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ON STAGE

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Master of puppets

Ronnie Burkett brings life to the lifeless

10 Days on Earth

By Ronnie Burkett, Starring Ronnie Burkett, Until Nov 26, Roxy Theatre (10708-124 St.), Tue-Sat 8 pm, matinees Sun 2 pm, Tickets \$28-\$30, \$23-\$24 for students/seniors, available at [www.tixonthesquare.com](http://www.tixonthesquare.com) or 420-1757, or The Roxy box office at 453-2440

Only Ronnie Burkett could make a duckling's droopy tutu compelling, or make an audience's heart soar with the transformation of a homing pigeon into a hot air balloon. Rats, dogs, rabbits and birds provide a childlike counterpoint to the main story in his latest theatrical outing, 10 Days on Earth.

The tale of Darryl, a mentally challenged man who goes about his life without realizing his mother has died, assays the very core of those ineffable yearnings that animate us. The desire for love, companionship, acceptance and a place to call home all echo gently but profoundly in this tale

The storytelling here is simple (in the best sense of the word), taking compelling sidesteps into the characters' pasts. There are many strands at play in 10 Days on Earth, but they weave together a narrative tapestry of offbeat wit and visual charm. Burkett has the uncanny ability to mingle humour and pathos in a manner that is more eloquent than the longest dramatic monologue. Of course he's helped by a haunting score by Cathy Nosaty, a song by John Alcorn that acts as a spiritual leitmotif of sorts, and set and lighting design are sublime.

It's remarkably easy to forget the cast is made of wood and wire, and that the voices all emanate from Burkett himself. Unlike in previous works Provenance and Happy, he isn't actually onstage with his cast; this time he's in shadow above the beautiful set, nimble hands flashing as he manipulates the strings. Because Burkett's technique is superb, it's completely unnoticeable—at times it seems he's transmitted his own life force into the marionettes. They breathe, laugh, weep, sing—and die.

Take the opening of the production—a ghostly woman in a nightgown descends the stairs in an old house. As she pauses, we see flashes of her as a young woman planning to go to Europe, fighting to keep her illegitimate baby, dressed up for a night on the town. It's eerie and beautiful.

Darryl too, is a gorgeous creation, childlike with an open smile and trusting

acceptance of everyone around him. Some of the most humanistic moments come through his interactions with Lloyd, a homeless man who thinks he's God. Perhaps he is, perhaps he isn't, but Darryl still shares his lunch with him.

Darryl's life is simple, days at his shoeshine stand, meeting his girl Patsy at the bus stop, and always thinking about his favourite book, a tale about a cranberry coated terrier called Honeydog and a duckling called Little Burp. The two traverse a verdant landscape in search of a home with a tree for Honeydog to nap under and a pond for Little Burp. Within their tale lie the seeds of Darryl's probable happy outcome and also a foretaste of heaven. As both tales reach their conclusion in a shower of sparkling light, there is magic afoot in the Roxy.

EVA MARIE CLARKE

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