

Ronnie Burkett's puppet tears of happiness

BY MARK MEDLEY

Ronnie Burkett, one of the world's most renowned puppeteers, was named the winner of the 2009 Siminovitch Prize in Theatre yesterday. While the \$100,000 prize alternates between honouring a director, a playwright or, like this year, a designer, Burkett is probably the only person to have been nominated in all three categories.

"It rotates between director, playwright and designer - it never once said puppeteer in there," he told the Post yesterday. "But I think it's maybe most appropriate that I'm the recipient in this category, just because that's what I primarily do: I make these things for the stage. They're visual and they're designed and they're crafted. The whole purpose of my work is to put those marionettes on the stage."

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Burkett learned he'd won about two weeks ago, while touring his latest production, *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*, in Sydney, Australia.

"I had to read the email five times. I didn't believe it," he said. "I just sat down on the edge of the bed and had a little cry."

Named after the scientist Lou Siminovitch and his late wife, the playwright Elinore, the prize goes to someone who has "advanced Canadian theatre through a body of work achieved in recent years while influencing and inspiring younger theatre artists."

"The selection of Ronnie Burkett as winner of the 2009 Siminovitch Prize goes to recognize his unique contribution to theatre design. Design has remained at the very centre of everything he

has created. His work challenges audiences and extends the way we see theatre," said jury chair Maureen Labonté in a statement. "As a designer, he takes risks and experiments while remaining profoundly human in the theatre he creates. He continues to inspire younger, emerging artists whom he has mentored and taught."

This year's jury also included costume designer M  r  dith Caron; Rachel Ditor, Literary Manager of Vancouver's Arts Club Theatre and adjunct professor in dramaturgy at UBC; Sue LePage, a set and costume designer; and Mieko Ouchi, co-founder and artistic co-director of Edmonton's Concrete Theatre.

The Calgary-born Burkett, who now resides in Toronto, is Canada's best-known puppeteer. His work, including *Street of Blood*, *Tinka's New Dress*, *Happy* and *10 Days on Earth*, has been staged around the world.

The other finalists, selected from a list of 17 nominees, were: Jean Bard of Montreal; Bretta Gerecke of Edmonton; Anick Labissonni of Montreal; Richard Lacroix of Montreal; and Ken MacDonald of Vancouver and Toronto.

The only strings attached to the \$100,000 prize is that \$25,000 must go to an organization or prot  g   of the winner's choosing; Burkett selected young puppeteer Clea Minaker as his benefactor.

"I actually think she's a thoroughbred in the making," said Burkett. "I think she's interesting, and of her time. For me, I was really determined that, because the focus this year is design, that I could hand it over to a designer of puppet theatre. And she's certainly that, plus a performer, so she ticked off all the boxes, and I was really excited to be able to choose her.

"She doesn't do it the way I do it at all," he added.

The money comes at a good time. Burkett says that last year, when the federal government cancelled the cultural export program, "we had to really evaluate whether this little company [Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes] would even survive."

They will: Next year Burkett will bring *Billy Twinkle* to Calgary, Montreal, and hopefully Toronto, and also start writing a new play.

"As for what the money will do," he says, "I don't know. It might be as simple as just buying me a little time, a little breath. I certainly have a wish list which goes from the sublime to the ridiculous, but I have a feeling I'll be a bit more pragmatic and just do nothing with it for a while."