavy. "Take five!" "On-stage!" Twist was soft-spoken and patient, but he looked nervous. The show dates, April 12th and 13th, were only six weeks away.

"The crucial point about puppets," Twist told me, "is that they are real and unreal at the same time." At the beginning of the twentieth century, many writers and visual artists (Alfred Jarry, Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, Sophie Taeuber-Arp), looking for something that was a little bit human, but much more art, made puppets, or works for puppets. The trend continues. Opera now routinely supplements its human casts with puppets, as in the Metropol-



Twist in the studio. His version of "The Rite of Spring" will premiere this month at a centennial festival in North Carolina.

church was unheated, with the result that the pipes had frozen and the plumbing had given up the ghost. (Portable toilets were brought in and set up in the vestibule.) The twelve puppeteers, in down jackets and ski hats, had to use their imaginations during their maneuvers. For the show, they would be joined by ten more, but right now

finger on the play-pause button, and issued corrections: "Higher," "Lower," "You're early." If there was really a problem, he would demonstrate. During breaks, the cast crouched under electric blankets—cords snaked through the hall; you had to navigate around them—and drank tea from thermoses. They also played with a smoke machine, get-

itan Opera's productions of "Madama Butterfly" and "The Magic Flute." So do Broadway musicals, such as "The Addams Family" (for which Twist designed the puppets) and "The Pee-wee Herman Show" (where he helped), not to speak of Julie Taymor's blockbuster "Lion King." Some visual artists now use puppetry in a way that makes their

work more haunting. Jim Dine has been making versions of Pinocchio for decades. The recent Quay Brothers show at the Museum of Modern Art included films of mechanical puppets performing vaguely obscene actions.

Twist doesn't think much of the idea that puppetry is necessarily linked with the avant-garde. "The only connection is that both of them are marginalized," he says. He seems to feel that insisting on the vanguard angle betokens a certain insecurity, an effort to raise puppetry's status, buy it a fur coat. To him, puppetry is fine the way it is: modest. Still, you don't see him performing at the Y. He's been presented by Lincoln Center and the Spoleto Festival. As for there being no important relationship between puppetry and modernism, he is at this moment creating a show to the defining work of modernist music. And it is largely abstract. Columns descend from the flies. Scrolls rise from the floor. The production is also huge, stage wide, which is something that very few puppet shows have ever been.

Twist, who is forty-three, was given his first puppet theatre by his parents, when he was three, and he began making puppets out of paper. When he was ten, his father built him a serious puppet theatre, out of wood. It may seem surprising that the father, a San Francisco businessman with an M.B.A., indulged his first child in this obsession, but puppetry ran in the family. Basil's maternal grandfather, Griff Williams, a big-band leader, had a set of large, realistic puppets representing jazz stars—Harry James, Cab Calloway, and others, including himself—that he would pull out in the middle of his shows and put through their paces. Basil's mother belonged to a puppetry club that put on shows in hospitals, for sick children, and also at birthday parties. Twist described to me one of the group's routines, about a Santa Claus who liked to chew gum and blow bubbles. A bubble burst, and the gum got all over his beard, whereupon the beard had to be shaved off. But then Santa looked terrible, so the beard was replaced with colored ribbons, which suited him marvellously.

Twist watched "Sesame Street," with Jim Henson's great gallery of pup-

pets, practically from the moment he could sit up. Then, in 1976, came the spinoff "Muppet Show," where Miss Piggy flirted with Rudolf Nureyev and Roger Moore. Twist papered his bedroom walls with Miss Piggy posters. In 1977, "Star Wars" was released, and Twist made a full cast of "Star Wars" puppets. (His R2-D2 was fashioned out of a L'eggs panty-hose container, in the form of a silver egg.) Around this time, his family took a trip to New York, where his mother wangled for him an invitation to the Muppet Workshop, on East Sixty-ninth Street. "I held a Kermit on my hand," he says, with renewed awe. He also went to a show by the renowned French puppet master Philippe Genty, who specialized, Twist says, in fabric, music, and emotion. (Go to YouTube, where there is a clip of Genty performing his "Pierrot." The marionette, suddenly realizing that someone is controlling him, yanks the strings out of the puppeteer's hands and collapses—a thrilling and horrifying spectacle.) Twist thus encountered European puppetry: subtle, historical. Finally, when he was ten, his grandmother Dorothy B. Williams, the widow of Griff—he says she was his Auntie Mame—gave him Griff's jazz puppets: Harry James and the rest. He hung them from a stand in his bedroom. "I would say that that sealed the deal," he tells me.

