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'Dogugaeshi' stunning, enchanting

By **TRESCA WEINSTEIN**, Special to the Times Union
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TROY — Basil Twist's brilliant and beautiful "Dogugaeshi," on view through Sunday at EMPAC, is at once a stunning visual tour de force, an enchanting exploration of the play between illusion and reality, and a surprisingly poignant reflection on the clash between ancient and contemporary culture.

The piece takes its name from a 400-year-old Japanese stage technique in which sliding paper screens ("fusuma-e"), depicting animals or landscapes, slide away in rapid succession to reveal new backdrops. Twist, a third-generation puppeteer based in New York City, is known for his integration of puppetry with live music; in his 1998 work "Symphonie Fantastique," pieces of fabric and plastic "danced" underwater to Hector Berlioz's composition of the same name.

Twist saw a link between his work in that piece and the ancient art of dogugaeshi (literally "set change"), which he first encountered in 1997. With this new piece, he brings the form into the 21st century by seamlessly integrating video projection and recorded sound, blended with live music by Yumiko Tanaka, who plays the traditional stringed instrument known as the shamisen.

Within a rectangular space whose dimensions are always shifting, one tableau after another appears and dissolves. Elaborately painted screens slide open, flip and overlap each other, tweaking our sense of depth and perspective. A silhouetted boat rocks on a wave, tiny figures ascend a mountain, panels of fabric that look like beaten gold slide back and forth across the stage. A single puppet — a flirtatious white dragon — inhabits the changing spaces, moving easily between them and dancing coyly to the twang of the shamisen.

At one point, it all begins to deconstruct: tatami screens rip and fall, and sheaves of paper flutter free as this carefully ordered world is threatened. We hear a radio moving between stations and static, and then black skyscrapers rise before us, along with images of the bridge built over the Naruto Straits, connecting the city of Shikoku with the island of Awaji, where dogugaeshi originated. The metaphor is clear, and Twist drives it home with video footage of older Japanese women remembering the puppet shows of their youth.

It's a relief when he returns us to the serenity of the ancient form, which takes on an almost ceremonial feel as the sliding screens, glowing in candlelight, continue to reveal new images: two tigers in a bamboo forest, a succession of intricately patterned designs, flowers, the sun and, finally, Mount Fuji in a snowstorm.

Rather than leaving us with this majestic landscape as his closing image, however, Twist slides open one door, and then another and another, to reveal at last a glowing rectangle of light that, koan-like, contains nothing — and thus everything.

Tresca Weinstein is a freelance writer from Canaan and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

Performance review

"Dogugaeshi"

Where: RPI's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), 110 Eighth St., Troy