



**RONNIE
BURKETT**



Represented by:
JOHN Lambert & ASSOC., INC.

RONNIE BURKETT



Ronnie Burkett has been captivated by puppetry since the age of seven, when he opened the World Book Encyclopedia to “Puppets”. He began touring his puppet shows at the age of fourteen and has been on the road ever since.

Recognised as one of Canada’s foremost theatre artists, Ronnie Burkett has been credited with creating some of the world’s most elaborate and provocative puppetry. Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes has stimulated an unprecedented adult audience for puppet theatre and continuously plays to great critical and public acclaim on Canada’s major stages and as a guest company at international theatre festivals.

“Ronnie Burkett is one of the geniuses of the world... seeing his troupe every few years has just become a necessity of civilized theatregoing.”

THE VILLAGE VOICE
(New York, NY, USA)

Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes was formed in 1986, dedicated to returning the puppet to the legitimate stage in theatre for adults. Ronnie Burkett’s work as both playwright and puppeteer serve to shrink his species to a scale whereby the world around us may be magnified. He minutely observes how humans behave, finding the best and worst in people, wrapping that up in a package that always includes large dollops of sentiment, anger, camp, and a fearless, frightening truthfulness.

Ronnie has received numerous awards in the Canadian theatre as a playwright, actor and designer for his work with Theatre of Marionettes, and international recognition including a Village Voice OBIE Award in New York for Off-Broadway Theatre. BILLY TWINKLE Requiem for a Golden Boy is the eleventh production from Theatre of Marionettes, and follows the now-retired international successes *10 Days on Earth*, *Provenance* and the “Memory Dress Trilogy” of *Tinka’s New Dress*, *Street of Blood* and *Happy*.

Ronnie lives in Toronto, and is presently working on his next production – *Penny Plain*.



Billy Twinkle

Requiem for a Golden Boy

Billy Twinkle is a middle-aged cruise ship puppeteer who dazzles audiences with his Stars in Miniature marionette niteclub act. His saucy burlesque stripper Rusty titillates the tourists, octogenarian Bunny invokes sidesplitting laughter with the inflatable balloon in his pants, Bumblebear juggles and roller-skates and steals the hearts of every audience, and society dame Bidy Bantom Brewster brings a bit of highbrow hilarity to the high seas with her drunken aria. Billy is the best in the business and on top of the world as he floats along through life.

Until he is fired by the cruiseline. Standing at the edge of the ship contemplating a watery demise, Billy is abruptly called back to reality when his dead mentor Sid Diamond appears as a hand puppet. Sid literally will not leave his side, and forces Billy to re-enact his life as a puppet show in order to remember and rekindle the passion Billy once had for puppets, people and the dream of a life that sparkles.

For anyone stuck in the middle – mid-career, mid-love, mid-life – caught between our own past and future, this requiem for a golden boy shines a little light on the wonder of youth meeting the wisdom of age with a kick in the pants to finish what we started.

BILLY TWINKLE *Requiem for a Golden Boy* will premiere at The Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, October 2008. Subsequent touring includes The National Arts Centre (Ottawa, Canada), The Vancouver East Cultural Centre (Vancouver, Canada) The Barbican Centre (London, UK), The Victorian Arts Centre (Melbourne, Australia), and The Sydney Opera House (Sydney, Australia).

Created and Performed by Ronnie Burkett

commissioned by
The Citadel Theatre (Edmonton, Canada)

and co-commissioned by
Canada's National Arts Centre (Ottawa, Canada)
The Vancouver East Cultural Centre (Vancouver, Canada)
The Arts Centre (Melbourne, Australia)
Sydney Opera House (Sydney, Australia)
barbicanbite09 (London, UK)





Edmonton, AB, Canada	WORLD PREMIERE Citadel Theatre	Oct. 17 – Nov. 9, 2008
Ottawa, ON, Canada	National Arts Centre	Nov. 25 – Dec. 6, 2008
Vancouver, BC, Canada	Vancouver East Cultural Centre	Jan.20 – Feb. 8, 2009
London, UK	BITE 09: Barbican	Mar. 18 – 28, 2009
Manchester, UK	queerupnorth	Apr. 2 – 11, 2009
Melbourne, Australia	The Arts Centre	Sept. 3 – 20, 2009
Sydney, Australia	Sydney Opera House	Oct.1 – 17, 2009
Calgary, AB	Alberta Theatre Projects	Mar. 26 – Apr. 11, 2010
Montreal, QC	Place des Arts	Apr. 22 – May 1, 2010



RETIRED
PRODUCTIONS

10 DAYS on EARTH

CanStage	Toronto, ON, Canada	2006
Alberta Theatre Projects	Calgary, AB, Canada	2006
Theatre Network	Edmonton, AB, Canada	2006
Vancouver East Cultural Centre	Vancouver, BC, Canada	2006
Sydney Opera House	Sydney, Australia	2007
Auckland Festival	Auckland, NZ	2007
BITE 07: Barbican	London, UK	2007
queerupnorth	Manchester, UK	2007
Wiener Festwochen	Vienna, Austria	2007
Place des Arts	Montreal, Canada	2007

Provenance

The Brighton Festival	Brighton, UK	2005
Kampnagel	Hamburg, Germany	2005
Sodra Theatre	Stockholm, Sweden	2005
Manitoba Theatre Centre	Winnipeg, Canada	2005
Great Canadian Theatre Company	Ottawa, Canada	2005
Queensland Performing Arts Centre	Brisbane, Australia	2004
Melbourne International Arts Festival	Melbourne, Australia	2004
Wiener Festwochen	Vienna, Austria	2004
queerupnorth	Manchester, UK	2004
BITE 04 (The Barbican)	London, UK	2004
Alberta Theatre Projects	Calgary, Canada	2004
CanStage	Toronto, Canada	2004
Vancouver East Cultural Centre	Vancouver, Canada	2003
Theatre Network (WORLD PREMIERE)	Edmonton, Canada	2003

HaPpY

queerupnorth	Manchester, UK	2003
Brighton Festival	Brighton, UK	2003
One Yellow Rabbit/ATP	Calgary, Canada	2001
BITE 2001 (The Barbican)	London, UK	2001
Manitoba Theatre Centre	Winnipeg, Canada	2001
CanStage	Toronto, Canada	2001
Theatre Network	Edmonton, Canada	2000
Theaterformen 2000	Braunschweig, Germany	2000
Usine C	Montreal, Canada	2000
Du Maurier World Stage (WORLD PREMIERE)	Toronto, Canada	2000

STREET OF BLOOD

The Tramway	Glasgow, UK	2002
queerupnorth	Manchester, UK	2002
Brighton Festival	Brighton, UK	2002
Södra Teatern	Stockholm, Sweden	2002
NYTP (Jim Henson Int'l Festival)	New York, USA	2000
CanStage	Toronto, Canada	1999
Theatre Network	Edmonton, Canada	1999
One Yellow Rabbit/ATP	Calgary, Canada	1998
Manitoba Theatre Centre (WORLD PREMIERE)	Winnipeg, Canada	1998

