



- *Joe Szekeres, Chief Toronto Critic*

I have heard puppeteer's name Ronnie Burkett over the years and have seen advertisements for his shows in Toronto, but never attended for one reason or another.

Each time I kept thinking, "Alright, next time he's performing somewhere, I'm going."

Well, I love Montreal; I have friends and relatives who live in this city and thought now is the time to see the production, especially since we are embarking on the Christmas/holiday season. Off I went with my Montreal college friend to the opening night performance and to see finally what I had been missing.

Why did I wait so long?

A bit raunchy and adult in nature at times, The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes tells a zany vaudevillian and "loose" adaptation of the Charles Dickens' classic 'A Christmas Carol' with over 40 marionettes. The cabaret song styles throughout the nearly two-hour performance showcase Mr. Burkett's bold and saucy show personality when he enters decked out in an ugly Christmas tree sweater. Mr. Burkett adores audience participation in this production so beware as the house lights come up periodically. If he spots you, he's right off the stage and

in the audience to drag you back up or as he says, “I’m so pleased you volunteered.”

At the top of the show, Burkett enters to talk to us for a few minutes to see who are return guests and who are show virgins. There were many of the latter (including myself). Off came the ugly green Christmas tree sweater and the show was on.

The production reminded me of the ‘The Lonely Goatherd’ sequence from the film version of ‘The Sound of Music’. I discovered later that Burkett’s love of marionettes was inspired by this film and this scene. The front curtain of the playing space contained two of what I’m assuming to be Burkett’s signature marionettes: Little Schnitzel and Esme Massengill. Mr. Burkett places himself at the top of the stage and moves around picking whichever marionette he needs. The production opens with an hilarious strip tease artist a la Gypsy Rose Lee.

The loose adaptation begins where we meet faded, has been movie star and live entertainer Esme Masingill, a garish cross between Sunset Blvd’s Norma Desmond and Carol Burnett’s interpretation. The drunken, miserly and bitter Esme Scrooge meets three of the spirits this Christmas Eve who begin to show her the error of her ways and warn her to change. When we are introduced to the Cratchit family, the adorably freakish Little Schnitzel plays Tiny Tim with such sweet aplomb that I wanted to go up on the stage and pinch his facial cheeks.

Burkett kept wiping his forehead and brow as the nearly two-hour show is quite a workout for him. But I was in awe of his formidable stamina as he is puppet master, set changer, curtain puller, song writer and storyteller all in one. During his thank you at the end of the production, I saw and heard in Burkett’s voice a personable, humble and appreciative man who was pleased this opening night audience enjoyed themselves immensely.

And my guest and I thoroughly did.

And you should attend too. Ronnie Burkett is a gift to all of us this Christmas/holiday season.