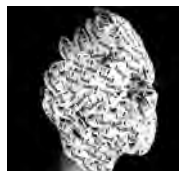


**Gallery** From everyday objects, artist Wilmer Wilson IV finds beauty. **3E**



**The Rant** NBC's "Smash" has so many chances to be diverse, and misses almost all of them. **2E**

**Blogs** A century after the Titanic sank, a National Geographic Society exhibition takes a deep look at the shipwreck. **6E**



STEVEN MENENDEZ

**PUPPETRY WITH A TWIST**

Hey, dummy, the real star is behind the scenes as Basil Twist gets his first retrospective

**A** white fox romps amid the telescoping screens of an antique Japanese art form. A drag queen rockets through a jungle, a sci-fi Manhattan and hell. Abstract colored shapes undulate in water — like a dream of a lava lamp mated with a 1,000-gallon goldfish bowl. This is the eerie, lapidary world of Basil Twist, a 42-year-old who is one of the era's most audacious puppeteers. Since bursting onto the experimental arts scene in the 1990s, Twist has birthed a series of visionary original puppetry compositions, while becoming a go-to collaborator for professionals in theater, music and dance

BY CELIA WREN  
*Special to The Washington Post*

and landing a gig on a Harry Potter movie. Now this French-conservatory-trained iconoclast has earned his first career retrospective: a mini-festival mounted by four local entities. The Shakespeare Theatre Company is hosting "Petrushka" (Friday-March 25), a reinvention of the celebrated 1911 Ballets Russes creation. The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center will present "Symphonie Fantastique" (March 29-31), an acclaimed abstract underwater puppet show. At Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, cross-dressing performer Joey Arias will star in "Arias With a Twist" (April 4-May 6), a cabaret with hallucinatory stage design by the puppeteer. And Studio Theatre will showcase "Dogugaeshi" (April 11-22), a homage to a Japanese stage



GARY PAYNE

**TENTACLES:** Puppeteer Basil Twist, above, worked with drag cabaret star Joey Arias on "Arias With a Twist," top, opening April 4 at Woolly Mammoth Theatre.

TWIST CONTINUED ON E7

**CLASSICAL MUSIC**



BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

**The voice that transports Metro riders**

BY KATHERINE BOYLE

You don't hear it when you step off the train, or after you've scaled the first batch of congested steps, or while you're pushing through the swarm of commuters collecting at the Metro turnstiles. It's on the protracted escalator ride up — the stairs you sprint for exercise — that the faint warbling starts to sound more like melody. The hollow notes break the usual rumblings. The swooshing. The screeching. The "Hello, I'm Janet Napolitano, Secretary of..."

you know the rest. And when you hit the passage adorned with posters of a coy Brian Williams and a man offering you a plate of linguine, you remove your ear buds to hear an aria — opera, interrupting your morning Playlist. A thin, gangly man, just over 6 feet tall, stands at the intersection of four tunnels in the Court House metro. Commuters walk past him doing the same double take. *It's a man? A grown man? Singing that high?* In the register of both woman and 10-year-old boy, Hisham Breedlove, 29, sings opera in Metro stations. A trained

**UNDERGROUND HIGHS:** Hisham Breedlove sings rarely heard countertenor in the Court House station. His busking got him all the way to Carnegie Hall.

countertenor, he's been practicing and honing his craft for almost a decade underground. Now, he makes Court House his primary stage. "It has the best acoustics," says the man who's tested many a station. But on this brisk Friday morning in February, Breedlove — wearing fitted cor-

duroys, a red windbreaker and a black backpack that looks heavier than he does — lays a colorful shawl and a few shiny quarters on the ground "to attract attention." He takes a sip from his bottle of green tea, and begins belting Langston Hughes's "Song to a Dark Virgin," his voice carrying through the tunnels and reaching up to the Cosi on Clarendon Boulevard. A woman dressed in a trench coat and slacks passes by and opens her purse. No change.

