

THE WORLD ON A STRING

by Michael Giltz

Imagine what it would be like to see a movie for the very first time. That sense of revelation—of an entirely new art form bursting with possibility and enchantment—will soon be felt by thousands of people: “Puppet virgins” in the words of puppeteer Janie Geiser.

The 1996 International Festival of Puppet Theatre, presented by the Jim Henson Foundation, is not your father’s Howdy Doody. Seen here previously in 1992 and 1994, the Festival now encompasses over 140 performances by 22 troupes at five theatres. Naturally, New York artists will be amply represented. Here’s a glimpse at three of the Big Apple’s best.

Basil Twist: Behind The Scene

When Basil Twist performs his one-man piece, “The Araneidae Show and Other Pieces,” he’s curled up behind his set, hidden from the audience’s view, using everything he can—his hands, his feet, his hips—to manipulate puppets, change scenery, move around props and bring a story to life. “If I could wiggle my ears, maybe I could it put in some more tricks,” he says.

How did he get into this position?

Seventeen years ago, Twist got a triple dose of the magic of puppetry. For his tenth

birthday, Twist’s grandmother gave him the string puppets his late grandfather used in his act as a bandleader. Later that year, on a

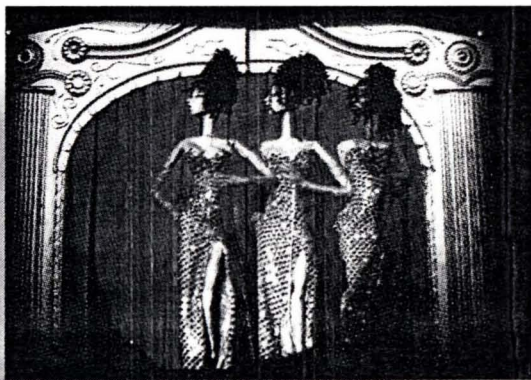
trip to New York, Twist’s mom wrangled a visit to the headquarters of Muppet master Jim Henson.

But the big event, that same trip, was when his family

went to see the great French puppeteer Philippe Genty perform, albeit to a near empty theatre. “It was very French, very existential,” he recalls. “In one piece, he came out with a clown puppet, the typical sad French clown. And the puppet looked up and saw he was a puppet and was so distraught he decided he would break the strings. And he reached up and pulled and broke off all his strings and collapsed in a heap on the floor. I’d only seen the Muppets basically, so it was nothing like I’d seen before.”

Completely fascinated, Twist went back the next night and his fate was sealed. Since then, he’s studied hard—in Paris and Atlanta—and worked anywhere he could. Since moving here four years ago, he’s plied his magic on the streets, in nightclubs, Off-Broadway and with other puppeteers.

However, for the 50-minute-long “The Araneidae (pronounced R-N-A-day)



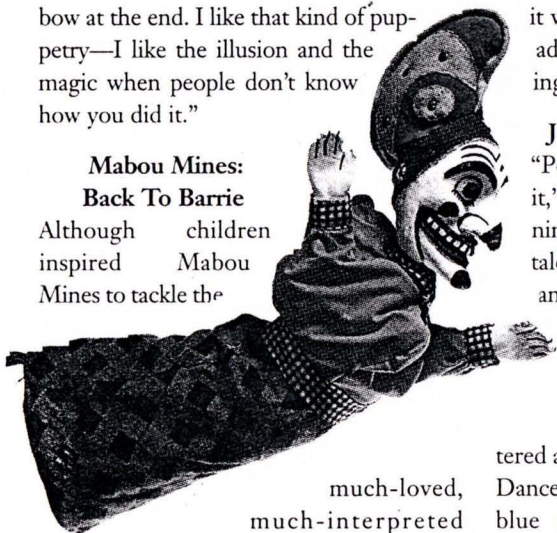
Show," Basil Twist will be where he really wants to be: Out of the spotlight.

"When I was a child I was really shy, and I know that I took up puppetry because I could hide and still impress people," he says, laughing. "And it's still that way. You won't see me at all until I come out for a bow at the end. I like that kind of puppetry—I like the illusion and the magic when people don't know how you did it."

Mabou Mines:

Back To Barrie

Although children
inspired Mabou
Mines to tackle the



much-loved,
much-interpreted
tale of Peter Pan, their "Peter
and Wendy" is designed, much like
James Barrie's classic book, to speak to par-
ents, even more so than their offspring.

"When we first started thinking of doing it in 1989, our set designer, Julie Archer had just had a baby and my son was five," says adapter/producer Lisa Lorwin. "Being a parent, you get to be in your own childhood again, and then you have to lose it all over again when your child grows up. That's why the story had a great deal of intensity at that moment."

To capture that lyric intensity, "Peter and Wendy" combines traditional Japanese bunraku puppetry (in which three people operate each character and a separate person acts as narrator) with shadow puppetry, children's action figures and a score by Scottish fiddler Johnny Cunningham.

As Lorwin has learned during previous performances, notably at Spoleto, those expecting Mary Martin or Robin Williams may be a bit surprised. "It was interesting to watch children with parents, because sometimes the parents would begin to look a little nervous when they were suddenly aware it wasn't 'Peter Pan,'" she says. "This is adult theatre. It's not about big, sweeping, fast-paced adventure."

Janie Geiser: Finder of Evidence

"People are really quiet when they see it," says Janie Geiser of her award-winning "Evidence of Floods," a noirish tale of a woman fleeing her abusive husband. "They almost feel like they have to walk quietly."

Unlike traditional staged works, "Evidence of Floods" consists of eight different sets scattered around a darkened room—this one at Dance Theater Workshop—with pools of blue lights as the only illumination. Audiences file from set to set, where the individual puppeteers perform their scene over and over again, as a taped score plays in the background.

"It becomes this kind of Zen thing and something new happens every time," she says. "With puppets, as well as people, you can't predict every move they make."

With its serious subject matter and subtle allusions (the cop chasing the woman whistles that infamous Robert Mitchum tune from "The Night of the Hunter"), "Evidence" is certainly a far cry from "Sesame Street." That makes it doubly wonderful, she says, that the Henson Foundation is presenting it.

"A new audience for puppetry is growing because of this festival," she says. "It's brought visibility to the form. I tell them, 'It's really worked.'" ★