TINKA'S NEW DRESS

Melbourne International Arts Festival	Melbourne, Australia	2002
Vancouver East Cultural Centre	Vancouver, Canada	2001
Theatreformen 2000	Hannover, Germany	2000
BITE 99 (The Barbican)	London, UK	1999
Theatre Bellevue	Amsterdam, Holland	1998
Images Festival	Arnhem, Holland	1998
queerupnorth	Manchester, UK	1998
Dublin Theatre Festival	Dublin, Ireland	1998
Jim Henson Int'l Festival (Public Theatre)	New York, USA	1998
Festival du Théâtre des Amériques	Montreal, Canada	1998
One Yellow Rabbit, The Secret Theatre	Calgary, Canada	1997
Theatre Network	Edmonton, Canada	1997
Belfry Theatre	Victoria, Canada	1996
National Arts Centre	Ottawa, Canada	1996
Canstage	Toronto, Canada	1995
Manitoba Theater Centre (WORLD PREMIERE)	Winnipeg, Canada	1994

10 DAYS ON EARTH

2006/07 UNIMA USA citation of Excellence in the Art of Puppetry (USA)

PROVENANCE

2004 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Production (Edmonton, Canada)

2004 Patron's Choice Award for best show of the 2004 Melbourne International Arts Festival (Melbourne, Australia)

HAPPY

2000/2001 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Production (Edmonton, Canada)

2000/2001 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (Edmonton, Canada)

2001/2002 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (Calgary, Canada)

2001/2002 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Production of a Play (Calgary, Canada)

2001/2002 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Set Design (Calgary, Canada)

STREET OF BLOOD

1998/1999 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (Calgary, Canada)

1998/1999 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Production of a Play (Calgary, Canada)

1998/1999 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Original Composition (Calgary, Canada)

1998/1999 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Costume Design (Calgary, Canada)

1998/1999 Betty Mitchell Award, Outstanding Set Design (Calgary, Canada)

1998/1999 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Costume Design (Edmonton, Canada)

1999/2000 Chalmers Canadian Playwright Award (Toronto, Canada)

2000/2001 GLAAD Media Award, Outstanding Theater Production - Broadway / Off-Broadway (New York, NY, USA)

TINKA'S NEW DRESS

1995/1996 Dora Mavor Moore Award, Best Set Design (Toronto, Canada)

1995/1996 Dora Mavor Moore Award, Best Costume Design (Toronto, Canada)

1997/1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Production of a Play (Edmonton, Canada)

1997/1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (Edmonton, Canada)

1997/1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Original Composition (Edmonton, Canada)

1997/1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Set Design (Edmonton, Canada)

1997/1998 Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award, Outstanding Costume Design (Edmonton, Canada)

1998 Evening Herald Award for Best International Show, The Dublin Theatre Festival (Dublin, Ireland)

Village Voice OBIE Award Special Citation for the 1998/99 Off-Broadway season (New York, NY, USA)

2002 Age Critics' Award at the Melbourne Festival (Melbourne, Australia)

OLD FRIENDS

1998 Chalmers Canadian Playwright Award in Theatre for Young Audiences (Toronto, Canada)

RONNIE BURKETT

1998 Freedom of Expression Award, Wordfest Writer's Festival, Calgary (Calgary, Canada)

2001 President's Award from The Puppeteers of America for Outstanding Contribution to the Art of Puppetry (New York, USA)

2003 Alberta Book Award, Trade Fiction Book of the Year for The Memory Dress Trilogy (Calgary, Canada)

2003 Manchester Evening News, Best Special Entertainment Award (Manchester, UK)

2003 Herbert Whittaker/Drama Bench Award for Outstanding Contribution to Canadian Theatre (Toronto, Canada)

2008 Canadian Institute for Theatre Technology (CITT) Award for Technical Merit (Canada)

“ 10 Days on Earth is art of the highest order... Burkett is an artist. And having painted the marionette equivalent of the Sistine Chapel in all its flash and colour, he's now content to step back and show us the delight and humanity he can find in a single piece of stone. ”

TORONTO SUN
(Toronto, Canada)

10 DAYS on EARTH

He lived alone with very little and more than enough, and preferred it that way. “Simply, simply” he was oft heard to say. He was alone, on his own, and that was okay.

Darrel is a middle-aged, intellectually challenged man who lives with his mother. When she dies in her sleep, Darrel does not realise she is gone, and so, for over a week, he lives alone. Tandem to Darrel's day to day routine are the adventures of his favorite children's book characters, Honeydog and Little Burp. Their search for a home leads the dog and duck duo to an understanding of family, while Darrel's ease in the world illustrates just how his mother has paved the path for him to be without her. Episodes from the past, like faded colour snapshots from a family album, illustrate this mother's love for her son in all its honesty and fierce, unwavering will. Simple, tender, funny and unapologetic, 10 Days On Earth asks –

If you were alone but didn't know it, would you feel lonely?

The original production of 10 DAYS ON EARTH is co-commissioned by Canstage (Toronto, Canada), Barbican BITE:07, (London, UK), queerupnorth (Manchester, UK), and Wiener Festwochen (Vienna, Austria)



Created 2006 - Retired 2007

10 DAYS on EARTH



THE TIMES
MAY 2, 2007, LONDON, UK
By Donald Hutera

REVIEW

Ronnie Burkett really knows how to manipulate his cast. And so he should, given that the dozen characters in this Canadian master puppeteer's latest fulllength production are marionettes. They may be small in stature, but Burkett uses his beautifully-made creations to tap in to big themes and fundamental human emotions.

Burkett writes his own material, and supplies all the voices and narration. Populated by a typically broad range of searchers, survivors and misfits, *10 Days on Earth* is one of his most finely constructed scripts.

The lead is Darrel, a middle-aged shoeshine man with learning disabilities whose mother, Ivy, has brought him up alone. We first see her as an elderly, wraith-like figure in nightgown and slippers, treading carefully through the handsome, wood-panelled corridor that is the principal set. It's the last walk she'll ever take. Leaving her slippers in the hall, Ivy retreats to her room to die.

Burkett combines the spell of a consummate storyteller with a playwright's craft. The narrative shuttles easily between flashbacks and the present, its gentle tension based on our uncertainty about when the sweet-tempered Darrel will discover his loss and how he'll react. Periodically, from his Godlike position in the shadows overhead, Burkett opens the walls centre-stage and takes us into a pastel-coloured, picture-book world. This is the realm of Honeydog, a "gentleman terrier" that has been Darrel's favourite fictional character since childhood, and Little Burp, the newborn duckling with which he sets out to find a home.

