

WOODEN CREATIONS OF '10 DAYS' ANYTHING BUT

10 DAYS ON EARTH

At the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, 1895 Venables, to Dec. 17
Tickets \$50/\$45, call 604 280-3311

BY PETER BIRNIE

Vancouver Sun

REVIEW

Ronnie Burkett has done it again. The master puppeteer makes his latest play, *10 Days on Earth*, so complete a piece of theatre that it eclipses many efforts involving big budgets and last casts of real actors.

For two hours, without intermission, it's only Burkett himself up there at the Cultch, atop an amazing setpiece that most closely resembles a judge's bench at the Old Bailey.

From above this platform panelled in rich wood, Burkett dangles dozens of long-stringed puppets in classic marionette fashion. As always, it's riveting how much character he can inject down the strings to his little characters.

In slippers and nightie, a crone pads along a shabby hallway, shifting along so slowly that she seems near death. Bingo. The mother of a mentally challenged middle-aged man named Darrel is indeed about to die, and what follows is filled with a fascinating study of Darrel's survival.

Burkett has the ability to convey many characters, both booming and quiet, and the skills as a craftsman to sculpt different facial features. There's a Darrel in his pajamas, a Darrel in a bath towel preparing to shower (and giving his little bum a scratch) and a Darrel dressed for his job shining shoes. Wait, he forgot his coat - and so another Darrel emerges, ready for a Toronto winter.

Each version comes and goes across an apron that's only a metre deep and four metres wide, yet is lit so specifically (in a subtle design by Bill Williams) that scenes are easily seen for what they are and where they're occurring. Darrel's flashbacks to memories of his life with Mom are made all the more poignant by the sight of a toddler Darrel or adolescent Darrel struggling to deal with a troubled mother who must escape every Friday night, "just for an hour or two," to cruise a singles bar in a desperate bid for adult companionship.

Burkett has always been blistering in his attacks on society's blissful ignorance of its unfortunates, and *10 Days on Earth* is dominated by a screeching street preacher named Lloyd, who thinks he's God.

Yet no matter how rabid Lloyd gets, he sees the genuine warmth within Darrel and responds gently to him. A calm counterpart to Lloyd's rantings comes when Burkett opens a pair of panels to reveal a painted

tableaux, which, in keeping with his blessed attention to the mechanics of classical theatre, is hand-cranked to shift scenes.

Sweet music by Cathy Nosasty plays for sequences set in the fantasy world of Darrel's favorite storybook characters, Honeydog the gentleman terrier (in a cranberry-red jacket) and Little Burp the duck. Here's the clever counterpoint to the dark and dreadful thematics of the main story, with its unending anxiety about Darrel's future; terrier and duck are upbeat and funny and offer everything that the mean streets of the big city don't.

Again, it's Burkett's deep understanding of what theatre can and should convey that elevates *10 Days on Earth* to something truly profound. Carve out the time needed to meet its little wooden wonders and their remarkable creator.

Sun Theatre Critic
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