With his entry into high school came a crisis. He realized that there was a problem with his puppet-making. It was like playing with dolls, a "girl thing." Even just his love of puppetry made him seem strange to others. He remembers a Halloween costume that he made, a huge, elaborate construction. "You couldn't even fit it through a door." But he didn't enter it into the high school's costume contest: "I didn't want to win. I would have been embarrassed of my passion. My passion was so strong." He took down his Miss Piggy posters. He stopped making puppets. "Suddenly, I had friends. I even had a girlfriend, for a minute."

Though he didn't have a stellar academic record, he got into Oberlin, a college that takes chances on applicants. It shouldn't have taken a chance on him. He found the place small and insular: "You know, I came from San Francisco. I

was sexually active as a gay kid, but it was a secret. And suddenly I was in this situation where there's a gay league and a gay student alliance and a gay this and that. Every day, you had to declare yourself as something." He left the college before the semester was over, and went to New York, where he enrolled in a few courses at New York University: "I took a deviant-sexuality class, I took French, I took a science survey about intelligent life in the universe. It was a good kind of overview." And, for the first time in years, he made a puppet: "A long, long dragon, out of this wonderful scaly fabric I found at some craft shop. I fitted a tube inside him, so that he could smoke."

In New York, he tracked down every puppetry person he could get the name of. "I was very aggressive," he says. "I would call up and say, 'Hi, my name is Basil Twist. Can I come and meet you?' Then I would go and show them my puppet." One day, at the Library for the Performing Arts, at Lincoln Center, he found Julie Taymor dismantling a show of her work. "There she was, taking these amazing things down off the wall and packing them in bubble wrap." He introduced himself, and soon he was a stagehand on her show "Juan Darién," a puppet-filled jungle tale. Though he was just supposed to move props and the like, he managed to insert himself into the play. "In general, actors and singers and dancers don't like to work puppets," he says. "They're not good at it, and they don't like wearing veils or standing behind things, where people can't see them. In 'Juan Darién' there was this bird, and the actor who was supposed to fly it across the stage didn't want to do it, because it meant that she couldn't go outside and have a cigarette. So, a lot of times, she asked me to do it, and then, the next day, she would get a note from Julie saying, 'The bird was really good last night.'"

He made other changes in his life. Though he was christened Basil Twist, everyone called him Billy. (His father and grandfather, also Basils, were likewise known as Bill.) Now Basil Twist III reverted to his real name: "Some people can carry off a purple cape and some people can't," he says. "I felt that I could carry off the name of Basil Twist. I was proud of it. It's a great name. And, of

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Silk spool of the recluse as she confects her final mythomania.

If it is written down, you can't rescind it.

Spoon and pottage bowl. You *are* starving. Come closer now.

What if I were gone and the wind still reeks of hyacinth, what then.

Who will I be: a gaudy arrangement of nuclei, an apple-size gray circle

On the tunic of a Jew, preventing more bad biological accidents

From breeding-in. I have not bred-

In. Each child still has one lantern inside lit. May the Mother not

Blow her children out. She says her hair is thinning, thin.

The flower bed is black, sumptuous in emptiness.

course, everyone thinks it's fake because it's so great." He also acquired a boyfriend. "I started to live my life, and be who I am." Then he heard about something he had never dreamed of. One of the puppet people he had stalked in New York told him that in France there was an actual college of puppetry.