This touching show skirts sentimentality, and is probably a tad too long. The net effect, however, is bleak yet hopeful and occasionally both raucous and charming.

Burkett must love his characters to breathe such life into them. Darrel is an endearing innocent. And then there's Lloyd, a bony, wild-haired homeless man who believes he's God. His delusional tirades are bitterly funny, but at their core is a tender, world-weary sadness that characterises the entire performance.

10 DAYS on EARTH

10 DAYS ON EARTH

"If I can get it to a place that feels real and feels true, and I can hit universal emotional themes, it doesn't matter if it's a puppet or it's me reading it, what matters is that it connects to the audience's frame of reference." - Ronnie Burkett.

Ronnie Burkett's *10 Days on Earth* is about as close to a masterpiece as you can get. It tells the story of Darrel (a man with the mental maturity of a 10 year-old) who doesn't understand why his elderly mother Ivy will no longer come out of her room and eat with him. Following Darrel for 10 days as he slowly comes to realize what has happened to his mother, *10 Days on Earth* blends emotional pathos with childlike wonder, creating an enthralling and moving night of theatre.

Intercut with the main story are scenes from Darrel's favourite children's book, a charming tale of a debonair dog in a cranberry coat known as Honeydog who, along with his friend Little Burp (a duckling in a tutu) is searching for a home and more importantly, a place to belong. As well as paralleling the central narrative, these delightful interludes work both as a respite for the audience from Darrel's world and an escape for Darrel. He refers to them as his "quiet space." By intertwining these, Burkett asks the audience to use their own frames of reference (primarily memories and stories recalled from childhood) to gain a deeper understanding of Darrel and his world, his goals and the way he views and deals with things. This personal connection creates an absorbing experience that really does draw you in.

The problem with this production is that a lot of people are going to miss it because it features puppets, which many associate with children's entertainment. However, the work of Burkett has traditionally dealt with mature subjects and *10 Days on Earth* is no exception. Mental illness, sexuality, death and the need to belong and be loved are just some of the themes dealt with in the show and all are treated with respect and dignity, presented in a way that never trivializes them.

Canadian Ronnie Burkett has built his career upon shows that deal with topics commonly left to more traditional types of theatre. Generally considered to be one of the world's leading puppeteers, Burkett created his own theatrical company in the mid-80s, after a career in television, to facilitate the production of these more mature shows. The resultant plays, which included *Provenance*, *Tinka's New Dress*, *Streets of Blood* and *Happy* pushed the boundaries in terms of subject matter, toured the world and picked up several awards (including two Canadian Dora Awards and a special citation for an Obie) demonstrating that audiences and critics were receptive to this new form of entertainment, puppets for adults.

While sitting in the Opera House Playhouse one needed to only look around at the sold-out audience of adults who were completely enraptured by this simple yet beautiful tale and the mastery behind its creation (Ronnie Burkett is visible throughout the performance and forms part of the show), to see how effective *10 Days on Earth* is as a piece of theatre. It is wonderful, well and truly proving that puppets aren't just for children.

10 Days on Earth is playing at the Opera House Playhouse until March 3. Tickets are available through www.sydneyoperahouse.com.

“ The art of theatre doesn't get much better than this. ”

THE EDMONTON SUN
(Edmonton, Canada)

Provenance

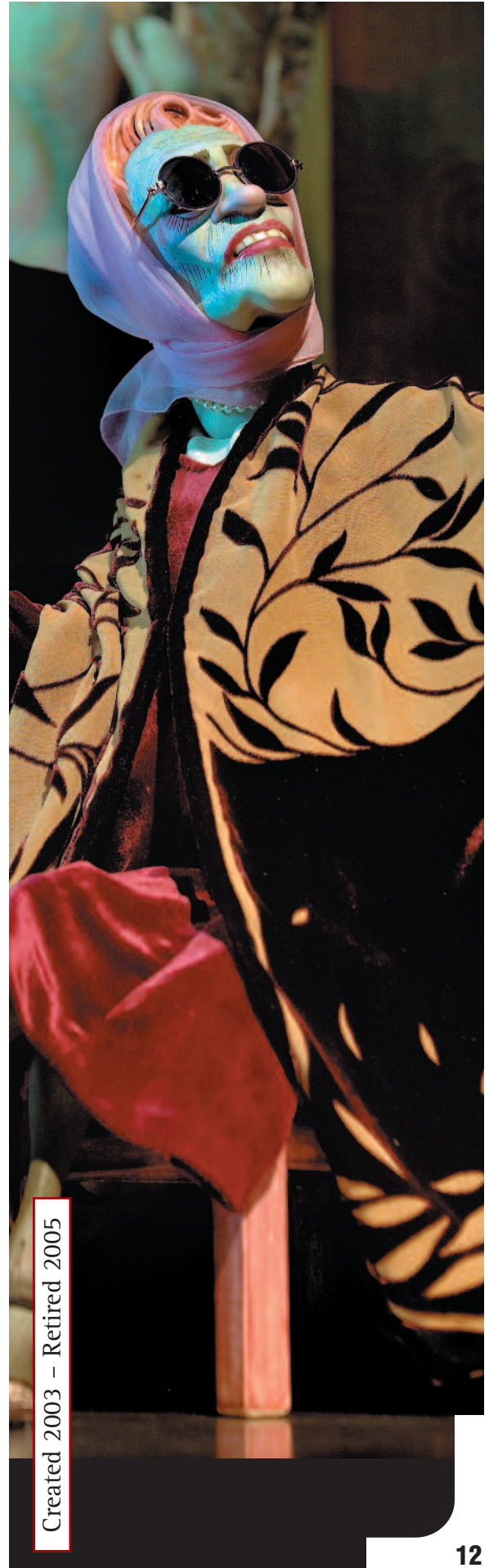
A mysterious figure frozen in a painting, sold and stolen, displayed and desired over the course of a century, now hidden in a Viennese brothel by a madam on the verge of madness. Canada's foremost artist in puppet theatre, Ronnie Burkett creates some of the world's most elaborate and provocative puppetry. Bawdy, wry, witty and sentimental, Burkett's work plumbs the highs and lows of the human experience in a play that is tender, exotic, erotic and wonderfully beautiful.

Provenance examines notions of beauty, self-loathing and fear as it charts the journey of Pity (Pittance) Bean, a graduate obsessed with an enigmatic painting of a beautiful, androgynous boy titled "Tender". Her quest takes her to a brothel in Vienna where she makes startling discoveries about the origins and history of the painting while confronting aspects of her own identity and self-worth.

Provenance was initiated during the CanStage Play Creation group, 2002. Ronnie's participation as the CanStage Playwright in Residence was made possible by a Senior Artist Grant from The Canada Council for the Arts. Thanks to Iris Turcott and "the barrel of monkeys", specifically Judith Thompson, Joan MacLeod, Adam Pettle, Michael Miller, Martin Julien, Bev Cooper, Jonathan Garfinkel, Waneta Storms and Bonnie Green.

