

This essay is written by Linda Yablonsky, commissioned by Creative Capital Foundation, of which Twist was an inaugural recipient.

Basil Twist is an artist destined never to repeat himself. Instead, he is building one of the most ambitious and imaginative bodies of work in contemporary puppetry. Since his award-winning *Symphonie Fantastique* debuted Off-Broadway in 1999, Twist has created pieces for venues as varied as Lincoln Center, new music pioneers The EOS Orchestra, and experimental theater company Mabou Mines, with each work as richly imagined and utterly distinctive as the last.

He is currently cooking up a whole new world in *Behind the Lid*, a collaboration with renowned performance artist Lee Nagrin, which will premiere at The Silver Whale Gallery in the summer of 2007. Twist and Nagrin began developing *Behind The Lid*, a mythologized version of Nagrin's own life story, after following each other's work for some time. "We're equal instigators of the project," the soft-spoken puppeteer explains. "So even though she's writing the text, she has a lot of input from me." Performed by the creators themselves, *Behind The Lid* starts the moment the audience enters, taking over the entire theater space. As Twist describes it, "People will walk into an installation, a kind of happening." Puppets and set pieces will extend beyond the stage and some music and text will be performed from within the audience seating area. Twist's creations for the piece are inspired in part by the Japanese form of Bunraku, in that the puppeteer will be visible as he manipulates his characters.

Defying expectation, even his own, is nothing new for Twist. *Symphonie Fantastique*, which ran for over a year and-a-half at Here's Dorothy B. Williams Theater, was the result of a self-described "three-year experiment in total abstraction." The work was a magical exploration of shape, color, and movement that took place in a giant water tank, in which Twist manipulated lengths of fabric choreographed to the music of Hector Berlioz. *Symphonie Fantastique* went on to win a 1999 Obie Award and a Drama Desk nomination, and toured to San Francisco, Washington D.C., London, and Montreal.

Rather than rest on his laurels and recreate past successes, Twist has covered an immense artistic range since *Symphonie Fantastique*. The New York-based artist recently completed *Petrushka*, commissioned by Lincoln Center, which featured a set of realistic puppets who, according to Twist, "could do ballet with perfect technique." In addition, the puppeteer recently collaborated with the new music ensemble EOS Orchestra and is currently working with Mabou Mines founder Lee Breuer and composer Ushio Troika on a new theater piece, *Red Beads*.

Twist's understanding of his craft comes from long years of study and from a surprising family lineage of do-it yourself visionaries. His grandfather, a bandleader in the Swing era, created puppets that resembled the big names of that time, such as Harry James and Cab Calloway. As Twist explains, "he'd bring puppets onstage and those puppets would conduct the orchestra." Growing up, Twist's mother had a small puppet troupe that performed at local schools and hospitals.

Accepting the mantle of family history came naturally for Twist. He built his first puppets as a child, out of household objects. "You remember those L'eggs's pantyhose containers?" he asks, "I used a lot of those." In college, Twist studied at France's Cole Superior National des Arts de la Marionette, where he is the only American to have been accepted into its three-year training program, and later at the Atlanta Center for Puppetry Arts, where he created his first full-length work.

Discussing the range of his work over time and the recent revival of puppetry in the U.S., Twist is modest. "I feel like I've been part of this renaissance, but I didn't start it," he says. While this may be true, he is likely to be at its center for years to come.