

## **Puppeteer Burkett wins top arts prize**

BY STEPHEN HUNT

Ronnie Burkett is too old to be emerging, and too young to be a revered elder, so he'll have to settle for being named one of Canada's most outstanding theatre artists.

The 51-year-old former Calgarian, who pioneered the adult puppet scene in this city, was named Monday as the winner of the \$100,000 Elinore and Lou Siminovitch Prize in Theatre, a national award given annually that recognizes outstanding work in direction, playwriting and design.

Burkett, who topped five other finalists to take the prize, will receive \$75,000, with \$25,000 going to Clea Minaker as his protege.

It was a bit of a stunner for someone who started his puppeteering apprenticeship as a 14-year-old, and has since toured the world with such memorable shows as 10 Days on Earth, Provenance and the Memory Dress Trilogy of Tinka's New Dress, Street of Blood and Happy.

"Design has remained at the very centre of everything he (Burkett) has created," said Siminovitch jury chair Maureen Labonte. "His work challenges audiences and extends the way we see theatre.

"As a designer, he takes risks and experiments while remaining profoundly human in the theatre he creates."

The only thing the fertile imagination of Burkett couldn't envision as a young puppeteer was that he would ever find himself embraced by mainstages across the globe.

"I think the jury made a pretty great leap of faith," Burkett said Monday. "I would put the blame and credit on them for this, actually, because it's pretty staggering. Did I ever think about this when I was 14? Well, maybe the message they're sending is (to that) new 14-year-old weirdo in their parents' basement building puppets that this sort of thing is possible."