

By JAY WEISSBERG

Posted: Tue., Feb. 23, 2010, 6:58pm PT



‘Arias with a Twist: The Docufantasy’ celebrates the creativity of performance artist Joey Arias and master puppeteer Basil Twist.

A Working Pictures production. Produced by Bobby Sheehan. Executive producer, Sara Feldmann Sheehan. Co-executive producers, Barbara Busackino, Julia Kislak, Robert Sorcher. Directed by Bobby Sheehan.

With: Joey Arias, Basil Twist, Ann Magnuson, Courtney Harmel, Sherry Vine, Raven O, Kim Hastreiter, Thierry Manfred Mugler, Dean Chamberlain, Kenny Scharf, Tony Frere, Chi Chi Valenti, Isabel Toledo, Ruben Toledo, Gary Austin, Lena Chan, Katy K, Michael Musto, Kristy Rose, Bobby Sheehan, Cassandra Peterson, Michael Halsband, Bobby Miller, Lynne Twist, Addis Williams, Ceili Clemens, Lindsay Abromaitis-Smith, Lee Breuer, Cheryl Henson, Oskar Eustis, Johnnie Moore, Barbara Busackino, Margareta Niculescu, Jeanne Fleming, Kristin Martin, Kim Whitener, Adrian Richards, Jean-Marc Houmar, Andrew Watson, Klaus Wowereit.

The collaboration between performance artist Joey Arias and master puppeteer Basil Twist forms the central portion of Bobby Sheehan’s uplifting, enormously fun “Arias With a Twist: The Docufantasy” -- fantasy because anything Arias and Twist do, whether together or apart, involves flights of the imagination, and docu because talking heads, archival footage and sequences from the duo’s stage spectacle “Arias With a Twist” provide commentary on the two careers. Notwithstanding some repetition and heartfelt hyperbole, this celebration of creativity should easily delight audiences at gay events and well beyond, including festivals, art houses and satcasts.

In 2008, “Arias With a Twist” hit Gotham, a riotously imaginative collaboration between Arias’ alter ego -- a cross between Tura Satana and Billie Holiday -- and Twist’s stunning puppet creations. Prolific commercial helmer Sheehan first met Arias during the booming years of New York’s downtown scene, and he knowledgeably chronicles the heady, explosively inventive times of the late 1970s and early ‘80s through interviews and clips. Fashion designers Isabel and Ruben Toledo describe the seemingly limitless scope for improvisation of those years, when the worlds of art, fashion, strip clubs and performance fused and inspired each other.

Then AIDS swept through, and stars of the scene such as John Sex, Klaus Nomi and Keith Haring died in often shockingly rapid succession. Sheehan lovingly collects footage of these and other performers whose mourned loss makes Arias’ survival a special cause for celebration. More than merely a survivor, however, Arias is one of the few people left from that scene who continues to evolve artistically, moving from club performances to the Cirque du Soleil in Vegas to international cabaret.

Twist’s career started in a much more traditional manner: The grandson of band-leader Griff Williams, and a third-generation puppeteer, he’s become an acknowledged master of his craft whose imaginative use of materials, music and movement draws high praise from colleagues such as Cheryl Henson. Sheehan’s evenhanded approach should attract a broad audience, encompassing aficionados of camp alongside connoisseurs of puppet wizardry.

Structurally, the docu intermittently loses its sense of direction; Arias and Twist are first established in their own right, followed by their collaboration, but then the helmer tends to go back and forth, accumulating scraps of information and placing them in undefined sections. Few viewers, however, will mind the occasional repetition or the fulsome praise from friends: Indeed, the producers of the stage spectacle will likely see a boost in interest for the still-touring show.

Despite the large number of talking heads, the docu never feels static or overwhelmed with commentary. Footage of varying quality brings the recent past to life and will induce waves of nostalgia from those who were part of the scene, as well as those who glimpsed it from afar via rare smallscreen appearances such as David Bowie's "Saturday Night Live" perf of "TVC15," with Nomi and Arias on backup.

Camera (color, HD), Sheehan, Russell Swanson; editor, Robert Whitney; music, Randy Lee; art director, Brian Drucker; sound, Ronny Kubis, David Turner; animation, Mort Todd; associate producers, Michael Caso, Tony Frere, Lez Rudge. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Panorama), Feb. 17, 2010.

Running time: 86 MIN