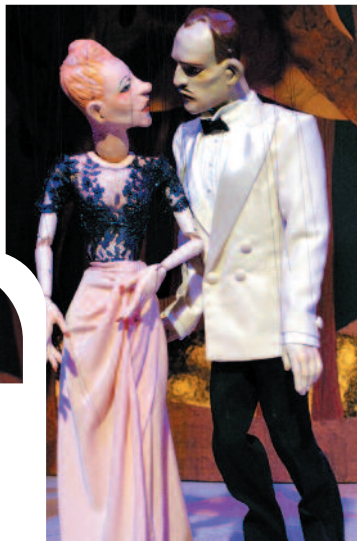
Provenance was a co-production with:
BITE (London, UK);
CanStage (Toronto, Canada);
Melbourne International Arts Festival (Melbourne, Australia); queerupnorth (Manchester, UK);
and Wiener Festwochen (Vienna, Austria).

The world premiere of *Provenance* occurred at Theatre Network in Edmonton, Canada on October 14, 2003.



Created 2003 – Retired 2005

Provenance



FINANCIAL TIMES
 May 04, 2004, London, UK
 By Ian Shuttleworth

4 STARS

The emotional zenith of Ronnie Burkett's *Provenance* is a long, very brutal scene in which a young man is raped near a first world war battlefield. The fact that the victim is 2ft tall and made of wood doesn't make it more bearable. Rather the reverse: because we have seen puppeteer Burkett take such care with the figure of Tender, gently manipulating what is literally his own creation, this sudden cruelty is the more disturbing.

The company name is the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, and Burkett (based in Toronto) is a superlative marionettist, but he goes beyond the one technique. For the first 10 minutes, he uses stringless figures which he moves directly by hand. A little later, he dons a headband to which is attached the miniature head of one of the show's characters - in one sense, Burkett's own body becomes the rest of the puppet; in another, the "head rig" is simply a badge to denote that he is acting in this character instead of simply voicing her.

Just as he flows easily and seamlessly between various techniques, so the subject matter and emotional registers in this uninterrupted two-hour solo performance are rich and dense, from camp

comedy to unabashed sentiment to the disquieting violence already mentioned. Much of the comic material in particular is at such high speed that if you laugh at one sharp line, you miss another.

In the present day, eccentric art historian Pity Beane uncovers the history of the painting that has obsessed her since childhood, prompting flashbacks to jazz-age Paris, interwar Vienna and a Canadian high-school locker-room among other times and places. The vocabulary of art - "provenance", "gaze" - serves as metaphor for how we relate to one another: the ways in which we own each other, how we perceive beauty and where. It's a remarkably fecund piece of work. At times it's also overwritten, but this adds to the overall texture rather than damaging it, and the intensity generated is sufficient to carry an audience past any such reservations. It also feels a little too long, but in the sense of containing too much to take it all in rather than of indulgence or *longueur*.

Provenance

Those who saw Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett's amazing Tinka's New Dress at the 2002 Melbourne Festival will not be disappointed with this new show, co-commissioned by Robyn Archer for this year's festival.

It is a more sombre piece, taking risks with sexual ambiguities and abstract philosophical questions, but grounded, like Tinka, in wartime horror, with enormous emotional impact.

It also develops, fascinatingly, a series of layers - of narrative, symbolism and significance - that are centred on the strange homoerotic painting that has drawn its heroine, Pity Beane, from Canada to Vienna in search of it. She desires not the painting itself, but its provenance, the story of its origin and its ownership.

Burkett's complex tale uncovers a story of tragic ownership in which the painter and her subject are bound together forever. Plain, homely Pity has understood the power of beauty in the painting, a strange version of Leda and the Swan.

The ancient Greek story of the rape of Leda by Zeus, in the form of a swan, is given a complex series of twists in Burkett's story. There is even some wry comedy in the name of the painter, Leda Swan, and her story is grounded in rape - one her own, one that of the painting's subject - the nightmare that shadows her career as painter's muse, erotic subject, rich man's wife and, finally, madam of the brothel in which Pity finds the painting.

Burkett's many characters hang behind ornate wardrobe doors in the brothel, and he creates a colourful gallery of individuals who are like the city of Vienna itself, survivors of war and violence, yet always devotees of beauty. Pity's New World directness and apparent naivety are in sharp contrast, yet she has her surprises, too.

Brought up by two gay fathers, Pity has an earthy wit and strong grip on reality that helps her rebel against her country's neat but ultimately hypocritical conformities. She provides a sympathetic audience to Leda's terrible story, one that is told in episodes that work backwards to the dark secrets at their core.

Burkett's superb puppets - some are floating "head" puppets attached to his forehead - bring a dimension of artifice to the serious concerns of the work. With Burkett working them, standing above them, vocalising all the roles, sometimes continuing the dramatic exchanges even when the puppets have been retired behind their doors, there is yet another dialogue created. This is one between the New and the Old worlds, Pity and Leda their representatives, where history instructs us that we neglect its lessons at our peril. Pity's brief story tells us that violence and evil can victimise a plain girl as much as they did the beautiful Leda.

At more than two hours, it is a long journey, occasionally made irritating by inaudible passages, but in Provenance Ronnie Burkett once again offers us a truly remarkable theatrical experience with enormous impact.

Provenance

“ (Ronnie Burkett) is a sophisticated, internationally renowned theatre artist who has pushed the concept of puppetry to new levels with rigorous, text-based plays that retain a sense of wonder and visual magic. ”

TORONTO STAR
(Toronto, Canada)

HaPpY

HAPPY introduces us to the engaging title character, a “happy-go-lucky” veteran and pensioner who wanders through episodes of grief in other people’s lives. Writer and performer Ronnie Burkett examines the impact of cataclysmic sorrow in human existence and the on-going discussion of whether happiness is the lucky domain of a select few or the result of constant struggle and striving beyond the layers of human despair.

Tandem to the storyline presented by the character of **HAPPY** is the “grief vaudeville” of Antoine Marionette, a campy, otherworldly master of ceremonies. Within this glittering silver realm, “the grey area of life,” are arch presentations of sadness in song, pantomime and burlesque which mirror and parody the state of the central characters.

Exploding the commonly held belief that life exists somewhere in the subtle shadings of the grey area, **HAPPY** explores the possibility that there is no grey at all, and that life exists between the harsh black and white in a rainbow of colour and endless dimension.

Ronnie Burkett collaborated with composer and sound designer Cathy Nosaty. Visually striking and starker in design than previous THEATRE OF MARIONETTES productions, **HAPPY**, featured “reversed neutrals” with an all white set painted with colour by acclaimed lighting designer Bill Williams.

