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10 Days on Earth  
Donald Hutera at the Barbican

★★★★☆

Ronnie Burkett really knows how to manipulate his cast. And so he should, given that the dozen characters in this Canadian master puppeteer's latest full-length production are marionettes. They may be small in stature, but Burkett uses his beautifully-made creations to tap in to big themes and fundamental human emotions.

Burkett writes his own material, and supplies all the voices and narration. Populated by a typically broad range of searchers, survivors and misfits, 10 Days on Earth is one of his most finely constructed scripts.

The lead is Darrel, a middle-aged shoeshine man with learning disabilities whose mother, Ivy, has brought him up alone. We first see her as an elderly, wraith-like figure in nightgown and slippers, treading carefully through the handsome, wood-panelled corridor that is the principal set. It's the last walk she'll ever take. Leaving her slippers in the hall, Ivy retreats to her room to die.

Burkett combines the spell of a consummate storyteller with a playwright's craft. The narrative shuttles easily between flashbacks and the present, its gentle tension based on our uncertainty about when the sweet-tempered Darrel will discover his loss and how he'll react. Periodically, from his Godlike position in the shadows overhead, Burkett opens the walls centre-stage and takes us into a pastel-coloured, picture-book world. This is the realm of Honeydog, a "gentleman terrier" that has been Darrel's favourite fictional character since childhood, and Little Burp, the newborn duckling with which he sets out to find a home.

This touching show skirts sentimentality, and is probably a tad too long. The net effect, however, is bleak yet hopeful and occasionally both raucous and charming.

Burkett must love his characters to breathe such life into them. Darrel is an endearing innocent. And then there's Lloyd, a bony, wild-haired homeless man who believes he's God. His delusional tirades are bitterly funny, but at their core is a tender, world-weary sadness that characterises the entire performance.