

Ronnie Burkett's The Daisy Theatre is worth shouting about

[Adrian Chamberlain](#) / Times Colonist

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Some of the characters that appear in Ronnie Burkett's The Daisy Theatre. Photograph By HANDOUT

What: Ronnie Burkett's The Daisy Theatre

Where: Metro Studio

When: Opens 8 tonight, continues through Nov. 22

Tickets: \$38 advance, \$40 door (Ticket Rocket at 250-590-6291 or ticketrocket.co)

How does puppeteer Ronnie Burkett keep his throat in shape to voice 40 marionettes in The Daisy Theatre? Simple — he uses a vibrator.

“It sounds really funny,” Burkett, 58, said from his Toronto home. “What it is, you use a sex vibrator on your vocal cords to stimulate and relax them. This has saved my life, actually.”

This week, the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes returns to Victoria for the first time in nearly 20 years. He'll be performing The Daisy Theatre, a solo puppet variety show peopled by such folk as Edna Rural of Turnip Corners and Lillian Lunthead.

In the rarefied world of puppet theatre, Burkett, who has 500 puppets in his basement studio, is a bona fide star. His 1994 breakthrough work was Tinka's New Dress, a puppet drama about a grim totalitarian regime not unlike Nazi Germany. It won two Dora Awards and a special citation from the Obie Awards, and provided Burkett with an

international standing.

Back to the vibrator. Burkett started using one for throat therapy after visiting an Alberta vocal coach who invented something called Vibrant Voice Technique. The puppeteer uses the vibrator on his throat nightly for 20 minutes to release muscle tension. It's not uncommon — Burkett says he often notices musical-theatre performers “walking around vibrating their vocal cords.”

He caps his own vibrating sessions with a sinus irrigation and a gargle.

Before performing *The Daisy Theatre*, Burkett does vocal warmups for a full hour. He plays 40 characters in the show, ranging from a falsetto-voiced elfin child to a gravel-voiced lounge singer. Burkett figures he covers a 41½-octave range.

It's a vocal workout. Burkett also received throat-care advice from a Calgary-based specialist who works with opera singers. The doctor told Burkett that on the day of a performance he must take it easy and avoid activities such as chatty lunches. “He said: ‘You just need to shut up all day.’ You know what, it was really nice to have someone say you can shut up,” Burkett said with a laugh.

In keeping with its neo-vaudeville theme, *The Daisy Theatre* features a burlesque act. Burkett has had a few different ones: a Latin performer, a farmgirl stripper and a classy fan dancer. Puppet burlesque is more specialized than one might think. Burkett visited an elderly puppeteer in Los Angeles years ago for lessons.

“There were only two or three people on the planet who really knew the mechanics of the [puppet] strip acts. I phoned him and he said: ‘Get down here.’ ”

For Burkett, *The Daisy Theatre* is a departure of sorts. His other shows have investigated serious subjects such as “the Holocaust, AIDS, the second coming of Christ and the end of civilization.”

The Daisy Theatre, on the other hand, is funny. Edna Rural likes to talk about her tattoos and give out recipes calling for cough syrup and NeoCitran. And while he has used memorized scripts for previous shows, in this one Burkett improvises much of the dialogue.

Another new twist is that he calls up volunteers from the crowd. Audience participation segments vary. Burkett recently enlisted a man to be a “dead Romeo” for a Shakespearean spoof. Audience members can also vote on the inclusion of characters or plot twists.

The Daisy Theatre is so loosely designed, he can add or drop puppets as he sees fit. “If I get an idea for a character or a song or a novelty act, I could just build it as a one-off and throw it in,” Burkett said.

The show, which debuted at Toronto's Luminator Festival in 2013, has been well received. In October, it played the Baryshnikov Arts Centre in New York, where one critic deemed Burkett “a benevolent god: indelicate, a little poignant and kind of fantastic.”

The Daisy Theatre has shifted the puppeteer's perspective a little. Before, Burkett said, his ambition was to play big soft-seat theatres. After performing this show, he realizes audiences crave intimacy.

His next project will bear this in mind. The audience will sit with him on stage — and Burkett will improvise using theatregoers as collaborators.

“I think it's either a career-killer,” he said, “or my next best idea.”

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