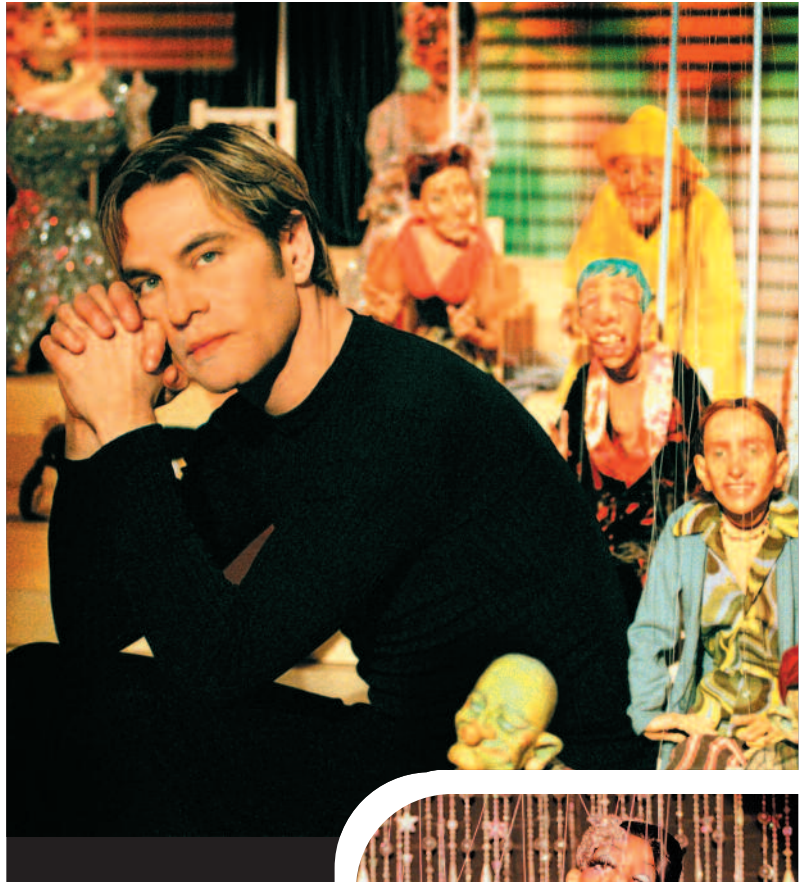
The world premiere of **HAPPY** occurred at the 2000 du Maurier World Stage Festival, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto. **HAPPY** was workshopped and rehearsed at The University of Calgary Department of Drama’s Reeve Theatre in March 2000

HAPPY, now retired, was a co-production with Harbourfront Centre (Toronto, Canada), Festival Theatreformen 2000 (Hannover, Germany) and The Barbican Centre (London, UK)



Created 2000 – Retired 2003

HaPpY



GUARDIAN
June 22, 2001, London, UK
Barbican Pit, London ****
By Lyn Gardner

REVIEW

HAPPY

What is happiness? Being with the one you love? A big bowel movement first thing in the morning? Surviving the Holocaust? A walk in the rain? In the latest solo show from remarkable puppeteer Ronnie Burkett it's all these things and more. Burkett continues to manipulate his marionettes in ways that not only amaze but actually make you think about the meaning of life.

Like Tinka's New Dress, inspired by the illegal "daisy" cabarets and plays of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, which was seen here two years ago, Happy is a fable about the folly and tenacity of human beings and how our choices make us into the people we are. Why is it that some people seem to have a knack for happiness while others crumple under the slightest misfortune?

Played on a large, beautiful kitchen dresser - a kind of keep-tidy of the psyche, where memories can be tidied away into drawers - Happy is set both in the mind and in a large American dwelling divided into flats, depicted here as an exquisite doll's house.

Using over 40 puppets - an amazing feat in itself for just one performer - Burkett introduces us to the house's inhabitants. There's Happy, who, despite tragedies in his life, is always upbeat; unfulfilled Raymond, who lives in the past; and recently bereaved Carla, drowning in despair. Interspersed with their stories are scenes from the Gray Cabaret, a grisly wallowing in emotional pain presided over by the revoltingly seductive Antoine Marionette and featuring acts such as Cleo Pain and Jacqueline DePressed.

Happy is sentimental, camp, soap opera-ish and full of bad taste and terrible poetry. It works not in spite of these things but because of them, because it always dares to go to the edge, to take risks. It toys with the mawkish and ends up being unbearably moving; it finds not just the spite but also the tenderness in camp. It uses soap opera to wash the grey out of our lives and see the world in colour again.

If I have a quibble it's that by running the show at two hours without an interval Burkett is being slightly self-indulgent. Losing 10 minutes would benefit both show and audience. But as Mr Happy himself might say, nothing is perfect. "You can't have a rainbow without the rain."

Happy

ANGELS IN DRESSES

Many believe that puppet theatre is for children, and that is usually false. It is especially false in the case of Ronnie Burkett whose puppet plays would presumably be rated R in the cinema. His stories are rude, brutal, and wicked—and yet always full of delicate poetry and inscrutable humour.

Like the brilliant New York puppeteer Robert Anton who died an untimely death, Burkett is to his creatures the great unpredictable god who understands everything and forgives nothing. He loves, hugs, or punishes his marionettes, which he handles openly, bringing them to life and often letting them die. As he lends them his voice and his ear, the puppets gain an audience. Burkett has them go for a stroll or sprawl across armchairs, gives them animals to stroke and drawers to hide in. Burkett is a player with high stakes. His ordinary little stories are full of irritations and sudden breakdowns. Behind every banality lurks a secret, every innocent scene hides an abyss. At the same time, everything remains light and in a whirr, nothing is definite: as in life, every affirmation also brings to mind its opposite.

HAPPY, his latest play which can be seen in Europe for the first time in Braunschweig, is about the inhabitants of an ominous old-age home and their pets, their affectations, and their memories. Perhaps they are not in an old-age home at all but in the hereafter, or perhaps they are just on their way back from the afterlife. A large revolving cupboard turns into a house, a scene, a stage with many rooms, balconies, and floors; and in front of, on top of, and inside the cupboard, Burkett performs an action-packed one-man show with over forty puppets. Upon each one, he bestows an unmistakable voice, a particular body language, and a scrap of a life-story. There is Happy who—pardon my French—loves to speak about his digestion while he nonchalantly exposes the sufferings and ridiculous trivialities of his neighbours. There is the old woman, a hacking chain-smoker who wants nothing more out of life than the next cigarette. There are the war veterans with their recurring nightmares and the young lovers who are the world to each other, until the young man suddenly dies and his wife, the poet, voluntarily follows him into the realm of the dead. Antoine Marionette, the master of ceremonies, presents all this as a special kind of “vaudeville of suffering”: a greyish eery parade of the life that has gone by and of the art that is to come.

