



The Wall Street Journal

A Puppeteer's 'Rite' of Passage

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Chapel Hill, N.C.

Basil Twist has described his "Rite of Spring" as a "ballet without dancers." As the puppeteer states in his program note for the "Rite of Spring at 100" festival at Carolina Performing Arts, he borrowed this description from Italian futurist Giacomo Balla, who similarly identified his dancerless 1917 Ballets Russes staging of "Fireworks," Igor Stravinsky's 1909 symphonic poem.

Last Friday, "Fireworks" opened the two-performance triple-bill called "Basil Twist, Puppeteer, With Orchestra of St. Luke's." The approximately four-minute curtain-raiser led Mr. Twist's program neatly. Fixed at the center of the blue-curtained Memorial Hall proscenium, the 2013 "Fireworks" offered a luminous evocation—in striking blacks, whites and grays—of Balla's full-color cubistic landscape of plains and pinwheels. Mr. Twist's twist on the original takes Balla's basic design and animates it as if it were a little

garden of geometric solids with inner lives of their own. It gently unfolds by way of shifting moves and changing lighting into a scene reminiscent of a Buck Rogers world, with its sharpest element taking off as if rocket propelled.

To proceed with his finely calibrated show, Mr. Twist kept things at the edge of the stage. He created a stage-wide frieze in front of the house curtain for 11 of his puppeteers to animate the program's second work, Stravinsky's 1920 "Pulcinella" (here in its later suite form). The subtly lighted, black-clad men and women became hazy shadows as they manipulated lengths of white tubing that might have been enlarged pieces of uncooked pasta. (Ayumu Poe Saegusa's lighting throughout gave masterly incandescence to every element it touched.)

What begins as a lineup of manipulated individual tubes, at times as if escaped from a pipe organ, climaxes in the arrangement and rearrangement of its parts—now as starbursts, then as galloping horses, and again into male and female stick figures—that tell of the Pulcinella and Pimpinella characters in the music's commedia dell'arte scenario. Mr. Twist shows his man and woman to us as a courting couple and as a duo performing a stately gavotte, as indicated in Stravinsky's score, to which the tickled Carolina audience expressed audible delight.

"The Rite of Spring," the bill's *pièce de résistance*, was the evening's most expansive creation, using the stage's full dimensions. Speaking at a postperformance talk-back, the puppeteer noted how he eagerly took advantage of the stage's full 44-foot depth outfitted with an elaborate rigging system in place for hanging sets.

Accompanied, as were all the works on the program, by memorable performances from the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Brad Lubman, Stravinsky's "Rite" was given a colorful orchestration by Jonathan McPhee.

Mr. Twist's rendering of music, once thought to be outrageously

brutal and assaulting, proceeds in eye-filling and variously articulated stages with consistently nonfigurative elements. These range from breathtaking and extensive walls of cascading silk, silhouetted and stiff beamlike pieces, bolts of fabric and lumps of crumpled material, all artfully maneuvered by puppeteers.

Greg Meeh is credited for the special effects and Daniel Brodie for projection design, all of which work in loving concert with Mr. Saegusa's lighting. The black, white and gray palette for this landscape, populated by none of the tribal figures featured in Vaslav Nijinsky's original version of "Rite," is elaborated along the way by spreading-ink-stain projections and by trajectories of smoke rings that appear shot from a cannon. Art-historical references to such abstract painters as Franz Kline, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko pass through the stage pictures.

For the "Danse Sacrale," Stravinsky's climactic dance to the death, Mr. Twist tweaks his creation "without dancers" by capping it with one featured dancer. A lone, single color—spring green—frames a nearly naked Christopher Williams, who fearlessly jumps and turns wildly at the center of the stage before clambering precariously up a rope ladder toward the top of the stage. There, he collapses backward as Stravinsky's final, bleating note cues the escape from within the proscenium space of a silky wisp of pure-white fabric, sending it like a comet into the auditorium ceiling. Though the choreographic details of Mr. Williams' dance up until this point seem more predictable than profound, the unleashed fabric magically caps this show.

At 100, Stravinsky's "Rite" has become Mr. Twist's brave new world of unforgettable effects.

Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.