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Earth shattering Puppet master Ronnie Burkett has his Day in the sun

By COLIN MACLEAN, SPECIAL TO THE EDMONTON SUN

Ronnie Burkett continues to surprise.

Once he gleefully filled the stage with puppets, impressing us with his ability to keep them all in play. His humour was bawdy, his language salty and his purpose? Make us laugh.

But in 10 Days on Earth, now playing at the Roxy Theatre, the man generally regarded as the world's best puppeteer has pared his art down to its barest essentials to present a moving story of enduring love, loneliness and the importance of home.

Without seeing the production, it is hard to imagine (or describe) how much emotion the puppetmaster can wring from plaster, wood and strings.

Burkett has been moving toward 10 Days on Earth since he started his career performing for kids in a Calgary mall. This adult phase began back in 1994 with Tinka's New Dress, which was based on the true stories of puppeteers who performed in the face of the Holocaust.

Burkett's marionettes are tiny works of art in themselves. In an effort to breathe life into his creations, Burkett and his team of designers and builders painstakingly assemble each one with astonishing detail. Shoes are laced, dresses fold correctly, tiny vests and coats fit as if designed by some Lilliputian master tailor.

By the time Burkett takes over the strings, you are half-way into his world.

For the first time, Burkett does not share the stage with his puppets. Since this is a play about loneliness, he stays high above them, doing all the voices and manipulating the strings. When his characters walk they don't drift across the stage. They walk. You can hear their steps.

Perhaps after playing God the last time around he figures he can't go any farther.

And my, when he touches those strings how they come to life. He'll have you in the first 10 seconds as an aged woman with white hair walks across the stage. Once you enter his world you're there to stay. The audience I shared the evening with was mesmerized for the whole two hours.

Darrel is a middle-aged, mentally challenged man who lives with his mother. We learn about their warm and loving relationship through a series of flashbacks. One night she goes into her room and never comes out. An uncomprehending Darrel continues his life as if she were still alive - talking to her through the door.

Darrel's story runs contrapuntally with his favourite story, the dapper Honeydog and flighty duck Little Burp. The two characters meet a series of cute animal friends. At first you laugh at their vaudeville antics but soon you realize that they are searching for something much deeper than a few good laughs - they are looking for their place in the world. A home.

This is an immensely moving production, achingly sad, real and suffused with melancholy. Ronnie Burkett - what an actor, what a writer. And what a world he creates. Burkett began as an entertainer and he's become an artist.

10 Days on Earth is rich with complex emotions and yet simple enough to tug at your heart.

Sweet.

PLAY TIME: 10 Days on Earth.

COMPANY: Theatre Network production at Roxy Theatre through Nov. 26.

COLIN SAYS: 'Rich with complex emotions.'

CURTAIN CALL: 5 SUNS (out of 5)