Charleville-Mézières, in northern France, is a cold, provincial place. It has two distinctions, however. It was Rimbaud's home town (though he ran away to Paris the minute he could). And it is the puppetry mecca of Europe, the home of the École Supérieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette, an institution, Twist says, full of puppetry scholars with big beards and classical educations. Twist applied and was put through an exacting three-part audition, in front of a panel supervised by the director of the school, Margareta Niculescu, a Romanian with a Dracula accent. Twist found her—indeed, all of them—terrifying. In the first stage of the audition, he brought his dragon and made it do something while he performed an Etta James song. "Interesting," they said, and let him proceed to the next level, which, again, he passed. For his final audition piece, he made a puppet out of a rubber-foam sheet that looked like a yoga mat: "I rolled it into a

tube and I painted eyes on it and made it talk, in French—what little French I knew. The thing was very sad. 'Where are you, love of my life?' it said. 'I look to the east and to the west.' Then it jumped off a cliff." The panel liked the show, and admitted him. For each class, only a dozen or so students, who come from all over the world, are accepted into the full three-year program. To this day, Twist is the only American to have graduated from it.

His tenure there was rocky, for him and for his instructors. The École was a typical high-level French academy, stressing history, tradition, and technique. Each student was expected to become an all-around expert in theatre—a master not only of puppetry but of set design, costume design, dramaturgy, music, acting, and so on. Niculescu saw her enterprise as part of European vanguard theatre—Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, Tadeusz Kantor—but she did not train her students to do that sort of work. They were there to learn everything that had happened in puppetry *before* that kind of work. Twist bridled at the school's conservatism. He was American. He wanted some fun—fake fur, Ping-Pong eyeballs. "He was one of the most difficult students that I had," Niculescu recalled in an interview, years later. Today, though,

Blue-footed mushrooms line the walkway to my door. I would as soon
Die as serve them in a salad to the man I love. We lie down
In the shape of a gondola. Venice is gorgeous cold. 3 December,
Unspeakable anxiety about locked-in syndrome, about a fourth world.
I cannot presume to say. The violin spider, she
Has six good eyes, arranged in threes.

The rims of wounds have wounds as well.

Sphinx, small print, you are inscrutable.

On the roads, blue thistles, barely

Visible by night, and, by these, you may yet find your way home.

—*Lucie Brock-Broido*

Twist feels that the flinty old school gave him pretty much everything he has, including his professional pride. Whatever his impatience with these traditionalists, he enjoyed seeing puppeteers, generally ignored in the United States, acting like divas—snotty, aristocratic, as if they knew something that other people didn't. "The famous puppeteers who came to the school—I didn't listen to what they said. I just wanted to see them: the way they walked, the way they carried themselves, what they were known for. Could I be like them?"

But apparently he did listen to them now and then, because, he says, they gave him the grounds on which to make judgments. "Now I could tell someone, 'Here's what's missing. Here's what you're not doing.'" Such authority allowed him not just to evaluate, but also to generate ideas, of which he now had a million. As his new boyfriend, the poet and photographer Bobby Miller, later said, "He came back and he was like a fully cooked nut." The shell had cracked open and the material was streaming out of him.

He began having a good time, with a crowd that Miller introduced him to. Miller was a "drag nurse," a person who would come and fix your drag getup—suggest a different lipstick, tell

you to lose the bangs. Their downstairs neighbor was Lady Bunny, who was renowned for her mountainous blond wigs. (Lady Bunny founded Wigstock, the coiffure festival that was held in New York every Labor Day weekend from 1984 through 2005.) With a few other men, Twist and Miller went out pretty much every night, to itinerant parties and clubs such as Boybar and Jackie 60, most of them in the meat-packing district. On a typical evening, Twist recalls, such gatherings included short amateur performances, "stupid, hilarious things—trash-compactor, pop-reference, mash-up, gay-winking, brilliant late-night things." Twist brought his puppets and joined the lineup. In one number, he presented a gorgeous miniature singer: "She looked like one of the Supremes. She flipped her hair and gave attitude and sang French songs. The crowd went apeshit."

The materials for Twist's shows were often scavenged. A rich hunting ground was Lady Bunny's trash can. Bunny was particular, and tossed out a lot of fine stuff. One day, Twist found some harem pants in her discard pile: "She had thrown them away because they had a stain or something. I made curtains—these incredible super-pink pleated curtains—for my theatre." The show started with a recording of Yma Sumac. "Pretty

soon, the theatre would begin to sort of shake and shimmy. Then the curtains were pulled open, and the stage was filled with marabou and ostrich feathers, doing a kind of weird 'Fantasia' dance." He made this production as a birthday present for a friend. He called it "The Birthday Show."

