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JIM BURKE, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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Ronnie Burkett goes back to his puppetry roots in The Daisy Theatre

The legendary Canadian puppeteer visits Centaur Theatre for a brutally funny, semi-improvised show which has unexpected moments of pathos too.

Forty-plus years in the business and legendary puppet maestro Ronnie Burkett is beaming like someone who finally gets to be a real boy.

He's introducing [his touring show, The Daisy Theatre](#), which plays Centaur Theatre to March 24, and he looks as though he can't wait to clamber up onto his raised platform, grab a handful of strings, and bring out the first of the acts he'll be choosing from the scores of beautifully hand-crafted (by Burkett himself) characters waiting in the wings. After garnering much acclaim as a serious-minded artist, Burkett has said he's ready to return to the sheer joy and sense of fun of puppetry.

His vehicle for doing just that is The Daisy Theatre, which he launched in 2013. It's a semi-improvised cabaret show and you're never sure what you're going to get from one night to the next. In fact, Burkett, like a mischievously twinkly carnival barker, drops several not-so-subtle hints that audiences should shell out for return visits.

On opening night, many of his very funny one-liners are tailored at the expense of Montreal theatre folk (and critics) clutching their comp tickets. As for which characters he'll choose from his gallery of chanteuses, vaudeville acts, and indefinable oddballs (many of whom are supplied with original songs from longtime collaborator, John Alcorn), his decisions seem to derive mostly from a mixture of reading the room and sheer whim.

One of the first puppets Burkett introduces on this particular night, an adorable vaguely punky kid called Schnitzel, has a daisy growing out of his head, which suggests it's this to which the show's title refers. Actually, the name comes from underground theatres which sprouted up in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia (a subject he dealt with in his mid-'90s show, Tinka's New Dress), and there's a distinct spirit of defiance here too, though most of it is directed at the bounds of good taste. This is more Avenue Q and Team America than Muppets and lonely goat herds.

Expletives and filthy jokes come thick and fast, including from the mouth of Jesus Christ himself. And if that doesn't sound offensive enough for you, Burkett jokes about a certain scandal-hit Torontonion theatre company during a routine in which the puppet of a clapped-out actress gropes an on-stage audience volunteer. Burkett is probably even now recalling the ratio between the resulting groans and guffaws to determine whether he cracks that one again.

As brutally hilarious as the show often is, it also takes several detours into more thoughtful, even existential territory. A flatulent Albertan lady rambles confusedly from the depths of an armchair, unwittingly makes a joke about dildos, then has the audience on the verge of tears as she recalls sharing fortune cookies with her late husband. Little Schnitzel clambers up the curtain to address the omnipotent puppet-master himself, asking him why he was built without wings. In a scene

worthy of a Samuel Beckett short, a ventriloquist's dummy goes into a babbling panic when his doddering operator falls asleep.

These last two, as well as a burlesque number featuring a stripper called Dolly Wiggler, are just some of the more conspicuous examples of Burkett's astonishing skill as a puppeteer. His veering between, say, the childish squeak of an angelic child and the smoky rasp of a potty-mouthed Italian lounge singer way past her prime also marks him as a brilliant voice artist. A brilliant artist all round, in fact, who knows just how to pull an audience's strings on any given night.