HAPPY had its premiere in Toronto in the Spring and is the final part of the trilogy, “Angels in Dresses”, that began in 1994 with TINKA’S NEW DRESS (which can likewise be seen at the THEATERFORMEN—only the middle part, STREET OF BLOOD, 1998, is missing). TINKA is a tribute to the Czech puppeteers who distributed coded messages of the resistance in their performances during the Nazi occupation. The historical model becomes a timeless parable, a fairytale of courage and cowardice, of revolt and conformism.

Stephan, the old puppeteer, relinquishes his famous “Franz and Schnitzel Show” to his two students who use it in very different ways: one uses the show to gain personal fame, the other to gain freedom. The temptation of power, which can be stronger than that of sexuality, the submission out of desire and calculation, the good as an instrument of terror—Burkett treats such topics with seriousness and humour, full of respect and yet also with the perceptive wink of complicity. And on top of this he pulls off the wild feat of a puppet show within a puppet show—no wonder that TINKA was showered with awards from Dublin to New York!

Ronnie Burkett’s Theatre of Marionettes is regarded as one of the best puppet theatres in the world. In his home in Calgary, where he lives and works, Burkett keeps over 300 marionettes, all personally carved from wood and with heads shaped out of a plastic material, which is normally used in the manufacture of automobiles. Aside from classical marionettes, he also uses—in dream scenes or recollections, for example—puppets that only consist of heads or separate body parts. He plays with atmospheres of light and sound, and lets his little friends jump and climb, sing and dance. Whether they are citing great literature or are amusing themselves with dirty little jokes, the puppets are always heart-rending—and indeed more human than any human.

Kleist already knew (“On the Marionette Theatre”) that “grace appears most pure in that human physique which either has no or infinite consciousness, i.e. in the jointed doll or in the god.” Burkett proves both.

“ What is remarkable about this show is the emotional and stylistic range it achieves... profoundly touching... hilarious...chilling...this puppeteer provocateur is one of the most daring theatre artists in Canada.”

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
(Toronto, Canada)

STREET OF BLOOD

When Mrs. Edna Rural pricks her finger and bleeds onto her sewing, she sees the face of Christ in a quilt square and the Shroud of Turnip Corners changes her sleepy prairie town forever. Having lost her faith, Edna refuses to acknowledge her grief, choosing instead to reflect upon her life in a series of memories as distinct and unique as each square of her quilt. Her controlled reverie is interrupted by the homecoming of her son Eden, a karaoke singing gay terrorist intent on revenge. With the arrival of Esmé Massengill, a has-been vampire actress seeking rejuvenation and fresh blood, the citizens of Turnip Corners fall in worship and sacrifice to their thirsty Hollywood goddess. Just as the bloodbath flows, the man in the quilt appears in the flesh to the odd trio, revealing that the bonds of blood are thicker and stranger than their individual thirsts led them to believe. And only through the deconstruction of their own beliefs and icons can Edna, Eden and Esmé find their personal redemption.

Intimate, gritty and political, funny and profoundly moving, *STREET OF BLOOD* confronts contemporary bloodlust, from the contaminated blood supply scandal, adoption, religion, AIDS and celebrity worship.

Written, created and performed by Ronnie Burkett and now retired, *STREET OF BLOOD* featured a soundscape composed by Cathy Nosaty and lighting design by Bill Williams.

STREET OF BLOOD premiered at Manitoba Theatre Centre's Warehouse Theatre, Winnipeg in April 1998.



Created 1998 – Retired 2002

STREET OF BLOOD



STREET OF BLOOD (5 STARS)

Lord love a duck, what have we here? A show that lasts almost two and a half hours without an interval. A puppet show at that. And it all takes place at the end of the universe: Turnip Corner, Alberta, Canada. Here nice, homely old biddy Edna is eking out an existence "in the pit of eternal debt" with the help of her quilting and her affection for the late Princess of Wales. It doesn't sound promising at all.

There you would be wrong, because this everyday story of families, Aids, vampires, the second coming and motherly affection on the prairie from the puppeteer Ronnie Burkett is a masterpiece. It is a remarkable mixture of the gothic and the homespun, the camp and the heartfelt, the outrageous, the acidly funny and the quietly touching. It nuzzles at your heart and takes a great big bite out of it.

Edna is quietly quilting one day when she pricks her finger and the blood seeps into the material, making a face. Her friend thinks it might be Elvis, but Edna knows it is the face of Christ. So is born the shroud of Turnip Corner.

Its creation coincides with the homecoming of Edna's adopted son, Eden, and the arrival in town of Esme Massengill, a Hollywood has-been. Eden believes the film star to be his birth mother, but she has other plans for him. There is plenty at stake here, and Burkett's story clots together very nicely as it examines prejudice, pain, rage, disappointment, the inadequacies of God and the way blood is not necessarily thicker than the other ties that bind people together, such as love.

Burkett manipulates and provides all the voices for his tiny detailed marionettes. This is a miracle in itself. But it is not just the skill you marvel at - it is the sheer humanity of a show into which Burkett seems to have poured his whole being, and that celebrates the quiet and quite extraordinary lives of ordinary people like Edna.

STREET OF BLOOD

STREET OF BLOOD

What may turn out to be the finest new play of the Toronto legit year is a puppet show, although calling what Ronnie Burkett does with marionettes mere puppetry is to seriously underrate not only his craftsmanship (he has created and manipulates some 40 of them), but also his breathtaking artistry.

It is not overpraising, either, to call Burkett a genius; "Street of Blood" is awesome in its weaving together a complex story, a huge cast and a sense of magic that reminds one what theater ought to be and rarely is.

On a stage divided into three miniature playing areas, with Burkett hovering in full view above, he tells the story of Edna Rural, a "good woman" from the prairies who does her duty both in church and in the home, by raising and painfully accepting a son, Eden, who turns out to be homosexual, burying a husband who contracted AIDS from tainted blood and finally acknowledging out loud her own status as HIV positive.

Meanwhile, her son who is adopted has vented his rage against a repressive childhood (the scene in which his father beats him for wearing his mother's wedding dress is terrible and real) by becoming a terrorist. And the search for his birth mother leads him to an old-time movie star he fantasized about during his unhappy childhood; the problem is, she turns out to be a vampire.

The contrast between Edna's simple country life and the gothic humor and horror of the creatures of the night weaves seamlessly through the play and the climax an eventual battle for supremacy between the vampire and Christ, the latter played by Burkett from above is a moving metaphor for the struggle of good over evil.

In one memorable scene, Burkett comes down off his perch and sits on the stage, with the vampire at his throat. At the last moment, as she is about to suck his blood, he reaches down for a crucifix and stabs her through the heart. His symbol of agony has become her deliverance. And Eden, though he dies from the earlier wounds inflicted by the vampire, is off to heaven.