For such performances, the bars gave him maybe fifty dollars and a few free drinks, but he received something else, too: an education in showmanship. "In those situations, you've got to hit it hard, and right away," he says. "The people are drinking, and they're standing up. They've just been disco dancing, and the music stops, and suddenly there's a show. The show better be at least interesting, or the people will start talking, and you'll lose them." In the bar culture he had also found a home: "I love that community. I'm part of it." It was a stronger influence on him, he thinks, than anything else except the Charleville school. It also connected him to the gay theatre and film community—Charles Ludlam, Jack Smith, Taylor Mead, Andy Warhol—that had contributed so much to the impropriety and hilarity of the sixties vanguard.

Because puppetry grew up all around the world, and over such a long time, it has many different technologies. You can get a puppet to move via a rod fixed in its body (as in Japanese Bunraku), or by pulling it around on a stick behind a screen (as in Indonesian shadow puppetry), or by just putting your hand in it and moving it around (this is a hand puppet or glove puppet). Alternatively, you can insert your whole body into the puppet (Big Bird, the horses in "War Horse") or suspend the puppet from the flies, as with the enormous and frightening figure by Julian Crouch which appears during the battle in Philip Glass's opera "Satyagraha." Most puppet-makers employ a combination of techniques. Almost all the Muppets are hand-and-rod. And the hand technique used with them is quite sophisticated, with the thumb below the mouth and the four fingers above the mouth. This way, you can get facial expressions, such as Kermit's pained looks over being green.

To Twist, the king of puppets is the

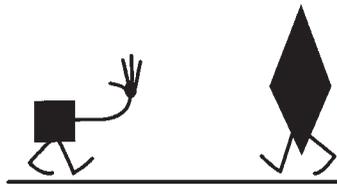
string puppet, the marionette: “It is the most poetic and satisfying.” Marionettes can also solve dramatic problems. In Rinne Groff’s play “Compulsion,” performed two years ago at the Public Theatre, the hero, a writer named Sid Silver, is obsessed with Anne Frank. He repeatedly speaks to her in his mind. If Groff and the director, Oskar Eustis, had used a child actress, this would have been too realistic. Silver’s Anne is supposed to be a vision. Nor would it have helped if the actress had been made spectral, via dry ice, or whatever. That would have been silly. Instead, Anne was represented by a foot-and-a-half-high marionette (designed by Matt Acheson), in a little red dress, who came and stood on Silver’s desk and talked to him—an ideal solution. Marionettes, however, are also the most difficult puppets to maneuver. The farther a puppet is from the controls, the harder it is to manage. A child can handle a glove puppet, but you have to study for a long time in order to operate a marionette.

If puppet technologies have different advantages, they also have virtues in common. Puppets can be very large or very small. (In the Czechoslovak-American Marionette Theatre’s recent “Twelfth Night,” at La Mama, some characters sat in teacups.) They may represent gods or, more often, monsters. Punch, in the traditional Punch and Judy shows, kills people and turns them into sausages. Puppets are allowed to say things that we aren’t. In 2009, “The XYZ Show,” a Kenyan puppet-skit TV program, had an act featuring leading Presidential candidates behind bars in The Hague—a scene that probably would not have been tolerated in a regular show.

But puppets don’t just say things we can’t; they say things we don’t know how to say. Kenneth Gross, in his recent book “Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life,” describes a couple of scenes from the work of Robert Anton, a beloved puppeteer of the nineteen-seventies: “Anton as puppeteer-surgeon sometimes probes his figures with a tiny forceps, pulling out a brain or a heart, or finding inside (in one show) a red stone, a red branch, a red starfish, red feathers, and red fur. In another show, a bag lady who has assembled herself out of a

heap of miniature refuse peers into the puppeteer’s own mouth in search of new objects.”