METRO SINGER CONTINUED ON E5

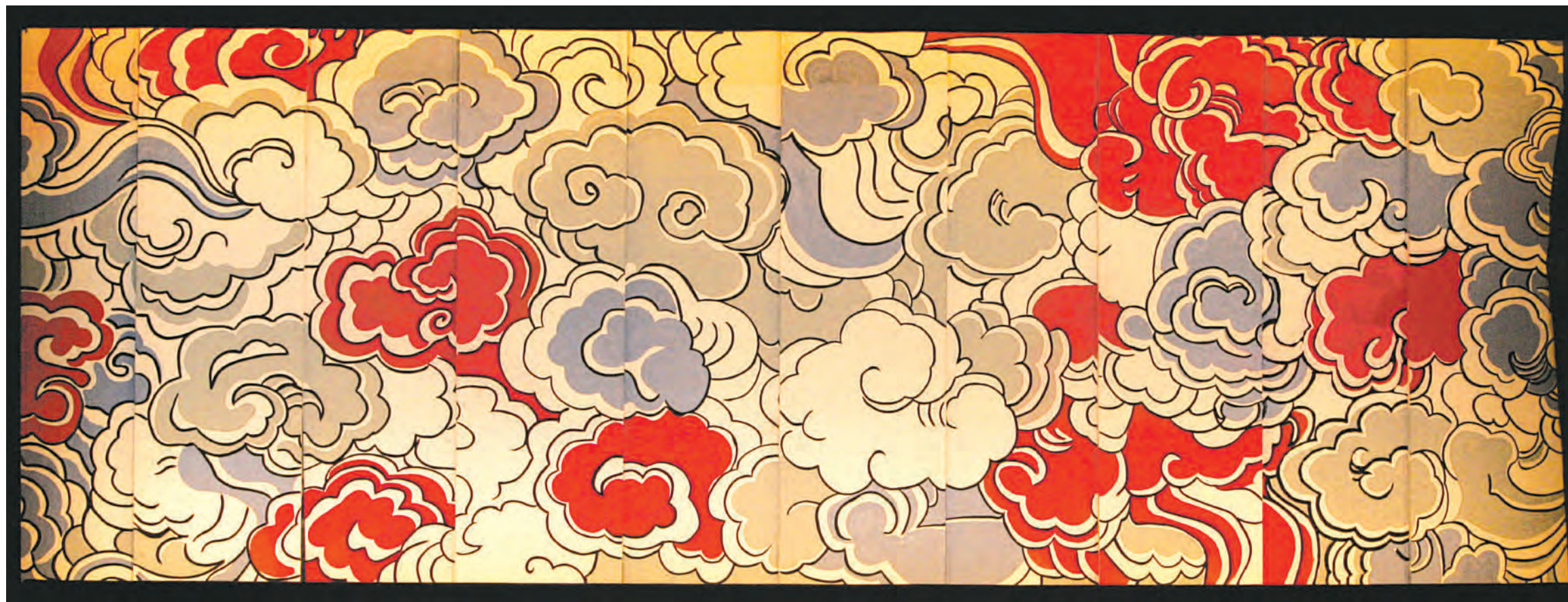
**THEATER**

**'Gypsies': A long journey to D.C., and reconciliation**

BY ROGER CATLIN  
*Special to The Washington Post*

For centuries, they have been figures of fear and fascination, in their colorful clothes and seemingly care-free lives. And while gypsies, as they are called, have left their mark on society with their music and verve, ignorance and stereotypes remain. On reality TV, splashy imported shows of extreme nuptials such as "My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding" are soon to be joined by two shows about American gypsies. In bookstores, "Gypsy Boy" by Mikey Walsh is the first of four gypsy memoirs on bestseller lists in England to be released in the States. And this month at the Kennedy Center, amid a festival of "The Music of Budapest, Prague and Vienna," where gypsy music is represented as deeply ingrained in the region's folk music, a retooled play presented by the Katona Jozsef Theatre of Budapest at the Kennedy Center raises contemporary issues of the Romany people also known as gypsies Thurs-

THEATER CONTINUED ON E4



PHOTOS BY RICHARD TERMINE/TANDEM OTTER PRODUCTIONS

“DOGUGAESHI”: The show, which takes its name from a Japanese technique using sliding screens, will be performed at Studio Theatre by its creator, puppeteer Basil Twist.

# Basil Twist has the world on a string

TWIST FROM E1

tradition. (Twist also contributed puppetry to the Broadway musical “The Addams Family,” landing at the Kennedy Center in July.)

“He has really pushed the boundaries in how puppetry can be integrated in multiple art forms,” says Shakespeare Theatre Managing Director Chris Jennings, the force behind the D.C. celebration.

Twist’s oeuvre has a remarkable range, observes Cheryl Henson, president of the puppetry-focused Jim Henson Foundation: “Each piece is really different from the one before,” she says.

Twist’s affinity for puppets stretches back to his childhood. — He grew up in San Francisco, where his mother, Lynne Twist, headed a local puppet group; she was the daughter of Griff Williams, a puppet-wielding big-band leader of the 1930s and ‘40s.

“I fell squarely into the ‘Sesame Street’ generation and was a total Muppet-head,” Twist recalled recently, speaking by phone from New York. The young boy made puppets and extravagant Halloween costumes, like a purple monster outfit with a neck so long he had to hold an arm over his head. “You can’t very successfully trick-or-treat in a thing like that, because you can’t use your arms or fit through a door,” Twist admits.

Ambivalent about academics, he dropped out of Oberlin College and moved to New York, where he began participating in the Village Halloween Parade. (He still walks a huge spider puppet up a Greenwich Village tower every Oct. 31.) Eventually he enrolled in the prestigious Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette in France.

He left with the conviction “that I had been invested in such a huge way that I had an obligation to try to do bigger, better, new and unique things in puppetry,” he says.

