

## Calgary-born marionette artist Ronnie Burkett

BY VICTORIA AHEARN

TORONTO — Calgary-born marionette artist Ronnie Burkett, who toured his puppet shows around Alberta as a teen and now mounts them internationally for adult audiences, has won the 2009 Siminovitch Prize.

The designer and playwright, now 52 and based in Toronto, receives \$75,000 as well as \$25,000 to give to a protege of his choice. Clea Minaker of Montreal will be the recipient, he said.

"I really didn't expect that the jury would take such a bold leap," Burkett said in an interview, noting the prize recognizes accomplishments in design, direction and playwriting in three-year cycles (this year's focus was design).

"It doesn't actually say 'puppeteer' in there anywhere, so I thought: 'Well, as great and as welcoming as the Canadian theatre community has been to me over the years, I'm a puppeteer, there's no way.'"

Theatre veteran Maureen Labonte, chair of this year's jury, said Burkett's 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," she said.

Burkett was up against five other design finalists for the prize, which was created in 2001 in honour of scientist Lou Siminovitch and his late wife Elinore.

He said he isn't sure what he'll do with the prize money, but adds that in this economy, he won't be spending it "willy-nilly."

"I'm sure if nothing else, it will give me a little breathing room, which artists never have," said Burkett, who has mounted 13 shows under his company, Theatre of Marionettes, and is working on another.

Burkett said he developed a passion for marionettes at age seven, when he "opened the World Book Encyclopedia and it fell open to puppets."

"I looked at that two-page article and thought: 'Well that's what I'll do for the rest of my life,' and then my mom called me for lunch and that's all I've ever been interested in really," he said.

"It's a bit crazy, huh? The family joke was that they'd wished for years that it had fallen open to pediatrician or podiatrist, but no such luck."

Years of reading up on the craft and mentorships with puppeteer veterans followed, and at age 14, Burkett took his marionette shows on the road.

"My dad would pack up the car with my stage and my gear and drive me around to those lucrative \$50 gigs," he said with a laugh.

"It's only since my dad passed away a year ago that I realized he probably lost a lot of money on gas and hotel rooms and things while I pocketed the \$50 cheque, but that was the beginning of it."

Since then, Burkett has mounted marionette shows around the world and on TV. His focus has been on adult-oriented content, he said.

"Puppetry is always thought of as for kids, and cute, little, soft, talking animals," he said. "And so I've spent the better part of two decades trying to rest the form from that preconception."

Burkett found out he was to receive the Siminovitch honour about two weeks ago while he was mounting a show called "Billy Twinkle," about a middle-aged puppeteer, at the Sydney Opera House in Australia.

While he found the news to be "fantastic," it was overshadowed by word that his mother had died that same day in Medicine Hat, Alta.

He said his parents "would've loved" the idea that he was receiving a prize sponsored by a major corporation (BMO Financial Group).

"What are the chances of bankers throwing a party for a puppeteer?" said Burkett, who is now writing his next show.

"They would've actually loved that."

The other 2009 Siminovitch finalists - chosen from a field of 17 nominees - were Bretta Gerecke of Edmonton; Anick Labissonniere of Montreal; Ken MacDonald of Vancouver and Toronto; and Jean Bard and Richard Lacroix, both of Montreal.

Toronto playwright Daniel MacIvor won the prize last year.