

## **Billy Twinkle | Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes**

BY BRON BATTEN

Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett is an absolute master of his craft. Shattering the notion that puppet shows belong in the realm of children's entertainment, Burkett's productions are sophisticated explorations of the human condition.

His subject matter ranges from the savagely political, as explored in early pieces such as Tinka's New Dress, to the more personal notions of beauty and desire in the later work Provenance. His most recent production Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy is perhaps the most personal yet, containing autobiographical elements from the artists own life, intertwined with indistinguishable fiction.

Billy Twinkle is a cruise ship entertainer, performing nightly for an unappreciative audience of buffet guzzling holiday makers. One night he snaps, insults an audience member and is subsequently fired. Alone on the ships bow he makes an attempt on his life but is prevented by his dead mentor Sid Diamond, who appears as a hand puppet. At Sid's insistence and with his guidance, Billy relives his life through a marionette show, forced to examine it in minute detail.

It's an ingenious premise and allows vast scope for story telling as Burkett plays with time and scale. There's a miniature theatre within the actual theatre and the puppets it contains in turn have puppets of their own. Burkett deftly switches between marionettes, voices and an array of characters as they in turn dance, roller-skate and perform a striptease.

Burkett's creation is a detailed and intricate world that unfolds with almost cinematic vision. Echoes of Shakespearean tragedy resonate through the work, not only through the appropriation of the Bard's text but also through our hero's journey. Billy suffers the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune on his voyage from puppetry's golden boy to washed up cruise ship entertainer, striving eternally for the approval of his mentor.

Billy Twinkle gently lampoons the inherent pretension of the art world and contains a wry commentary on the nature of theatre and show business. Young Billy has a pure and wistful wish for a 'shiny life', but this is at odds with the often tawdry reality of earning a living as a performer. The beautifully droll and relentlessly rapid fire script weaves back and forth through time as we view Billy as a small town boy, dreaming of the big city lights, as well as the openly gay adult who's lost the passion that once spurred him so determinedly forward. The older Billy lives in a world where the shine has worn off completely, the sequins have faded to reveal a tired and disillusioned interior.

Burkett is a performer completely in control of every aspect of his creation. His connection with the audience and ability to ad lib draws the viewer into his finely drawn world. His presence looms large both literally and metaphorically within the work as Billy is a flamboyant character surrounded by an equally outrageous supporting cast. But this heightened style lends the necessary theatricality to this larger than life world. A shy and reticent Billy just wouldn't wash in this fantastical tale.

Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy is smart, funny, adult contemporary theatre. Go and see it - if only to view the master of a unique artform in his absolute element.