

started hacking out what looked like bullet casings. These were fossils of belemnites, squidlike creatures that also went extinct at the close of the Cretaceous.

When the sun began to set, the group, by now covered in mud, headed north on Route 34 to an ice-cream parlor. The shop, in yet another strip mall, was so small that everyone had to eat in the parking lot. The conversation turned from the past to the future. What would remain of today's New Jersey sixty-five million years from now?

"All of this is what we'd call ephemera," Landman said, his gaze taking in the cars, the strip mall, a nail salon, and a bowling alley. "Geology, if nothing else, gives you a perspective on time."

"What will get preserved?" Garb asked, as a mother and daughter left the ice-cream parlor, cones in hand. "Probably not much."

—Elizabeth Kolbert

THE BOARDS STRINGS ATTACHED



Since 1994, the puppeteer Basil Twist has worked out of an impossibly tiny basement studio on Leroy Street. "People usually come here and think it's going to be like Geppetto's workshop—eyes staring at you," he said the other day. If you recall John Cusack's character from "Being John Malkovich," you have some idea of what Twist makes: handcrafted puppet extravaganzas, among them "Petrushka" (2001), which was commissioned by Lincoln Center, and "Symphonie Fantastique" (1998), which took place entirely underwater. Three years ago, he and the performance artist Joey Arias created "Arias with a Twist," a drag puppet show that played a sold-out run at a sixty-three-seat theatre in SoHo. It has just returned for an encore engagement, at Abrons Arts Center, on the Lower East Side.

"I can't tell you how many times I've made things and I can't get them up these stairs," Twist said, entering a white hallway crammed with puppet parts. He was wearing zip-up boots, shorts, and a purple shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest. When he

started renting space in the building, he had a single room, but he slowly colonized the majority of the basement. He lives across the street, in another basement. "It's a mess here," he said, stepping over his cat, Boots, "but it's a beautiful mess."

The studio was bustling with assistants, who were at work on "Arias with a Twist" and "The Addams Family," which Twist designed for Broadway and was preparing for a national tour. "This is Cousin Itt," he said, indicating a Styrofoam snowman that would soon be covered with human hair. (Asked where he got the hair, Twist said flatly, "Fourteenth Street.") He opened a door onto a small courtyard, where two designers were putting finishing touches on a latex dragon—another "Addams Family" creature. "This is the MUB, which stands for Monster Under the Bed," he said.

To his neighbors, Twist is something of a MUB himself. "I have to be sensitive," he said, pointing to a window above. "There's an older woman upstairs who has asthma, so I can't use stuff that smells bad." To earn good will, Twist cropped a window shade for the neighbor. Nonetheless, he conceded, having puppets around can be creepy. "You're actually dealing with something being alive or not, and what's that frontier?" he said. "It's an art form that relates to our ancient selves that *do* see spirits in the rocks and the trees. It puts this huge existential question right in front of you."

Puppetry is in Twist's blood. His grandfather Griff Williams was a big-band conductor based in Chicago in the thirties and forties, and he incorporated puppets into his act. When Twist was ten, he inherited his grandfather's marionettes, which depict Williams and five other bandleaders. (They were built by the same puppeteer who made Charlie McCarthy, the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's sidekick.) Twist's mother, Lynne Twist, began puppeteering as a hobby and became the head of an organization called the San Francisco Puppet Group. His name, which is real, came from his father's side—technically, he's Basil Twist III. In 1991, he studied puppetry at the École Supérieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette, in Charleville-Mézières, France, "the town that Arthur Rimbaud was always running away from." He is the school's only American graduate.

Twist had to bring some things to the

theatre, including a bag of sequins and a severed puppet head. He threw them over his shoulder and went up to the street. "For 'The Addams Family,' we used to carry these tentacles up the stairs, like a Chinese dragon," he said. "People were trying to walk their dogs, and this huge purple tentacle's coming out." Twist passed the delivery entrance to Murray's Cheese Shop, where he recently scavenged materials for "Arias." "I made an entire spaceship out of cheese insulation wrap that I found on the street."

At the corner of Bleecker, he ran into the asthmatic neighbor, Gioia Munari, who was born in Trieste. "I was just talk-



Basil Twist

ing about you!" Twist said. "I was saying sometimes I make too much noise."

Munari patted his cheek. "Part of life!" she said.

Twist caught a cab to the theatre, where most of his puppets were stored in a dressing room. He opened a black trunk and took out his grandfather's marionettes, which are featured in "Arias with a Twist." "There is something about a puppet having a charge to it," he said, holding a puppet representing the trumpeter Harry James. "People don't carve heads out of wood like this anymore—nobody knows how."

The next puppet he picked up was of his grandfather. "It's really the essence of our collaboration that I'm using my grandfather's puppets and Joey is singing with them," Twist said. "The rest of the show is just an excuse to get them together."

—Michael Schulman