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No strings attached

By COLIN MacLEAN

Ronnie Burkett is probably the best at what he does in the whole world.

Since 1994, and his international breakthrough with Tinka's New Dress, the Lethbridge born entertainer has led the movement to take puppetry out of the old children's Punch and Judy tradition and into the realm of adult theatre.

In subsequent productions, from Provenance to 10 Days on Earth, he has brilliantly demonstrated that involving, serious and sometimes achingly human stories can be told through the art of the puppeteer.

In his latest work, Billy Twinkle, Requiem for a Golden Boy, being given its world premier at the Citadel Theatre, Burkett has taken a lifetime of obsession with marionettes, the wear and tear of a life on the road and his own entry into middle-age and rolled them into funny, often outrageous, entertainment that touches the heart as often as it stimulates the funnybone.

Burkett maintains that the show is not autobiographical, but it's hard for anyone familiar with his work over the years not to find echoes of his life.

Billy Twinkle is a former child star who finds himself in middle-age doing celebrity puppet shows for the Happy Sea Sun Cruises. One night he loses it, insults a particularly obnoxious audience member, and is fired.

As he stands at the railing of the ship contemplating suicide, the ghost of Sid, his mentor, returns (as a Shakespeare-quoting and highly animated hand puppet) and, in It's a Wonderful Life style, forces the burnt out puppeteer to relive his life as a marionette show.

Billy comes to realize that his life has been important and joyful.

Burkett's story is engrossing enough, but he stops from time to time for a tour de force display of just sheer talent. A stripper (Miss Rusty Knockers) takes it all off in a wowsler of a routine, another puppet sucks up a drink through a straw.

An arthritic old man walks about the stage with such realism that you think, "Gawd, the thing's alive". An aging soprano sings and dances a fiery gypsy melody. A bear roller-skates.

Burkett even manages to have some of his puppets manipulate other tiny puppets as he keeps several levels going from his perch high above in his detailed mini-Ziegfeld set flanked by two staircases.

He not only does all the voices, but often joins in as a character himself. Even as he stands in full sight, his tiny charges take over the stage and through some magical alchemy, the man pulling the strings seems to disappear.

The puppets themselves are rendered in precise detail and Burkett keeps them moving and changes them so quickly, you never get the feeling that you are watching lifeless glass, strings and papier mache. All of the characters are given a separate voice and movements that are all their own.

His displays of genius and craft will leave you breathless.

Billy Twinkle brings us a world class master at the peak of his powers.

SUN RATING: 5 out of 5