

Art versus showbiz razzle-dazzle, with strings attached

Master puppeteer delves into serious themes, keeping tongue firmly in cheek

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Theatre review

Billy Twinkle Requiem for a Golden Boy



EDMONTON - At a crucial moment in BillyTwinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy, Ronnie Burkett's complex and compelling new play, an up-and-comer puppeteer falls out with his grand old puppet mentor over the question of Artist and Creation. Billy Twinkle, who has added a Shakespeare act to his Stars in Miniature routine, is doing The Taming of the Moo, a hysterical livestock version with Cow-trina and Pet-rooster. Sid Diamond is mostly outraged by the visibility of his protege. "We don't want you to be God!" he bellows in his Stratford roar. "God is in the puppets." It's a pinch-me moment of extraordinary technical virtuosity; the technical term would be "fabulous." Billy is, after all, a marionette (in a tiny perfect straw hat), manipulating miniature marionettes with their own controls. So Sid, a marionette himself, has a point: the scene is owned by the characters, as acted by Burkett's marionettes. And the way Sid exits stage right, in silence, with a certain subtle sag of shoulder and a final poignant turn of head, is one of those golden Burkett moments where the slightest gesture opens a world of fulsome emotional expression.

But in Billy Twinkle, the scene is also the marionette theatre of memory. The rememberers are above, Burkett himself as middle-aged Billy, a cruise ship puppeteer just canned from his gig, and an exasperated hand-puppet Sid, deceased but trapped in the limbo of unresolved artistic issues. And they're scrapping, eyeball to eyeball. Burkett, a quesser by nature and one of our bravest theatre artists, has always taken huge risks with his audience -- not least by appearing onstage with his diminutive co-actors. In the self-contained fictional worlds the puppets populate, the human string-puller magically vanishes into our shared belief. And, paradoxically, the occasional intrusion of the puppeteer into the theatrical fabric only seems to reinforce the weave of that magic.

In a theatre fashioned from the mesmerizing humanity of his puppets, it is audacious in the extreme to cast Burkett himself as the lead character, presiding over a scene-by-scene retrospective of his life starring Burkett's marionette cast-mates. Can the dramatic illusion of Billy's story survive the segues, the vaudevillian back-and-forth? Will the marionettes feel that Burkett is stealing, or at least co-opting, their thunder? They're only human, after all. Billy Twinkle is virtually a test-case for the dramatic viability and power of what this highly original artist does. But then, what he does, what he's always done, is explore. It makes Billy Twinkle a distinct and sometimes disconcerting departure from Burkett's latest work. He has frequently probed the relationship between artists, their art, and their lives, witness Tinka's New Dress, Happy, Provenance and the rest -- but never before in such depth.

For a play with a shameless Catskills sense of humour and an ample share of laugh-aloud wit, Billy Twinkle is full of anxieties -- about middle-age, mid-career slump, the impulse to razzle-dazzle the crowd versus "serious" artier pursuits, the father/son continuum of the art form in mentorship. When the winking, beaming, double-entendre world of showbiz comes up against "art," as it so often does in the Burkett crucible, comedy results. Burkett, torn between the two himself, has genuine affection for the classic variety acts -- the stripper Rusty Knockers, the aging soubrette Biddy Bantam Brewster, the rollerskating Bumblebear, et al. The scenes with Sid the hand-puppet are a kind of Punch and Judy, with Burkett as the punch-ee. Billy's nemesis Benji, an avant-gardiste puppeteer with an ultra-nerd's perennial post-nasal drip, is a riot. He speaks the language of irony: "It's a brave neo-day," he says to Billy. "You slapped my cold dead heart into beating." Poised wincingly between showbiz and art, there's the unforgettably sad/funny scene, perfectly judged, of ancient Sid, a marionette in hospital gown and bathrobe with an inflatable pink balloon in his pants, a grotesque and moving portrait of old age. Significantly, the show -- exquisitely crafted by Burkett and team, costumed (Kim Crossley), lit (Kevin Humphrey) and accompanied (composer John Alcorn) -- is bookended by two scenes of Billy Twinkle confronting his god, who turns out to be Us. At the outset, in a long, perhaps over-extended, suicide rant, he's at the ship's rail, fired for hushing some mouthy "peroxide pig" in the house seats. At the end, he quotes Prospero in the epilogue of The Tempest ("now my charms are all o'erthrown"), returned to the world of men, renewed in his artist's need to communicate with us. Let the tempest, as Sid tells Billy, "continue to brew."