

10 Days On Earth

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February 20, 2007

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"If I can get it to a place that feels real and feels true, and I can hit universal emotional themes, it doesn't matter if it's a puppet or it's me reading it, what matters is that it connects to the audience's frame of reference." - Ronnie Burkett.

Ronnie Burkett's 10 Days on Earth is about as close to a masterpiece as you can get. It tells the story of Darrel (a man with the mental maturity of a 10 year-old) who doesn't understand why his elderly mother Ivy will no longer come out of her room and eat with him. Following Darrel for 10 days as he slowly comes to realize what has happened to his mother, 10 Days on Earth blends emotional pathos with childlike wonder, creating an enthralling and moving night of theatre.

Intercut with the main story are scenes from Darrel's favourite children's book, a charming tale of a debonair dog in a cranberry coat known as Honeydog who, along with his friend Little Burp (a duckling in a tutu) is searching for a home and more importantly, a place to belong. As well as paralleling the central narrative, these delightful interludes work both as a respite for the audience from Darrel's world and an escape for Darrel. He refers to them as his 'quiet space.' By intertwining these, Burkett asks the audience to use their own frames of reference (primarily memories and stories recalled from childhood) to gain a deeper understanding of Darrel and his world, his goals and the way he views and deals with things. This personal connection creates an absorbing experience that really does draw you in.

The problem with this production is that a lot of people are going to miss it because it features puppets, which many associate with children's entertainment. However, the work of Burkett has traditionally dealt with mature subjects and 10 Days on Earth is no exception. Mental illness, sexuality, death and the need to belong and be loved are just some of the themes dealt with in the show and all are treated with respect and dignity, presented in a way that never trivializes them.

Canadian Ronnie Burkett has built his career upon shows that deal with topics commonly left to more traditional types of theatre. Generally considered to be one of the world's leading puppeteers, Burkett created his own theatrical company in the mid-80s, after a career in television, to facilitate the production of these more mature shows. The resultant plays, which included Provenance, Tinka's New Dress, Streets of Blood and Happy pushed the boundaries in terms of subject matter, toured the world and picked up several awards (including two Canadian Dora Awards and a special citation for an Obie) demonstrating that audiences and critics were receptive to this new form of entertainment, puppets for adults.

While sitting in the Opera House Playhouse one needed to only look around at the sold-out audience of adults who were completely enraptured by this simple yet beautiful tale and the

mastery behind its creation (Ronnie Burkett is visible throughout the performance and forms part of the show), to see how effective 10 Days on Earth is as a piece of theatre. It is wonderful, well and truly proving that puppets aren't just for children.

10 Days on Earth is playing at the Opera House Playhouse until March 3. Tickets are available through www.sydneyoperahouse.com.