

At Studio Theatre, Basil Twist's alluring scenery changes invoke Japanese tradition

By [Nelson Pressley](#) April 13, 2012

Puppeteer [Basil Twist](#) loves the old-fashioned business of raising the curtain. That's how each of the four eye-opening shows in this month's festival of Twist's work has begun, and in "Dogugaeshi" he takes the act to new heights.

The title refers to the screens used for backdrops in a traditional form of Japanese puppetry, but for the inventive Twist, the scenery is more than enough to sustain a 60-minute show. In the small fourth-floor space at Studio Theatre, Twist unveils vista after vista, with handmade screens sliding or flipping into place.

Twist chronicles a journey — a ship bobbing on the sea, silhouetted figures trekking up a hill — and includes video of Japanese people recalling dogugaeshi performances. A shaggy white fox puppet takes a special interest and is good for sly laughs, popping up in unexpected places.

But the show is mainly the shifting screens and their alluring pictures of interiors and abstractions, managed out of view by Twist and three puppeteers. Something like an earthquake seems to rock the whole set (which is only about 15 feet wide and 8 feet tall) and tatter the screens, giving you the sense that this highly specialized art form is in trouble.

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The finale, though, is a long, exhilarating succession of screens shifting and receding in forced perspective that eventually makes it seem as if you're peering a thousand feet into the distance. It's a riveting display of the tradition, and a marvelous act of affection.

As usual, Twist's visuals are accompanied by live music, with Yumiko Tanaka playing the three-stringed samisen. Also true to form, at least during this festival, Twist allows the audience backstage when the show is over, revealing the apparatus and answering questions. The transparency is appealing, and the peek behind the curtain doesn't diminish the magic one bit.

Dogugaeshi

Directed by Basil Twist. Sound, Greg Duffin; projection design, Peter Flaherty; lighting design, Andrew Hill. With puppeteers Kate Brehm, Jonothon Lyons, Jessica Scott and Basil Twist. Through April 22 at the Studio Theatre, 1501 14th St. NW. Call 202-332-3300 or visit studiotheatre.org.

First Post byline, 1992; covering theater for the Post since 1999. His book "American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice" came out in 2014. [🐦 Follow @nelsonpressley](#)

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