Burkett is clearly testing his rage at the global AIDS curse and at his own childhood on the prairies. As he (Christ), Eden and Edna lock in verbal combat, with tiny Edna, head tilted up, shaking her wooden fists at the savior who has appeared to her as a face in a quilt she is making, Burkett's anger at a God who appears to have deserted his children is searing.

Yet there is also laughter, life and fun in "Street of Blood," much of it provided by Burkett's caustic but always warmhearted wit. And there are songs and music as well. All of it, with the exception of some pre-recorded sound, is created live onstage.

On one level, it is impossible not to be awed by the dexterity and talent of the master puppeteer, as he works the strings from above with only the help of a stage manager to put things in position; on another level, there are huge stretches of the show where the characters are so alive, so convincing, that they seem to be acting on their own.

Burkett's development over the years from early campy shows to the sophisticated and haunting "Tinka's New Dress" and last year's bittersweet "Old Friends" points to an artist whose imagination and maturity have reached a satisfying fullness. It seems like far too long a wait until April, when his next show, "Happy," will debut at Harbourfront Center's biannual du Maurier World Stage festival.

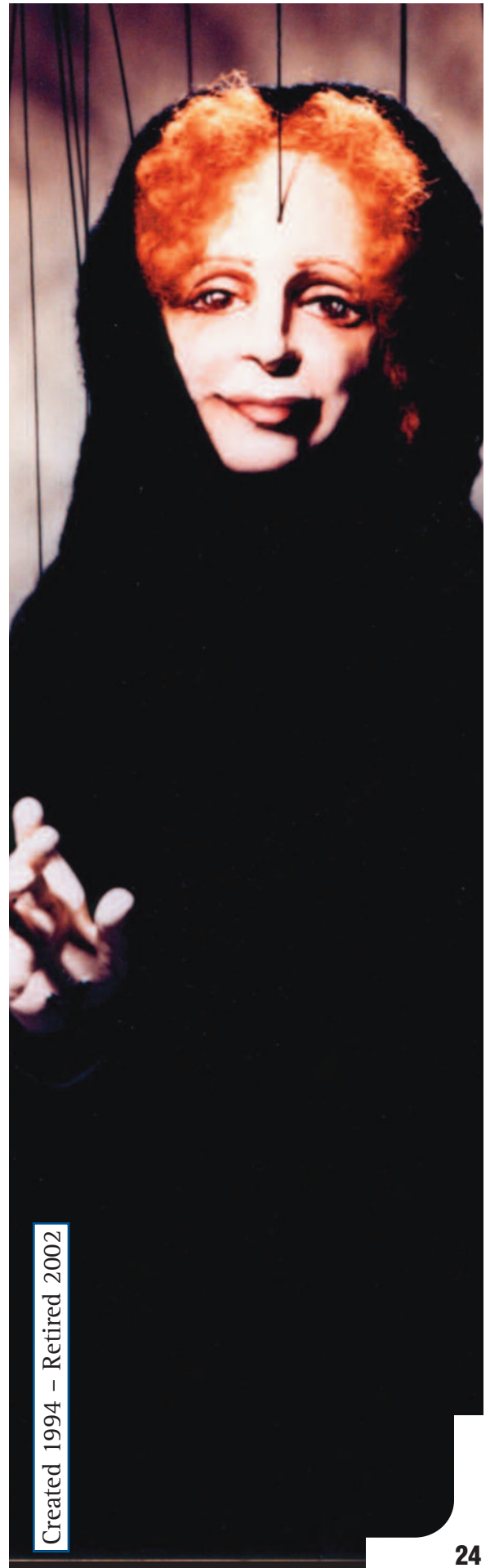
“ If theatre festivals are intended to represent the best international theatrical endeavors of imagination and style, then this show was in the right place. This is art as politics in its subtlest form; the call not to arms but to that most powerfully subversive weapon, imagination. ”

THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE
(Dublin, Rep of Ireland)

TINKA'S NEW DRESS

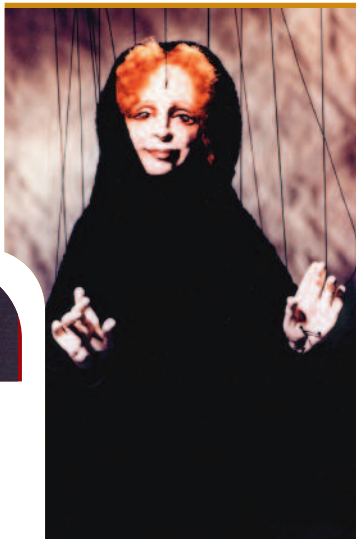
TINKA'S NEW DRESS is a fable for adults based upon the underground puppet shows of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Two childhood friends become puppeteers, each performing with the same beloved folk characters "Franz and Schnitzel". Fipsi, ambitious and naïve, aligns herself with the ruling government, The Common Good. Carl, headstrong and out-spoken, is forced underground as his satirical shows parody the censorship and oppression of The Common Good. More a commentary on the present than a glimpse into the past, *TINKA'S NEW DRESS* examines propaganda versus truth, compliance versus censorship, and the collective society versus the individual. *TINKA'S NEW DRESS* featured a cast of 36 breath-taking marionettes, a working carousel for the setting, and a haunting score by composer Cathy Nosaty. Adding to the immediacy of this allegorical tale, the two "Franz and Schnitzel" portions of the play were improvised at each performance.

Now retired, *TINKA'S NEW DRESS* was produced in the Calgary studio of Rink-A-Dink Inc. and premiered at Manitoba Theatre Centre in November 1994.



Created 1994 – Retired 2002

TINKA'S NEW DRESS



Puppet States

Puppets: The word summons up joy, animation, and magic when it means us watching them, humiliation and confinement when it means someone else watching us. We'd all like to be as enchantingly free as the wood and canvas creatures onstage apparently are; the bitter joke is that we're freer, and don't know it until somebody in power tries to jerk our strings and throw our voices for us. Whether a big Somebody Up Above may be doing just that is a matter for theological, not aesthetic, debate. The magic in the microcosmic world of most puppet theater comes from its ability to suggest simultaneously that there's a bigger world for every little one and that there isn't. Puppetry's whole tradition is rich with miraculous escapes, transformations, and liberties that contradict the idea of somebody above or below manipulating the figures; it's been dialectical since Punch first outwitted the Devil. This makes it a uniquely valuable tool for viewing the world. People who do their creating with only full-size humans onstage, or pictures of humans onscreen, are stuck with what they can make us see of our own world. Having a puppet stage is like having one of those magic mirrors so beloved of medieval legends and fairy tales: It magnifies our scrutiny of whatever it displays.

