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## Marionettes you won't forget

RONNIE BURKETT: His exquisitely complex and individualized wooden actors are anything but stiff

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An elderly woman, tall, frail and elegant, walks slowly across the stage to the top of a stair. She hesitates, then braces herself slightly before carefully descending. Soon she'll retrace her steps, enter her bedroom, close the door behind her and die. This is Ivy. Ivy is a marionette.

All the characters in Ronnie Burkett's *10 Days on Earth* are as exquisitely complex and individualized as Ivy -- her mentally challenged adult son, Darrell, his friend Big Patsy from the group home, the demented, obscenity-spouting street person Lloyd with the messiah complex (he calls himself the Lloyd God) and more. And all are made of wood.

They're also all written, designed, built, manipulated and voiced by the ridiculously talented Burkett.

I would call them all distinctively human, too, except that some characters are animals, come to life from Darrell's favourite storybook in a play-within-the-play starring lispng, cranberry-vested Honeydog and his talkaholic duckling friend Little Burp. Their story of looking for a home sweetly complements the human plot.

In this latest remarkable offering from Toronto's Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, here on the fourth stop of an international tour, Burkett shows once again why he is one of Canada's premier theatre artists and perhaps the world's most astonishing puppeteer.

Like Burkett's previous shows, *10 Days on Earth* tackles adult themes like self-sufficiency and mortality. We meet Ivy as a vital young woman with her whole life before her. She ends up spending it as a single mother nursing her elderly father and raising an autistic child who still lives with her when he's 49.

When Ivy dies, Darrell has to cope on his own. But for 10 days he doesn't know she's dead. One of their rules was that when mom's bedroom door was closed, Darrell wasn't allowed to enter. So now when he comes home from work at his downtown shoeshine stand, he calls "mom, mom, mom, mom, mom, mom" with increasing urgency. But nobody answers.

As moving and profoundly human as Darrell and Ivy's stories are, the two-hour-long intermissionless show has its deliriously funny moments, from Lloyd's messianic rants to the divaesque posturing of a sheep, Southern belle Blanche Dubaa-a-a.

Standing half-lit and unobtrusive halfway above the elegant oak set from which the dozens of marionettes hang -- every new costume and change of age requiring a different puppet for each character -- Burkett lets us see him pulling the strings. With the speed and facility of a classical pianist, he creates the subtle gestures of sometimes two or three marionettes at once while providing rapid-fire dialogue in

different voices and accents. It's a performance of remarkable technical skill and dazzling artistry.

Burkett takes theatre as we know it to a whole other level. Don't miss this show.

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