One day in 1995, Twist was walking down his street, and, as usual, scanning people’s recycling piles, when he spotted a fishtank with a crack in it. He took it to his studio, covered the crack with duct tape, and filled the tank with water. “Then, at night, I’d sit there, by myself, and smoke a little weed and stick



a piece of silk on coat-hanger wire and drag it through the water. And, whoa, it looked fantastic.” He had just received his first grant, about a thousand dollars, from the Jim Henson Foundation. So he went out and bought the biggest tank he could find—a hundred gallons—and started playing with materials other than fabric: “I used bubbles. I used feathers. Almost everything, when you put it under water, is transformed and looks great. You put a garbage bag under water—it looks great. Cotton balls—they’re not so good. But feathers!” He started giving his materials more complicated choreography: dips, glides, plunges, twirls. He knew that he needed to anchor this to music, and he eventually found his piece: Berlioz’s “Symphonie Fantastique.” “It was wildly theatrical—*fantastique*. It was in five movements, so you could have a nice progression. And it was an hour long, which was perfect.”

And so he created his own “Symphonie Fantastique” (1998). In it, the tank was on a platform, in a rectangle cut out of a stage-wide piece of black fabric. The front looked like a big television screen. Behind the tank, there were four puppeteers in wetsuits, scurrying around, dipping this, removing that. The show, as usual with his work, involved a lot of improvised technology. Matthew Gurewitsch, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, reported that he saw a slide carousel controlling lights that shone into the water. But on the glass screen what you saw were visual/kinetic dramas—materializations, confrontations, metamor-

phoses—enacted now not just by pieces of cloth but by ribbons, fringes, sparkles, stencilled designs, and, above all, lighting changes. Even on video (which is the only way I have seen it), the proceedings looked like what the neurons in your brain might do during a complicated metabolic process.

“Symphonie Fantastique” was Twist’s breakthrough. From the *Times*, Ben Brantley (the theatre critic), Bernard Holland (music), and Margo Jefferson (culture) all wrote on it. Brantley claimed that, in its conjunction of the visual and the musical, it offered something “undreamt-of in theatre producers’ philosophies.” Gurewitsch said that it was “the hottest ticket in New York, apart from ‘The Lion King.’” People lined up on the sidewalk—music people, drama people, people with children. Stoners, too, at the late-night show. The show was mentioned on CNN and in *Time*. Before, Twist had worked in a secondary capacity for some distinguished directors: Roman Paska, Theodora Skipitares, Lee Breuer (of Mabou Mines). Now he was no longer in a secondary capacity.

For a number of years, he had presented small things at the downtown theatre HERE, in one of its two respectable-looking ground-floor spaces. But downstairs there was a sort of dusty, gloomy space that could accommodate about seventy-five seats—small, you might say, but ideal for a puppet show. When Twist was creating “Symphonie Fantastique,” the space was being used as a storeroom. For that piece, HERE renovated it. Twist’s grandmother gave the organization some money for this purpose. In recognition, the theatre was named for her: the Dorothy B. Williams Theatre. Twist lent his grandfather’s jazzman puppets, which were installed in glass cases in the lobby. (They are still there.) Mrs. Williams, in a wheelchair, came to cut the ribbon, and the rest of the family came, too. (They were always in attendance at Twist’s big occasions—graduation, premières. And not just his mother and father but his brother and sister and grandparents, too. His parents went on sending checks for a long time.) HERE’s puppetry program—it fields several shows per year—was founded by Twist and is still directed by him.

“Symphonie Fantastique” also ad-

vanced puppetry as an art. Twist, whatever his claims of independence from the avant-garde, says that for a long time he was irked by puppetry's failure to keep up with modernism. He has a broad definition of a puppet. To him, a puppet doesn't have to look like a person or an animal—something specific. Anything inanimate that you animate is a puppet. In other words, puppets could be abstract, and Twist wondered why they so seldom were. He told me, "Kandinsky wrote about that in 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art.' He was jealous of composers, because they didn't have to represent something. So that's kind of where 'Symphonie Fantastique' came from, and I felt that it worked—it really connected with people, in a personal way. Of course, everybody looks at the piece and thinks, Oh, that looks like a hat, or that looks like cigarettes, or whatever. But everyone's idea is different." "The Birthday Show," with the dancing feathers, was a small step toward abstract puppet theatre. "Symphonie Fantastique" was a large step. Lincoln Center came calling.