Take, for instance, the magic-mirror version of America today offered by the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes in *Tinka's New Dress*. Did I say "America today"? Sorry, I meant Czechoslovakia under the Nazis. Or maybe I meant a hypothetical future that contains elements of both. Burkett's world is an ancient, faintly sinister-looking, gilded carousel, on which some 37 puppets ride round in between scenes, set in a Europeanish city where Stephan, a dear old man, gives park puppet shows for kiddies featuring those eternal characters, Franz and Schnitzel. Scheming, bossy, red-wigged Franz is the big bully, whose schemes always end in disaster, no matter how helpfully dreamy, sweet-natured little Schnitzel abets him in between fantasies of being able to fly. The kids love Schnitzel.

The city where Stephan works has lately been taken over by a repressive, pietistic force known only as The Common Good, which dislikes, among other things, deviants, dissenters, and queers. Such people, when exposed, get moved to a district known interchangeably as "the ghetto" and "the camp." One of Stephan's two assistants plays her cards obediently and becomes a prosperous State Artist, using Franz and Schnitzel to deliver cute messages about conformity on state TV; soon Stephan's working for her. His other assistant, Carl, gay and outspoken, moves to the dubious district voluntarily, performing a lewd, satiric puppet show with the same figures, in a late-night cabaret run by a drag queen. Carl's sister Tinka, designer extraordinaire of pup-

Tinka's New Dress
By Ronnie Burkett
International Festival of Puppet Theater
Joseph Papp Public Theater
425 Lafayette Street
(Closed)

Ubu and the Truth Commission
By William Kentridge
International Festival of Puppet Theater
Joseph Papp Public Theater
425 Lafayette Street
(Closed)

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

Masters of the marionette art, mostly with Czech names I wouldn't inflict on our copy department, have created lifelike figures before, but never in my experience with this richness of detail and this psychological depth. Not only does Burkett conceive and build these fascinating, complex people; he creates all their voices, rarely missing a syllable even in four- and five-character scenes. Each of his marionettes has a different *walk*. Their faces, their hats, their relationships, their confusions, their silences are all meaningful and fully realized. Of course Burkett hates

about the performance, and many more ideas in it to discuss, which I hope tells you something about both the quality and the density of Burkett's amazing work, and explains why seeing his troupe every few years has just become a necessity of civilized theatergoing.



Tinka's New Dress: Ronnie Burkett's magic mirror

pet costumes, comes along reluctantly, and soon finds that drag queens offer costumers a special challenge.

Anyone who's ever seen a film or play about resistance to a totalitarian regime knows that the story will get grimmer, and it does; the one thing Burkett hasn't done as a writer is bring surprise to what's essentially a predictable system. In terms of dramatic structure, even the elements meant as surprises are predictable. But going to a puppet show for the dramatic structure is like going to a symphony concert to follow the chord sequences. Let me be frank about this: As a puppeteer, Ronnie Burkett is one of the world's geniuses. I've devoted so much space to the characters of his drama because his performance made me know and love every single one of them. I deny the existence of a puppeteer: This is a great ensemble of actors, so great that their appearance in an honest, good-hearted, somewhat predictable play is no hindrance at all to the joy of watching them work.

totalitarianism—who could perceive this much variety in life and stand for its being flattened out or suppressed?

Nor is this all, not by a long shot. The two segments we see of Carl's late-night Franz and Schnitzel act are improvised out of that day's headlines—which last week, in effect, meant a festival of Clinton-Starr jokes. Suddenly The Common Good and the Christian Right seemed awfully interchangeable. Further joke: We also get to see Franz and Schnitzel as Carl's rival conceives them for The Common Good. Her Franz and Schnitzel are minuscule; Carl's are larger than the dramatic characters themselves. And a more serious joke: Carl resembles his creator, who at one point kneels with his face in the light, sharing an intimate moment with his puppet avatar. With the big-scale Franz and Schnitzel, Burkett in essence assumes Carl's role; the puppeteer becomes the puppet, not vice versa. Take that, Pinocchio. And, though I'm forcing myself to stop for lack of space, there are many more things to praise

TINKA'S
NEW DRESS

the village

VOICE
FREE

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1998

PUPPET FESTIVAL REVIEW

Life Is a Carousel, a Dark One

By ANITA GATES

For a few minutes on Wednesday night, I thought Jim Henson had come back to life. There were puppets onstage at the Public Theater with the irresistible combination of heart-tugging cuteness and everybody-dies edge. But the story's setting was some Weimar-like republic, newly ruled by a group called the Common Good, and the humor was an intertwining of the political and the sexual that evoked the dark essence of "Cabaret." There were a lot of four-letter words. No Muppets need apply.

The Ronnie Burkett Theater of Marionettes' one-man, 37-marionette show, "Tinka's New Dress," which is part of the International Festival of Puppet Theater (produced by the Jim Henson Foundation), is brilliant.

The set, an exquisite dark-brass carousel with marionettes seated on the animals, has a deceptive sweetness. The ominous preshow announcements, from the fictional Common Good, are more accurate harbingers of the show's mood. "Compliance is the core of civilization," a woman's voice intones. "Please have your identification card available for inspection at all times." "This area is now secured. Movement will be monitored."

Mr. Burkett, whose theater company is based in Calgary, Alberta, appears and brings out the marionettes he will operate and speak for over the next 2 hours 15 minutes.

There is an old man, Stefan, distressed because his puppet theater in the park, "The Franz and Schnitzel Show," may be closed down by the authorities. His protégé, Karl — "an unknown with ideals," as one character calls him — is the evening's pro-

tagonist. Karl is gay and political; he opposes the new dictatorship (which considers his sexual orientation a disease), and he is doing a midnight puppet show at a cabaret. Which is how we come to see the characters Franz and Schnitzel in action. Karl's best friends are his gentle-voiced sister, Tinka, a seamstress with the skills of a couturier, and Morag, a witchy heterosexual drag queen with a heart of gold. All the good characters end up living in a sector of the city they call "the camps." Some come to tragic ends. The very Aryan villains — like Phipsie, the "state artist," and Ezell, who tells Tinka that she cleans up "rather nicely for a camp person" — live and prosper.

The two performances of Franz (a tall Bozo-style redhead with sex on his mind) and Schnitzel (sort of a deformed white mouse with a high, sweet voice like Lamb Chop's) are priceless. "I refuse to use my innate cuteness for such puppet games anymore!" Schnitzel declares when he's politicized. Mr. Burkett works in Clinton jokes, Canada jokes and jokes that ridicule uptown theater audiences and ticket prices. A special puppet guest, Madame Rodrigue, teaches the audience how to greet a diva properly.

The portrayals of Karl and the other marionette characters' real, offstage lives are touching but not quite as inspired as the comic relief. In the end, though, the show wouldn't work without the juxtaposition of laughter and despair.

If you can't get into "Cabaret" this weekend, see "Tinka's New Dress," which continues through Sunday. It doesn't have Alan Cumming, but if you hummed a few bars, Schnitzel could probably do a mean version of "Wilkommen."

TINKA'S
NEW DRESS

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