Back in the Big Apple, he performed in small clubs. (A routine with a demonic baby puppet — red claws, glowing eyes and a feather boa — sticks in his mind.) Then, one day, an abandoned water tank he discovered on the street became the conceptual launching pad for “Symphonie Fantastique.”

In this production, audiences find themselves contemplating the front of a custom-made 1,000-gallon aquarium-like tank. In sync with the strains of Hector Berlioz’s music, abstract shapes — some of them vaguely reminiscent of flames, wings or jellyfish — swirl and dance through the liquid, seemingly of their own accord. In reality, hidden puppeteers are maneuvering dyes, fabric,

glitter, feathers and other substances through the water. (Paul Brohan, director of artistic initiatives for the Clarice Smith Center, said that he and his colleagues had to ascertain that the floor of the center’s Kogod Theatre could support the production — a 1,000-gallon tank of water is, after all, pretty darn heavy.)

For Twist, “Symphonie Fantastique” answers the question “What is the essence of puppetry?”

A puppet “doesn’t need to have a face or be telling a story,” he explains. “It just needs to be something that’s lifeless that comes to life.”

“Symphonie Fantastique” premiered at New York’s HERE Arts Center in 1998 and became a sensation, running for two years. After movie director Alfonso Cuarón saw it, he recruited Twist to help create the look of the dementors in “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.”

And “Symphonie Fantastique” also led to the Lincoln Center commission for “Petrushka.” This piece, which draws on Czech and Japanese puppet traditions, tells a story about three magical puppets at a Russian carnival: One of the puppets is a tutu-clad ballerina who executes delicate arabesques and buoyant grand jetés while the clownish Petrushka, who loves her, looks on sadly, and the muscular, turbaned Moor strikes menacing postures with a scimitar. Twist’s nine puppeteers — who sometimes also manipulate billowing banners and other objects of carnival jollity — wear black-hooded costumes and move against a black background, so that they are almost invisible. Meanwhile, identical-twin pianists Irina and Julia Elkina supply a live version of the Stravinsky score.

The premiere of “Petrushka” in 2001 ushered in a new effort by Twist to incorporate live music in his productions — an undertaking that has left its mark on the D.C. festival. The original “Symphonie Fantastique” used a recording; at the Clarice Smith Center, pianist Christopher O’Riley will supply live accompaniment.



“PETRUSHKA”: Instruments played by invisible musicians open the piece, which re-creates the Ballets Russes classic, left. It will play at the Lansburgh Theatre.



“It’s a riot — but an extremely artistic riot,” Woolly Mammoth Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz says.

An anecdote about the genesis of “Arias” provides insight into Twist’s creative process. He finds physical ingredients many of his shows at a warehouse run by Materials for the Arts, a New York City resource that provides surplus and recycled supplies to nonprofits. During the incubation of “Arias,” when Twist’s plans for designs were still inchoate, he discovered a trove of green fabric at the warehouse. “I said, ‘Oh, I’ll make a jungle!’” he recalls.

He also frequents fabric stores and the kind of inexpensive hardware, trinket and art-supply shops that have populated New York’s Canal Street over the years. And he has also given a lot of business to bait shops — which carry hooks, fine strings, swivels and similar items of value to a puppeteer. Online sources are less useful: “I have to be able to touch stuff,” he explains.

Once he has come up with a puppet design, he generally sculpts it in clay; the shape forms the basis for a mold that can be filled with paper mache, rubber, or other substances. He usually starts working on a puppet in his Manhattan studio but may finish up at a rehearsal or performance space before a show’s premiere. Interns and freelance associates help out on large projects, under his supervision, but, he says, “I am very hands-on. A lot of things I do on my own.”

For Twist, all the festival offerings — indeed, all puppet works — share an ability to communicate with audiences on a near mystical level.

When a puppeteer animates an object, he says, the moment “strikes us in a really powerful, primitive place that’s thousands of years old. I know this sounds really heavy, but I think it’s true: There’s this part of us that believes in the spirits in the rocks and trees and water. We see life everywhere.” Tapping into that primal belief, he theorizes, puppetry connects us “to something really powerful about what it is to be alive.”

style@washpost.com

Wren is a freelance writer.

#### BASIL TWIST FESTIVAL

“Petrushka,” at the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Lansburgh Theatre, Friday-March 25. 202-547-1122. [www.shakespearetheatre.org](http://www.shakespearetheatre.org).

“Symphonie Fantastique” at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, March 29-31. 301-405-2787. [www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu](http://www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu).

“Arias With a Twist,” at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, April 4-May 6. 202-393-3939. [www.woollymammoth.net](http://www.woollymammoth.net).

“Dogugaeshi” at Studio Theatre, April 11-22. 202-332-3300. [www.studiotheatre.org](http://www.studiotheatre.org)

TO SEE VIDEO of Basil Twist’s production of “Petrushka,” go to [washingtonpost.com/theater](http://washingtonpost.com/theater).



“SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE”: The underwater abstract show was Twist’s first hit. He says puppetry “just needs to be something that’s lifeless that comes to life.”