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Basil Twist, "The Araneidae Show" at The Jim Henson International Festival.

Photo: Richard Termine

and bedsheets - what fodder for dreams! - and invite, even require, us to participate in the fantasy if it is to come to life. And come to life it does, magnificently, and intelligently. The sets appear like giant origami pop-ups; the pirate ship is created simply but elegantly from strung-up bed sheets, with an ironing board as the gang-plank.

This inspiration from Japanese paper-folding is probably no accident. To animate his puppets, Breuer uses the visible-manipulation technique inspired by - and often misdescribed in this country as - Japanese Bunraku Theatre. But whereas others merely borrow from this aspect of the Bunraku Breuer also makes inspired use of the Bunraku narrator, who speaks for all the puppets in a traditional performance.

The omnipresent narrator here is Karen Kandel who - for audiences familiar with his P of A national festival performances - is David Simpich in a dress. Like Simpich, Kandel is an actor with a talent for character voices that is simply spooky. Kandel is Peter and Wendy and Mr. Darling and Hook and Smee and all the others - and all without any compromise. Equally impressive, she moves flawlessly between the role of omnipresent and omniscient narrator/story-teller and that of the characters. Her virtuoso performance is the glue that holds this production together. And she is sufficient proof that puppets can indeed "do" dialog (to answer a classic puppeteers' debate) - provided, that is, that the actors behind them can, too. Those actors, of course, include the superb ensemble cast, who perform seamlessly despite the added challenge of manipulating puppets that are voiced elsewhere.

Virtually every aspect of this production is right - including the use of film during the flying sequence, the simplicity and primitiveness of hand-shadow wolves to suggest the dangers of Never Land, Nana dog's reappearance in the guise of the crocodile, even Peter's sudden rage at the thought of losing Wendy and the boys. The long exception, notable because it's a discordant note in an otherwise harmonious whole, is the request that the audience pull a songsheet out of its programs to sing to the poisoned Tinker Bell. It's a turn on the familiar "clap if you believe in fairies" bit that could have been dispensed with.

This is no *Peter Pan* for children - although it's booked for an engagement at the child-prone New Victory - but rather for the lost child in us all. And it is a most welcome treat and revelation.

Mark Levenson

Basil Twist
New York

THE ARANEIDAE SHOW
September 16-17, Public

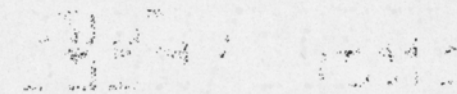
Basil Twist's Araneidae Show at the International Puppetry Festival can almost be described as Houdini Puppet Theatre. The audience turns to each other after the applause exclaiming "How did he do that!"

The evening begins with a rousing curtain warmer called *Angel's Tarantella* where an angel puppet with a violin floats down into the small proscenium stage. She proceeds to play with demonic concentration a tarantella which literally raises her into the air at moments. Twist's puppeteering precision fills this woman with emotion as she leans into the more lively strains with humorous and recognizable intensity.

The second piece, *Stickman*, explores the relationship between puppet and puppeteer with a beautifully-wrought, wooden marionette man. As he floats in and struggles with standing and walking on the human plane, we become entranced by his subtle exquisite movements. You begin to wonder how many strings are on this marionette as he raises a wrist, a hip, to stand, only to again fall flat. Finally, the puppeteer's hand reaches compassionately down into the stage to lift out his exhausted creation.

Then, we are treated to the title piece, *The Araneidae Show*. It is a whirlwind, dream landscape of constantly shifting walls, spiders, horny cats and three black cabaret singers with more aplomb than the Supremes. It is in this piece we discover Twist's Houdini element as walls move while cats hump, spiders appear as the cats stalk until the stage actually begins to spin and lift in the air. The audience at one point literally gasps out loud as the cats reappear, and in an instant, their fur falls away, revealing two of the cabaret singers dressed in feathers and full-length glitter. Twist must be using every spare appendage and possibly has learned how to puppeteer with his nose. We follow this gifted puppeteer through his dream world from one strange, haunting image to the next. When he comes out for his solo bow, we check our program in disbelief. There really isn't somebody else back there?

—Annie Evans



Basil Twist is a rising star in the New York theater world, and it was a great privilege to be able to see his solo show. He has a wonderful ability to tell

stories without using words. His mastery of puppet design and construction as well as manipulation and other theater skills is impressive. Above all, this young artist has sensitivity, vision, and a willingness to really give himself to his audience.

Though there were three pieces in Twist's performance, I will concentrate on *The Araneidae Show*, the longest of the three as it is illustrative of the quality and style of his work. One of the most arresting sections of the story was told not only without words, but virtually without puppets! We find ourselves looking at two old brick buildings with an alley between them. The buildings, incomprehensibly, begin to move. They turn, join, part, shift and rotate leading the audience ever deeper into a maze of deserted passages of a city asleep (at the risk of sounding like I am gushing, I'll just say that the effect of all this was remarkable). A door opens, then suddenly closes again. We move on. Somewhere nearby a red light is flashing. Two cats are screwing (and noisily!). Later, the cats are fighting over a spider. Before we know it, we are *inside* of the spider's web. A red velvet curtain parts to reveal another red velvet curtain. That in turn is parted to reveal another, and another, and another - each in turn smaller than its predecessor. The show is filled with these surprising images. None of them are gratuitous. All contribute to the unfolding story - a fevered vision communicated with great imagination and humor.

Twist's mastery of puppet design and construction techniques is clear, and, as he is a graduate of the three year professional training program at Charleville-Mézières, France, one might expect this. Even before that training, though, as an intern at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, his talent was obvious. This was a show with more than simply terrific puppets - the lighting design, the sound, the manipulation so skilled that experienced puppeteers in the audience found themselves scratching their heads and asking, "How did he do that?" Again, none of these elements was used for its own sake; everything was in the service of the story.

Years ago, I remember hearing Albrecht Roser, the great German puppet artist, say that, in his opinion, primary among the puppeteer's responsibilities was that he/she truly "*muss von sich geben*," must really be able to give of himself (or herself). Perhaps it is this quality which makes Basil Twist's show Art and not just hollow virtuosity. He gives to his audience something from deep inside and makes us care.

- Andrew Periale