



“The hour-long show felt like the great first act of a disappointing play.”

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THEATER REVIEW

A master at pulling the strings



BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

DANCING ON A WIRE: Portrayed by puppets, the Ballerina and the title character of "Petrushka," adapted from the classic ballet, come to life on the stage of the Lansburgh.

BY PETER MARKS

Was ever a charmer of fabric and wire more aptly named than Basil Twist? This master twister of stuff you find in hobby drawers and hardware stores into winsome shapes and figures seems to have ordained an appellation as beguiling as the art he makes and the images he creates.

Twist is, in the broadest sense, a puppeteer. I know, I know: Tell friends they simply have to see a puppet show, and

Basil Twist's 'Petrushka' demonstrates that the art of puppetry is far more than child's play

you're likely to get those pretend-to-be-fascinated looks, followed by declarations like, "Oh, gee, would love to, but my car needs an oil change that day."

So let me try to break down your resistance. The work of the New York-based puppeteer — on stages in Washington and its environs between now and

May 6, in the first Twist festival ever organized — is anything but the fodder of a silly intermission after birthday cake and pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. It's kid-friendly fare, for sure: Twist was, logically enough, a consultant on underwater puppetry for "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban." His eclectic, liquid style of

puppetry is a whimsical and vigorous shake-up of dramatic paints and music, serving both mood and story. What "Fantasia" is to cartoons, Basil Twist seems to be to animation in three dimensions.

The shapely rigor of his approach is apparent in the first festival offering, Twist's ravishing adaptation of "Petrushka," the Stravinsky ballet choreographed by Michel Fokine in 1911 for the Ballets Russes in Paris. Compressed into a taut

THEATER REVIEW CONTINUED ON C

Puppetry with a special Twist

THEATER REVIEW FROM C1

Twist's abstracted take on a later Stravinsky work, "Sonata for Two Pianos." With the introduction of the Elkina twins and the start of the sonata's three movements, Twist lifts a screen to reveal a series of geometric patterns that seem to float within the frame. Some of the forms — oblong shapes, arranged like wheel spokes, or broken segments of a circle — join and retract, as if guided by the music. At other times, they remain suspended in less organized configurations, glowing all the while in Andrew Hill's admirably understated lighting design.

The effect is soothing, though a bit monotonous. Listening to the sonata in this way doesn't come across as an ideal amplification of the experience; the visual element, for me, tended to flatten rather than intensify it.

The evening's main course draws on a far heftier bag of Twistian tricks. Puppets themselves are flattened things until they are administered the blessing of human touch. His "Petrushka" is a paean to this notion, a clever twist on the ballet's

conceit. Here, Stravinsky's rhythms work giddily in concert with the puppeteer's to convey the world of the ballet; his jack-in-the-box onion domes lend personality even to the Russian architecture.

Oversize, disembodied hands materialize at intervals to strum mandolins, pump accordions or simply organize themselves into jaunty choreography of their own; fabric glides through the air to the composer's billowing compositions, and flocks of chickens get a serendipitous cameo or two.

The evocation of the three main puppet-characters — costumed in eye-catching exotic raiment by a "puppet couture" specialist identified in the program as Mr. David — is arrestingly achieved and culminates in the athletic marvels of the side-by-side-by-side Russian Dance. One of Twist's hallmarks is his ability to provoke emotional responses to materials in fairly raw form, such as textiles. When he extends his talent to conveying the beauty of ballet, you don't necessarily expect him to evoke refined dance technique.

Yet with the aid of ballet captain Christopher Williams, he has managed to reproduce some elements of that technique, and have the puppets approximate

some of the elegant extensions and spins that human dancers execute.

It's an impressive theatrical coup. After the official opening night performance Friday, Twist gave the audience a quick peek behind the curtain, showing us the Russian Dance again, this time with all of the puppeteers visible. Watching their exquisite choreography deepened one's appreciation for "Petrushka" — they should provide this instructive encore every night — and served as a great teaser for the festival productions waiting on strings in the wings.

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PETRUSHKA

Music by Igor Stravinsky. Created and directed by Basil Twist. Pianists, Julia and Irina Elkina; lighting, Andrew Hill; puppet couture, Mr. David; ballet captain, Christopher Williams; technical director, Michael Kerns. Performed by Lindsay Abromaitis-Smith, Stefano Brancato, Kate Brehm, Keri Lewis, Jonathon Lyons, Brendan McMahon, Marc Petrosino, Lake Simons and Williams. Through Sunday at Lansburgh Theatre, 450 Seventh St. NW. Visit www.shakespearetheatre.org or call 202-547-1122.