

BURKETT AT HIS CHARMING, QUICK-WITTED BEST

Audience captivated by puppet protagonist's loss, discovery of (Lloyd) God and connection with a new family

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Edmonton Journal

"I do quiet things in my head," explains Darrell, the heartbreaking man-child hero of Ronnie Burkett's new play *10 Days On Earth*.

Quiet they may be (or not, in the case of Darrell's favorite storybook characters). But in Burkett's theatre of marionettes, thoughts, memories, fantasies, other selves enter the stage, fully formed, warm-blooded and dimensional.

You can, you must, marvel at the illusion of life, of course. There's no one in the world like Burkett. This is not *guy and dolls*. His diminutive creations, exquisitely sculpted and dressed, and animated by unexcelled technical virtuosity, command the stage with the merest nod, or shrug, or shuffle. They age expressively before us; Burkett knows an eerie amount about the way time erodes flesh.

But it's so much more than that. The puppets live; we share their humanity. That, my friends, is theatre in its very essence. And Burkett's marionettes seem able, somehow, to convey things no mere human actor can. Or should.

This is crucial in *10 Days On Earth*. Burkett has set himself a new challenge: his jaunty protagonist is mentally challenged. Darrell at 49 has a 10-year-old mind, uncluttered, simple in the connections he makes and the ones he doesn't. Darrell doesn't reflect, or sift through the chaos of the world. He lives in the moment, comforted by familiar routine. When his mom, fatally, doesn't emerge from her bedroom for 10 days, Darrell assumes she's sleeping.

His everyday life - off every morning to the bus stop, chat with Big Patsy from the group home, job at the shoeshine stand - is set forth onstage with beautiful economy in the early scenes, with the added poignance that his mom is "sleeping". Then they repeat, like the mantra Darrell loves, both in life ("mom mom mom mom mom!") and literature (the stories of gentleman canine Honeydog and chatterbox bird Little Burp).

Darrell interacts on a direct, irony-free level with the world. Being maladjusted is beyond him; Darrell has a capacity for happiness that will remind you of the title character of Burkett's *Happy*. His fragmentary conversations with Big Patsy start mid-thought ("mosquitos have 47 teeth"), and trail off. Both are satisfied. He has utterly non-judgmental conversations with Lloyd, a furious street guy who thinks, and possibly is, God. Lloyd God, the heavenly father, knows how infuriating parenting can be: "everyone's pissed at me today; everyone's mad at daddy."

Lloyd, incidentally, a gaunt wild-haired vision of a guy, has a truly startling physicality as he throws himself into ranting, flailing fits about the ingratitude of man ("after all I've done for you!") and the impending apocalypse.

There are touching flashbacks, too, where we meet little boy Darrell and we see the struggles of his single mom to equip her "angel with one wing" (as the show's signature anthem, by John Alcorn, has it) for life. Maternal love, exasperation, sadness and fear are fine-tuned in Ivy, who permits herself Friday nights on the town to find a man. There's a startlingly lovely scene in which she meets Darrell's dad at a dance and gets rejected one more time.

Burkett has frequently returned to the theme of what it means to have, or find, a home. In plays such as Tinka's New Dress, Street of Blood and Happy, a family is what you make for yourself. In 10 Days On Earth, he returns to these explorations. Like Darrell, the storybook animals, led by the redoubtable Honeydog ("this egg, sir, is queer") and including a self-dramatizing sheep Blanche DuBaaa, are on a quest to find a home. The scenes, set against a scrolling painted backdrop, are funny, an outlet (and in rhyme!) for Burkett's fast wit.

When a fast-talking rodent tries to weasel out of his incriminating situation - "I never wear hats; they make me look all snout" - you know you're in the presence of a premium comic actor. When a gentile pooch shrugs with delicate skepticism, you know you're in the presence of a master puppeteer. Burkett has done puppet shows within puppet shows before, but this might well be the most charming example.

Darrell ever-so-gradually discovers the dark truths about the mysterious absence that is death. The end, as Lloyd God grimly predicts, is always near. Darrell has, however, an instinct for friendship, and new families are waiting to be forged. Darrell's funny/sad scenes with hymn-singing Mrs. Irene Lempke, paid-up member of the Salvation Army, show the way.

For the first time lately, Burkett removes himself from the stage action (there's already a god onstage) to play puppeteer. He hovers above sliding oak panels (lit by Bill Williams). In addition to all the other voices, he's a kind of inner narrative voice that recounts tales, and sings a strange, brooding song about "a broken, tethered seraph."

"Simply simply"...that's the way the stories go. "Simply simply he was alone, on his own, and that was OK."

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