

SHARON POLLOCK/10 DAYS ON EARTH
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Alberta Theatre Projects has launched its current season with Ronnie Burkett's latest puppet creation "10 Days on Earth" which premiered earlier this year in Toronto and concluded a successful three month run.

The Village Voice describes Ronnie Burkett as "one of the world's geniuses" and adds "seeing his troupe every few years has become a necessity of civilized theatre-going." He's a grand master of puppetry, with an international reputation and is truly a Canadian national treasure. To top it all off, he's one of our own, a real Alberta boy born and bred in Medicine Hat.

Calgary theatre-goers have a long, warm and heart-felt association with Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes from 1986's "Fool's Edge" to "Provenance" in 2003. So electricity was in the air, and the theatre crackled with audience excitement and anticipation as lights went up on Burkett's latest creation. That's the way it should be particularly when the work is by one of the world's significant theatre artists. And for those who may not be sufficiently aware of Ronnie's work, it's puppetry for the legitimate stage and an adult audience. He deals in serious themes with outrageous wit that cuts to the core.

Burkett has spoken in interviews of a catalytic and haunting experience that inspired "10 Days on Earth." In an English shopping mall he saw an elderly woman with a developmentally disabled adult, her son or so he thought. Burkett was touched by the woman's loving care and attention to the needs of this child in a man's body and the man-child's affectionate response to his mother. The question of what would become of him when his mother died solidified in Burkett's mind as "if you were alone and didn't know it, would you feel lonely?" And so "10 Days on Earth" came into being.

In the play Burkett presents us with Darrell, a mentally challenged middle-aged adult who lives with his elderly single mum who was abandoned by Darrell's father when she found herself pregnant. One day she retreats into her room, closes the door, and dies. Darrell returns home from his shoe shining job, knows he mustn't intrude when the door is closed, and continues on for 10 days, talking to her through the door, mourning the loss of the rituals and routines that have governed his life, and gradually realizing that something is not right.

He finds solace in recalling his favorite book in which a terrier, Honeydog, nattily attired in a cranberry waistcoat and bow tie, and a tutu clad duckling, Little Burp, search for a home. They meet a variety of animals from a raunchy rat in pink to a seductive sheep, Blanche Dubaa. The story of Darrell's 10 days, his simple conversations with street acquaintances from Lloyd a foul-mouthed preacher who just may or may not be God, to Irene, a Salvation Army worker, and the story of Honeydog and Little Burp's quest for a home are interwoven and, for me, subtly reflect each other.

"10 Days on Earth" is a deceptively simple story told with wit, insight, sensitivity and affection. But the plot is merely the surface of "10 Days on Earth." Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes is

hypnotic and multi-dimensional which deepens and enriches our engagement with the characters and the story. And that has something to do with the art of puppetry itself.

First we have Ronnie Burkett's marvelously and beautifully crafted puppets with their faces permanently etched into an expression, a smile, a frown, a grimace. I see those expressions change and I know that cannot be true. Yet it is. A theatrical miracle. Then there's Ronnie's manipulation of his cast, each broad or subtle manipulation true to the character of the individual puppet and the emotion or action of the moment. But economical as well, conveying the essence of that movement and moment. And the characters' voices, all given voice by Ronnie ring authentic for each.

The puppets are real, as real as you or I am. In fact they're more real than we are, and more real than any actor could be for Burkett's puppets are people stripped to their essence. Our awareness that the source of this magical multi-dimensional world is given life and unfolds before us through one multi-talented individual amplifies our engagement and entertainment. Viewing it is like looking through a microscope at our own world. It magnifies, penetrates and illuminates.

We have this tendency to define and circumscribe an individual's work. We say "Ah, that's the kind of thing he or she writes or directs or paints or role he or she plays." We label the work and the artist and then we compare his or her new work to old work. And if the label no longer quite fits, it seems we have a sense of unease. I think Burkett is exploring a slightly different path than his previous work and I find that really exciting. With the Honeydog and Little Burp story Burkett reveals himself as the Narrator. He's lit and speaks to the audience directly. The creator is acknowledging himself in a way I find significant.

I wonder if it is an indicator of where Burkett will go next. I know he'll go where his vision takes him. It won't be determined by the expectation of those who prefer an artist to run in the same spot.

As for his central question "if you were alone and didn't know it, would you feel lonely?" one answer is you can never be lonely so long as you have access to stories. Unlike Darrell most of us are seldom alone, yet we're told feelings of loneliness are pandemic. Perhaps Honeydog and Little Burp's story is an offering by Ronnie to us, as well as comfort for Darrell.

Popular as Burkett is, there are often good seats left in the run so try not to miss this latest work by a master of his art form.