



THEATER

Review: Anxious Puppets and Other Dummies in ‘The Daisy Theater’

Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes: The Daisy Theatre | NYT Critics' Pick | Off Off Broadway, Play, Puppet

Theater Closing: October 10, 2015 | Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 W. 37th St. | 646-731-3200

By **LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES** OCT. 1, 2015

Performing in New York for the first time in 15 years, the Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett was keeping expectations low. “I’ve brought you the stupidest show I’ve ever created,” he told the audience at Baryshnikov Arts Center on Wednesday.

Whether he meant it as a warning or a boast, “The Daisy Theater” is emphatically not stupid, but it is lightheartedly silly, sometimes deliriously so. If you’ve never experienced an antic, bawdy, marionette version of the crypt scene from “Romeo and Juliet,” here is your chance. You’d do well to seize it.

Fair warning, though: “The Daisy Theater” is a bit of a shape-shifter. Structured like a variety show — one for grown-ups, complete with puppet nudity and a profusion of blue humor — it has a rotating cast of 40 marionette characters, familiar from Burkett shows like “Street of Blood” (Edna Rural of Turnip Corners is here, chatty in her Sears housedress) and the Obie Award-winning “Tinka’s New Dress” (Schnitzel, the reliably endearing fairy child, plays a prominent role).

The lineup and length change every night, with audience votes determining some of the acts. If the crowd hadn’t clamored more loudly for the elderly Canadian actress puppet Lillian Lunkhead than for the faded Hollywood star puppet Esmé Massengill (“My stage manager just lost a little bet,” Mr. Burkett said with a smile), we wouldn’t have seen Lillian as Juliet, flinging herself on the fresh corpse of her Romeo, embodied by a cheerfully game young man the puppeteer had plucked from the audience.

Mr. Burkett, who operates the marionettes and changes the scenery, too, is an expertly resourceful ringmaster who appears to have no qualms about cracking himself up with partially improvised dialogue. On Wednesday, there were jokes about the Pope Francis-Kim Davis meeting, ABC’s new Muppets reboot, the auditorium’s unusual seats (“odd cuddle benches,” Edna Rural called them) and the arts center’s artistic director, Mikhail Baryshnikov.

The looseness of the show — presented in association with the Center for the Art of Performance at U.C.L.A. — means that there are occasional dead spots, and the shifts in tone can be jarring. But the quiet that creeps in gives depth to the revelry. “I’ve always been worried if I stop talking, someone will tell me some bad news,” Edna says, and she’s not the only puppet with anxiety.

Little Woody Linden, a vaudeville dummy, dreads the demise of his aged ventriloquist, Meyer Lemon. “His grip is firm, and it’s my heartbeat,” the dummy says.

Mr. Burkett is the animating force for all these characters — one of whom, Schnitzel, fears he’s being controlled from above, jerked around for no reason by some unseen man up there. But as puppetmasters go, Mr. Burkett is a benevolent god: indelicate, a little poignant and kind of fantastic.

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