

Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett handed \$75,000 award

The Siminovitch Prize winner also hands out \$25,000 to protégé Clea Minaker

BY JAMES BRADSHAW

Master puppeteer Ronnie Burkett has won the 2009 Elinore & Lou Siminovitch Prize in Theatre – a distinction that comes with a welcome \$75,000, no strings attached.

With the prize allocated for a designer this year – it also rewards playwrights and directors on a three-year cycle – Burkett won for crafting marionettes. The Toronto-based Alberta native has been nominated in the other categories before, but being celebrated as a designer just feels appropriate: “This is the essence of me,” he said yesterday.

The 52-year-old received word that he'd won the prize the same day his mother died. He said he never dreamed he would be chosen, but adds that at the end of a tough year, he's grateful for the boost.

The creator of shows such as *Tinka's New Dress*, *Street of Blood* and *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* increasingly finds joy in writing his unique plays, which feature puppets he builds himself tackling weighty, adult subjects such as how artists worked in the repressive Nazi regime, and AIDS.

But as he stares ahead at a year-long process of “being in the studio, sculpting and carving, designing and drawing” for his next show *Penny Plain* (about “the end of civilization”), he admits he finds the craftsmanship increasingly hard going.

“I certainly don't hate it, but it's a lot of work. I don't have the same energy for it that I used to,” he said.

Part of Burkett's weariness undoubtedly comes from the difficult year he's had. Burkett's company was hit hard by the recession, as well as the federal government's cancellation of much of its international touring funding, which he called “a death blow” he's still fighting to recover from.

He insists the recognition, a much-needed mid-career affirmation, is the best part of his win, but the windfall that comes with it gives Burkett some breathing room financially, “and I've never actually had that,” he said.

The Siminovitch Prize's total value is \$100,000, making it the most lucrative honour in Canadian theatre. In addition to \$75,000 for the winning artist, the prize comes with \$25,000 for a protégé of their choice.

Burkett took his time choosing, since he suspects the chances of another puppeteer winning any time soon are slim. In the end, he tapped Clea Minaker, an innovative Montreal-based artist who has explored puppetry to create all sorts of “odd little things,” such as avant-garde “performance art costume puppetry,” and who recently performed live, large-scale shadow puppetry as a backdrop for touring shows by the singer Feist.

Burkett feels that “big puppetry” of the kind seen in National Theatre's *War Horse*, the Broadway musical *Avenue Q* and recent projects by Robert Lepage, is thriving. But his interest lies with “the odd little freaks making small shows.” Burkett theorizes that a whole generation growing up with *The Muppets* led it to make reams of “derivative, flappy-mouthed Muppetty stuff.” Much to Burkett's delight, they're now being supplanted by a new, highly experimental generation of puppeteers like Minaker.

“I think a new day has begun,” he said.

Burkett was chosen by a five-member jury, chaired by Montreal-based dramaturge and translator Maureen Labonté. She took over from Leonard McHardy, the chair for the past six years, who faced complaints last year that the close association of a series of winners and judges was breeding cynicism about the prize. McHardy's departure as chair was not connected to the controversy.

This year, Burkett beat out theatre designers Jean Bard of Montreal, Bretta Gerecke of Edmonton, Anick Labissonnière of Montreal, Richard Lacroix of Montreal and Ken MacDonald of Vancouver for the award.

Past winners include director Daniel Brooks, playwright John Mighton and designer Louise Campeau.