

THEATER REVIEW; Wash Cycle Dreams, Via Berlioz

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By BEN BRANTLEY

It all sounds about as exciting as staring at a glass-sided washing machine. Pieces of cloth unfurling in the water? Floating fringes of threads and white sheets swathed in bubbles?

True magic, however, turns the ordinary into the sublime, and there's no denying the presence of magic in the puppeteer Basil Twist's extraordinary interpretation of Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique." This is a work that takes place entirely in a 500-gallon aquarium, without the visible presence of anything remotely human. Or, for that matter, animal-like. If you taxed the imagination, you could describe the figures that move to the strains of Berlioz's great musical fever dream as looking vaguely like the laundry of a Folies-Bergere dancer. But that's really stretching it.

That Mr. Twist's latest work, which inaugurates the "Dream Music Puppetry Program" at the Here theater complex in SoHo, eludes metaphors is an indication of just how original it is. His "Symphonie Fantastique" is a gratifying reminder that there are still things undreamt of in theater producer's philosophies. It also comes as close to anything I've seen to finding physical equivalents to the abstractions of classical music.

Music, of course, isn't a visual medium. And as sensual as it can be, it is definitely not of the flesh. But that hasn't stopped artists as different as Balanchine and Walt Disney from trying to capture it in earthly terms. That's not what Mr. Twist is aiming for. There are no balletic hippopotamuses or anthropomorphic mops a la Disney's "Fantasia" in this production. Nor is there anything approaching a story-ballet plot.

That would have been the obvious way to go with "Symphonie Fantastique," conceived as a despairing love poem by Berlioz to an Irish actress and for which the composer wrote an annotative narrative that moves from a pastoral idyll to an opium delirium to a witches' sabbath. Mr. Twist, who has created memorable personality puppets for Theater Couture's "Tell-Tale" and Mabou Mines's "Peter and Wendy," could certainly have depicted this story in amusingly literal terms, had he chosen.

Instead, he has created his own Platonic vocabulary out of light, water and substances that range from Mylar strips to feathers. When the miniature velvet curtains part in the new Dorothy B. Williams Theater at Here, what the audience sees is the 30-by-40-inch opening of a glass tank filled with water. The show that follows plays on the transformational powers of water on light and movement; it conjures the sense of music as an elemental force in which everything we see

occurs. Oh, dear. This all sounds awfully precious and high-falutin', doesn't it? That's not the experience of watching "Symphonie Fantastique." In fact, you'll probably find yourself smiling all the way through it. Mr. Twist and his team of assistant puppeteers (who remain unseen) manipulate pieces of fabric (and fiber-optic cords and plastic cutouts) into an astonishing variety of compositions. Sometimes they bring to mind what you see under a microscope; at other times, they suggest time-lapse photography of blossoming flowers.

All this is no mere head trip, no random turning of a kaleidoscope. As the symphony progresses through its five movements, and certain images recur with variations, it becomes apparent that Mr. Twist is conjuring a visual approximation of Berlioz's motifs and showing how themes evolve and mutate in the piece. There's wit here that goes beyond words, and it doesn't pall during the hour it takes to perform the piece.

It is also to Mr. Twist's credit that his images don't get in the way of your appreciation of the symphony when you hear it afterward. His visual portrait, so startling and immediate in the performance, seems, in the memory of it, to have been reclaimed by Berlioz's music. The interpretation is that seamless. It's as if you had been listening with your eyes.

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