

Twinkle, Twinkle, Puppet Star

Ronnie Burkett's astonishing puppetry skills are just the icing on the cake in *Billy Twinkle*

by Michael Hingston in Theatre Review

BILLY TWINKLE: REQUIEM FOR A GOLDEN BOY

Maclab Theatre, The Citadel

Let's ignore, for a minute, the fact that *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* features world-class puppeteer (marionettist?) Ronnie Burkett commanding nearly two dozen of the most expressive and painstakingly crafted puppets you're ever likely to see. If this show were performed a cast of 12 competent, real-life actors — hell, even if it were just Burkett on an empty stage for 105 minutes, switching in and out of the various characters — it would still probably merit four stars on heart alone.

But as one of his marionettes puts it, "Arrogance is to have an ability and not use it," and by this standard Burkett is not an arrogant man; his numerous talents (as actor, writer, director, costume and set designer, and, of course, puppeteer) are all on full display here. Burkett breathes nuance and tenderness into each of his wooden creations, and carries the whole thing with so much old-fashioned showmanship that it's easy to forget he's doing it all himself. *Billy Twinkle* is an exquisite, captivating show.



As the eponymous Billy, Burkett is a once-revolutionary puppeteer who's been reduced to performing on cruise ships for the bloated and gassy. He's on the verge of throwing himself overboard when the ghost of his old mentor, Sid Diamond, suddenly materializes beside him as an angry hand puppet (who is inexplicably wearing bunny ears). Sid convinces Billy to restage his entire life with marionettes, in an *It's a Wonderful Life*-ish attempt to make him see the error of his ways.

While Burkett has great affection for the classic marionette routines, and in fact the first scene features two standard characters, a stripper and a roller-skating bear, *Billy Twinkle* is first and foremost a modern story. There's a great self reflexive streak at play, starting when Burkett jumps off the ship, only to realize it's part of a stage, and hitting its stride when the marionette Billy creates his first puppet as an ambitious 12-year-old stuck in Moose Jaw. Watching Burkett controlling Billy's every move, and Billy (or maybe Burkett again) controlling the even smaller puppet feels like a Borges story or Michel Gondry music video brought joyfully to life.

The only modern peer to Burkett's work that I can think of is *Team America: World Police*, the 2004 marionette comedy no extended vomiting sequences, thankfully — but Burkett's show isn't without its own frankness. Most of it has to do with Billy's penis, as well as his discovery of his homosexuality, which is barely dormant to begin with, as a teenager. I also lost track of the number of times Burkett and Sid tell each other to fuck off, usually in the midst of heated face-to-puppet-face arguments.

But there's no substitute for seeing these extraordinary marionettes in person. If nothing else, *Billy Twinkle* will restore a sense of awe to those who feel jaded by art in the age of information — those who think that bootlegs took the fun out of live music, or that YouTube ruined magic. Understanding how Burkett's marionettes work, and seeing the various strings that move the mouths and limbs, does nothing to dilute how other-worldly it is watching them move. And each with their own unique mannerisms: the evangelical woman who holds her Jesus puppet straight up in the air, the nerd-turned artist who never quite shakes off his bad posture, or the elderly man Billy creates in Sid's image, who walks around the mini-stage so realistically that it's actually sort of terrifying.

Billy and Sid argue in the play over whether puppeteers should think of themselves as playing God, but if people like Burkett aren't allowed to, who else (aside from maybe the guys at Pixar) even comes close?