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# Water World

*Basil Twist Gets Wet*

**BY GERARD  
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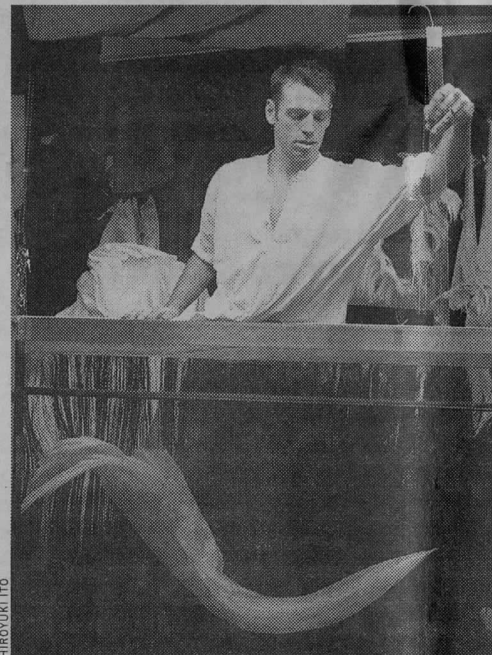
**W**hile Julie Taymor has established a new vocabulary for the Broadway musical by weaving magic in full view of the audience in *The Lion King* uptown, puppeteer Basil Twist is about to create phantasmagoric illusions from behind the scenes in *Symphonie Fantastique* at HERE, downtown. Both revolutionaries are reinventing their craft by turning to the past. The black-clad actor “flying” a flock of birds attached to the end of a long stick in the hit Disney musical is using a technique derived from 18th-century Japanese Bunraku theater. Twist is returning to a different tradition—where a hidden manipulator animates puppets on a marionette stage. Only he’s added a couple of, well, twists of his own: His show is totally abstract and his stage is a 500-gallon tank of water.

“I want to do something completely nonfigurative, where the shapes and the forms don’t represent anything other than what they are,” says the San Francisco-born 28-year-old. In *Symphonie Fantastique* (opening May 19) Twist is attempting a dreamlike visual extravaganza set to the music of Hector Berlioz’s 19th-century composition

of the same title. Think of the “Toccata and Fugue” section in Disney’s *Fantasia*, but performed live with sorcerer Twist and three apprentices getting themselves very wet.

Twist is a third-generation puppeteer: his grandfather, Griff Williams, was a big-band leader in the ’30s and ’40s who incorporated string puppets into his nightclub act; his mother performed puppet theater at children’s parties. Puppets were an obsession from a very early age. Dropping out of college in 1989, Twist moved to New York to learn the craft. He spent three years in France, graduating from the International School of Puppetry in Charleville, but his initial training was here in New York, working with a group called the Puppet People and apprenticing with Taymor, who at the time was experimenting on the fringes of Off-Broadway. This month both Taymor and Twist were among four nominees for the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Puppet Design.

Twist’s nomination was for the visual effects in *Tell-Tale*, Theatre Cou-



**Tank you very much: Puppeteer Twist readies his underwater *Symphonie Fantastique*.**

ture’s wacky Edgar Allan Poe-inspired spoof starring drag queens Sherry Vine and Jackie Beat. Even as the divas chewed up the scenery onstage, Twist, hidden underneath the stage, literally stopped the show with a spectacular

Busby Berkeley-like number in which disembodied hands danced madly to Sondheim’s “Losing My Mind.” Twist delights in coming up with ingenious mechanisms: for the Theatre Couture production *Kitty Killer!*, he devised a dead cat with rigor mortis out of a black folding umbrella that unfurled spectacularly on cue. The giant spider that scales the tower of Jefferson Market Library every Halloween is another Twist creation.

The audience views *Symphonie Fantastique* through a window in the aquarium, but *The Little Mermaid* this ain’t. “The water is simply a technique for creating a completely other universe,” Twist says. He explains that the viewer loses a sense of scale and time when watching something in water.

“I also discovered all these amazing things you can do with light in the water,” he adds gleefully. He isn’t giving away too much before the show opens and hints at some “really strange illusions” in store. Says Twist, “I hope people will see it as a new invention.”