

## **Man, puppet show pulls right strings**

**By Jo Ledingham**

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### **BILLY TWINKLE: REQUIEM FOR A GOLDEN BOY**

Mid-life? Mid-career? Mid-marriage? Before you throw the baby out with the bathwater, take a tip from Billy Twinkle: revisit the passion that got you there in the first place.

It's hard not to see virtuosic marionette artist Ronnie Burkett in Billy Twinkle, a middle-aged puppeteer who's questioning where it's all going. But, unlike Burkett, Billy has just been sacked for hollering "you bloated breeder," "peroxide pig" and other insults to his inattentive, talking, drinking audience.

Billy has been busting himself entertaining these louts with stock puppet show favourites like lovable, roller-skating Bumblebear and stripper Rusty Knockers. (To master the puppet stripper routine, Burkett sought out an 80-year-old Californian puppeteer.) Ready to throw himself off the stern of the Happy Sea Fun Ship, Billy admits, "The worst is not liking puppets anymore."

And that's when we know that Burkett isn't Billy Twinkle. It's clear that Burkett loves his little wood-and-string people from Billy's lean, pharmacist father puppet to Doreen Gray, a fat, beanie-wearing puppeteer who's right hand is ensconced in a Kermit-like sock puppet she calls Jesus.

Saying a little prayer before hurling himself overboard, Billy inadvertently arouses the ghost of his mentor, Sid Diamond, and upon Sid's insistence, Billy goes back in time to see himself as young Billy--so excited, so eager to hit the bigtime with his little handcrafted marionettes.

Imagine if you can, Burkett handling the strings on Billy who's working the strings on Cowtrina and Petrooster in Taming of the Moo, Billy's barnyard send up of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew. Or Burkett handling the strings and singing while the 15-year-old Billy marionette works the strings on a tiny, black nightclub singer. Puppet shows within puppet shows; and in Burkett's usual fashion, he's very much a part of the show.

His female creatures lean against his leg in a languorous, sexy way. Hand-puppet Sid strokes Burkett's face while giving him advice, "Be good, sweetheart, or they'll rip you to shreds." It's obvious that the pink balloon that hangs between the legs of the slipper-shuffling, hospital-gowned old puppet guy in the hospital is being inflated by Burkett. Sometimes you wonder whether Burkett is a character in a show created by a bunch of puppets or the puppets are in a show conceived by Burkett. (The puppets hang quietly in the shadows awaiting their cue, and I caught myself wondering whether they were nervous, had stage fright or were in a state of excitement. This is where Burkett can take you.)

It's a workout. Burkett confesses to being black and blue from being thrown to the ground by hand puppet Sid. He's up and down the curved stairways of the glitzy cruise ship set. And he sings, in several voices, songs written for the show by John Alcorn, including the torchy "High Falutin' Lady From the Wrong Side of Town" and "A Gypsy Went A-Riding," an aria sung by increasingly tipsy society dame, Biddy Bantam Brewster.

Co-presented by The Cultch and the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy is a thing of beauty, carved out with love, compassion and humility. The beauty is in the details: the tiny hands patting the air, the shrugs, the sighs, the pattering little feet, the necks thrust out with eagerness or age.

It's not likely, given all the praise and awards lavished on him, that Moose Jaw-raised Burkett would go through a Twinkle-like crisis but, echoing Billy's friend Benjie, I say, "Stay pure, little cowboy."

And stick around. Please. We need you.