In 1998, Jane Moss, who was then the vice-president of programming for Lincoln Center, invited Twist to create a show for the Great Performers series. It could be any show he wanted, but it would have to be accompanied by classical music. He decided to do a "Petrushka." This was an ironic choice, because the model, Michel Fokine's 1911 "Petrushka," made for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and set to a commissioned score by Stravinsky, was also a puppet show, but with human dancers representing the puppets. (Vaslav Nijinsky was Petrushka.) In Fokine's story, Petrushka, a Russian Pierrot, falls in love with a beautiful and fatuous Ballerina puppet. The Ballerina is also loved by a third puppet, a stupid, beefy Moor, who eventually tires of Petrushka's interference and runs him through with his scimitar. It's a wistful, seriocomic tale of the world's preference for body over soul.

Twist, in his version—which had its première in 2001, in the Clark Studio Theatre—got rid of Fokine's frame story, about fairgoers watching the puppet show, and pared down the cast to just the three puppets. He thereby gained concentration, and a chance for

abstraction. Periodically, a white scarf flitted across the stage of the little puppet theatre. (I think it represented Petrushka's soul.) On a cloth rising from the floor came a ferocious bear, but only his teeth and claws: a compact image of terror. At the end, Twist engineered a wonderful coup de théâtre. There was a curtain around the perimeter of the auditorium. On the last notes of the score, something ran along the wall behind the curtain. You could see its pleats bulging out. Then a door slammed and there was the sound of footsteps descending stairs. Petrushka's spirit, released from the unkind world, had escaped. Presumably, he was down on the street, hailing a cab. This is the kind of wit and poetry and surprise that Twist routinely produces. "Petrushka" sold out the minute the reviews appeared.

Twist, having achieved abstraction in "Symphonie Fantastique," returned to representation when he felt like it. Between 2002 and 2006, he directed three operas: "Master Peter's Puppet Show" (to Manuel de Falla), "The Sleeping Beauty" (Ottorino Respighi), and "Hansel and Gretel" (Humperdinck). He was the underwater-puppetry consultant for "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban." He also helped out on plays: "We need a giant squid, people would say to me, 'an enormous squid that comes and sticks its tentacles through every orifice of the house and then it grabs one of the characters and takes him away,' and I would say, 'Sure.' Or sometimes they would say, 'We need a bed that can fly upside down, with a cat sitting on it,' and I would have to tell them I couldn't, but I'd give them ideas about how to suggest the thing they wanted."

But he also journeyed back into abstraction. In his 2004 work "Dogugaeshi," based on Japan's Awaji tradition of puppetry, he made a one-hour show that consisted almost entirely of decorated screens, representing palace rooms, seen in vanishing-point perspective. Folding down, rising up, these panels sometimes showed birds and flowers, but most of the time the designs consisted just of lines and arcs, in shapes and colors that went on forever. "Dogu" means set, and "gaeshi" means "flipping."

In the past eight years or so, Twist

has edged into something between realism and abstraction: fantasy. For years, he had been friends with Lee Nagrin, a formidable actress and playwright in the downtown avant-garde of the late twentieth century. At her request—more or less unrefusable (she was old, and dying)—he created with her a very spooky puppet play, “Behind the Lid,” representing visions (Kristallnacht, Hiroshima) that had come to her when, years before, she visited the cave of the Sibyl of Cumae, near Naples. Appropriately, the show was presented in a space (Nagrin’s home) so small and cavelike that only eighteen spectators were admitted. “Behind the Lid” was thrilling, and you couldn’t wait to get out of there.

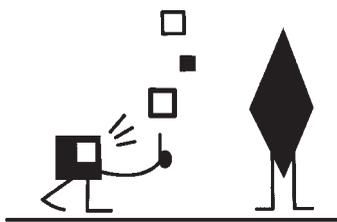
That show’s trafficking in hallucination unquestionably fed into Twist’s next piece, “Arias with a Twist” (2008), which, however, was in a different key. For many years, Joey Arias, a friend of Twist’s, had been a beloved figure on the downtown cabaret scene. Then he left town, and for a number of years was the ringmaster of Cirque du Soleil’s rather dirty show, “Zumanity,” in Las Vegas. In 2008, he returned to New York. To mark the occasion, Arias and Twist planned a show about Arias: a series of fantastic scenes, most of them with songs for him. First, Arias leaves the city, but not because he wants to. He is abducted by aliens, who may have been attracted, in part, by his outfit—bra, panties, garter belt, stockings, spikes, all in black. (Thierry Mugler designed the costume.) When the curtain goes up, the aliens, in their spacecraft, have him spread-eagled inside a blue neon tube and are about to perform some sort of appalling surgery on him. But he escapes, and falls back down to earth, landing in a tropical rain forest.

