

Puppet master

Ronnie Burkett strings us along for a magical 10 Days

By [JOHN COULBOURN](#)

You should never really get to know an artist.

Not that there is anything wrong with artists -- indeed, in my experience, they are warm, compassionate and wonderful human beings, in the main.

But art -- good art and, by extension, the people who make good art -- should always surprise.

Judged on that criteria alone, *10 Days On Earth* -- the latest work from marionette master Ronnie Burkett -- is art of the highest order.

The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionette's opened *10 Days* in its world premiere Thursday in the CanStage Berkeley St. Theatre, where it plays through June 24, in a production of Rink-A-Dink Inc.

Surprise, of course, is nothing new to Burkett's audiences. For years, we've watched him take things so far over the top that we've suspected he might qualify for NASA funding -- and we've loved it all.

But for an artist like Burkett, the question eventually then becomes: When you've trained an audience to expect the unexpected, how do you surprise them again?

The answer -- his answer? Simple restraint.

In *10 Days*, Burkett seems to have said goodbye to big, broad shows that teeter constantly on the edge of chaos as he juggles myriad characters and a complex and often overwrought and overwritten storyline.

In their place, he's invented a less complex world, inhabited by far fewer characters, all of them moving through a simpler world that contents itself with interweaving just two storylines.

At the forefront of Burkett's brave new world is Darrell, a mentally challenged man in middle life whose world begins to unravel when his mother suddenly disappears from his life.

The details of Darrell's life from birth to present day are sketched with great affection, honesty and economy, from the man's abandonment at birth by his father through the



Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett with one of his creations, the mentally challenged Darrel. It's all part of his Theatre of Marionette show *10 Days On Earth*.

complexity of being raised by a harried single mother to his present-day occupation running a shoe-shine stand.

These everyday details are interwoven with Darrell's favourite childhood tale -- a children's story told in rhyme, of Honey Dog, a truly sartorial puppy, and his ward, Little Burp, a chatty duckling, and the characters they encounter in their search for a home.

There are, of course, flashes of earlier Burkett incarnations in this kinder, gentler world. Many of the characters Honey Dog and Little Burp encounter on their perambulations are vintage Burkett, stripped of subversion, while Darrell's homeless and profane friend Lloyd is convinced that he is God.

And, truth to tell, with Burkett pulling his strings, Lloyd the Lord makes just enough sense that you start to think he might just be who he claims to be.

But in the main, Burkett contents himself with a simpler format, stepping into the background (at least until some of the strings get crossed) and allowing his marvelous and miraculous marionettes to carry a story that is quietly rich in both complex issues and simple sentiment.

In a theatrical world rushing pell-mell to find the next big thing, it is almost as though Burkett has realized that he was on a treadmill, where bigger has come to mean simply bigger and not better.

In the face of that realization, he's stepped back in time to embrace the things in his miniature world that have proven truly timeless and re-invent them to new purposes.

His arts and crafts-inspired set may reek of Frank Lloyd Wright, but that sense of history doesn't keep him from exploring complex issues like sexuality among the disabled with a candour that is all too discomfiting.

What's changed is his approach. Where he might have once performed such exploration with a blazing cannon, he does it today with a scalpel. That makes the exploration no less courageous however.

No doubt, some in Burkett's following will find it difficult to adjust to this new approach, but it's not as though they are being asked to make the transition from a Ferrari to a Rolls -- or on a more prosaic level, from a rollercoaster to a merry-go-round.

While Burkett has made his name as an entertainer, he is, finally, an artist. And having painted the marionette equivalent of the Cistine Chapel in all its flash and colour, he's now content to step back and show us the delight and humanity he can find in a single piece of stone. Even better, for the first time, Toronto has a chance to be involved in the world premiere of one of his works and witness the many ways it can grow and change in the playing.

For people who respond to the art that Burkett makes and not just the entertainment he makes, this show is exciting -- but, when one considers the new directions he's exploring, it's not nearly as exciting as the next one.

10 DAYS ON EARTH

Director: Ronnie Burkett

Starring: Ronnie Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes

Sun Rating: 4 1/2 out of 5