

IN 'THE DAISY THEATRE,' PUPPETEER RONNIE BURKETT HAS THE WORLD — AND HIS AUDIENCE — ON A STRING

BY TOM SELLAR

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Ronnie Burkett with the cast of *The Daisy Theatre*

Hiroyuki Ito

"What I'm going to do is make shit up," announces the master puppeteer at the top of his new show. He stays true to his word. *The Daisy Theatre*, a funny and sometimes provocative evening with cult marionette showman Ronnie Burkett, doesn't have a fixed running time. (It came down after two hours the night I saw it, with a boisterous crowd egging him on.) In his fingers, the 40 marionettes hanging out in the wings become a kind of strung-together vaudeville ensemble. This cast might look inanimate, but they're ready to deploy at the whim

of the godlike man who manipulates and speaks all the roles. Standing in the bridge over the playing space, the spry, T-shirt-clad Burkett never seems to stop talking and moving around. The result is a thoroughly enjoyable, hyperkinetic evening of humor, song, and drama — short scenes that resemble a chain of daisies.



Ronnie Burkett has Major General Leslie Fuqwar yanking your chain in *The Daisy Theatre*.

Hiroyuki Ito

These creatures, which Burkett crafted, are beautifully intricate and remarkably expressive. They cover the personality spectrum. Yet all seem haunted by age. The horny, barrel-chested bully Frantz laments the decline of the Left (while cracking raunchy jokes about a certain presidential candidate's pantsuits and Kermit's endowment). Other characters include a spinster librarian, an old-school white-tux crooner, a frumpy widow, and an aging French chanteuse named Jolie Jolie. All somehow embody a basic fact about marionettes: They're dead wood, but they come to life onstage. "Look at me/Please don't look at me," the Parisienne singer barks to her admirers, reflecting her ambivalence about making a show of her age.

Burkett, too, seems to have time on his mind. *The Daisy Theatre* marks the Canadian artist's welcome return to New York after more than fifteen years away. Those who remember his political edge — his earlier work touched on AIDS, war, and other weighty matters — might be surprised. "I realized I've got to lighten the fuck up," he confesses early on, in a rare personal aside. Many of his puppets also wrestle with questions of control, and when to give it up.

The audience sometimes votes for the next act in this series of shorts; one marionette complains that we're horrible people who "sit in the dark and judge." Perhaps to remedy that

complaints that were horrible people who sit in the dark and judge. Perhaps to remedy that shortcoming, Burkett invites selected spectators (always guys) into the show — my fellow audience members Josh, Todd, and Mike earned commendations for their brave deeds. Mike wound up stripping bare-chested (a long story) to take the reins of Major General Leslie Fuqwar, a deluded British Empire relic who sings ghastly tunes from the colonial songbook. Josh gamely stood in for a eunuch slave as part of a Hollywood diva's fantasy; he endured a surprisingly vivid seduction — when she placed her hand there, we almost forgot that underneath the feather boa, stilettos, and pearls was a wooden figurine.

Abundant fun and sharp wit carries *The Daisy Theatre* over some prosaic moralizing material — especially a superfluous finale in which a squeaky naïf called Schnitzel warbles about finding freedom by crossing political lines. No matter: Burkett's artistry transcends these occasional slogans and we surrender to it happily. Ultimately, we're all just puppets in his hands.

The Daisy Theatre

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