This set is a triumph. Snakes ooze through the foliage. Sinister pink flowers open stickily. One of them extrudes a microphone, so that Arias can sing. Then he goes back to New York, an even greater triumph of stage design. A whole Manhattan—bright-lit, Deco, the Empire State Building rising maybe seven feet—slides onto the stage. At the end of the show, a gigantic, multilayered white cake appears, with Arias at the top, “riding it,” Twist says unflinchingly. “Arias with a Twist”

could not have been more theatrical—a celebration of stage effects, stage illusion, what you can get away with on a stage—and, after the emotional rigors of “Behind the Lid,” Twist had immense pleasure in doing it. I usually find drag shows exhausting, and I did here, too. But, because of Twist’s contribution, the piece was a joy. I have never seen him more exuberant, overflowing.

Having created this show, with people and places, he has now returned to abstraction. The first performance of “The Rite of Spring” (1913), about an ancient Slavic tribe celebrating the return of the earth’s fertility, reportedly caused a riot. Stravinsky’s revolutionary score banged and crashed; the choreography, by Nijinsky, had the dancers squatting and stamping. Stravinsky said that he modelled the score on the Russian spring: it was like “the whole earth cracking.” This was in accord with one of the leading ideas of the period, primitivism, the representation of humanity’s supposed heart of darkness. Since that première, there have been perhaps two hundred new “Rite of Spring” ballets. Most of them seem to have been as violent as Nijinsky’s dance (which was performed only nine times, at most, and then lost). Or, recently, some have been the opposite: sassily postmodern reactions to those portentous creations.

Twist’s “Rite” will be neither. It will



be nearly abstract, and perhaps even witty: a mélange of ropes, cloths, boulders, screens, scrolls, flats, columns, smoke, and a cardboard object or two. Before the stage action begins, fourteen curtains will fall, one by one, from the flies to the floor (to say, I think, that we’re seeing something distant). The audience will glimpse human beings, in black tie and tails, but only now and then, moving the equipment. Finally, at the end of the piece, much

the same thing will happen as in the original ballet, where the so-called Chosen One danced herself to death as a sacrifice to the god of fertility. Christopher Williams, a charismatic performer who has appeared in many Twist productions (he was Petrushka’s puppeteer), will strip off most of his clothes and perform, without irony, a suicidal dance.

It is a little strange to see Twist sound this note of brutality. I think, though, that a major attraction for him was the tremendous score and the fact that it would be played live, by an A-level band, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s. He has said that now he usually makes his shows as a response to music. (He’d like to do something to Ravel’s “La Valse” and “L’Enfant et les Sortilèges.”)

But, even with a score as glamorous as “The Rite of Spring,” he is faithful to the aesthetic of the old avant-garde theatre. The set and the props look homemade. The smoke machine: there is something endearingly corny about this. Ditto the people creeping around with the boulders. Also, Twist can never stop having fun. The black tie and tails, the dozen curtains, falling twice: this is just a few steps beyond the shows at Jackie 60.

Twist is a child of light. He has had considerable luck in his life: his generous parents, his improbable admission to the Charleville school, his landing in Greenwich Village, in the bar culture. He just got an award of two hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars from the Doris Duke Foundation. He knows he’s had good fortune, and this makes him sweet-tempered. Today, because his shows are bigger than before, he has to hire people to help him. Sometimes they even sculpt and paint the puppets. He regrets this. (“I still love painting the eyelashes.”) But he has never stopped feeling that he has a sort of magical and blessed relation to his material. He tells me about looking into a museum vault on the Japanese island of Awaji and finding the torn screens that became the models for the screens in his “Dogugaeshi.” Among them was a puppet, a fox, white and furry, with nine tails. “He was the protector of the tradition,” Twist said in an interview. “He was waiting there in the vault. He was waiting for me.” ♦