

# CALGARY HERALD

## [Review: Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy](#)

By [Stephen Hunt](#) Sun, Mar 21 2010 [On the Scene](#)

At ATP Through April 11th  
Written & Performed by Ronnie Burkett  
Tickets: 403-294-9494 or [www.atplive.com](http://www.atplive.com)  
Four stars

When we first meet him, Billy Twinkle is a cruise ship puppeteer in crisis. He's hit the part of life where he hates his job. This is a problem any time, but when your job involves entertaining the general public, it can get ugly fast.

Billy knows no performer can afford to alienate their audience, but one day, having hit his breaking point, commits the cruise ship entertainers' cardinal sin: he shushes an audience member.

The simple truth of the matter is that, like a lot of middle aged guys, Billy wakes up one day, most probably in a small cabin in the bowels of a cruise ship, takes stock of his life, and realizes it's never going to live up to his expectations -- so he wants out.

Next thing you know, Billy is an unemployed, depressed cruise ship puppeteer, all of which leads him to the bow of the ship, where he says his goodbyes and prepares to launch himself into the sea.

As he prepares to bid adieu to the world, he is visited by his childhood mentor, Sid Diamond, a pretentious old crank who appears in the form of a verbally-abusive hand puppet. Sid -- who, above all, is a professional -- forces Billy to re-live his life as a puppet show so that he can rediscover the sparkle that led him into the marionette life in the first place.

You might call this one *It's a Wonderful Puppeteer's Life!*

Ronnie Burkett is well-known in these parts, having grown up in Medicine Hat (he launched his puppet company in Calgary back in 1986). And while he may call Toronto home these days, Billy Twinkle tells a story that is as much rooted in the Western Canadian prairies as it is in the (geeky, freaky, social misfit's) world of marionettes.

This Billy is a beautiful, talented, imaginative young boy from Moose Jaw with the sort of passion for marionettes that Tiger Woods demonstrated for golf as a three year old. Billy devours every book in the Moose Jaw public library about marionettes; Billy knows the names of all the major players in the puppet world, and manages to convince his dad to send him to a puppet festival in Detroit as a 12-year-old, where he makes the acquaintance of mentor Diamond and launches his career.

Burkett is so gifted that the puppets are virtually indistinguishable from actual human characters, and in Billy Twinkle, takes the conceit one step farther, having puppets operate puppets.

The story of a middle-aged man having a life crisis is not a new one. And although Burkett's life doesn't quite mesh with Twinkle's -- he's never been a cruise ship puppeteer, and has a shelf full of prestigious theatre awards and honours that one senses Billy's career lacks -- he has borrowed enough from his life to make Billy Twinkle feel like a very personal journey through the life of Ronnie Burkett.

As much as Billy is about a child star trying to rediscover the passion he once had for the thing he loved so much as a kid, it's also a story about growing older in a culture that worships youth. Watching Burkett, now in his fifties, manipulating a puppet of a 12-old-version of himself as a young, wildly ambitious boy in Moose Jaw, you get the odd sensation of witnessing two parts of one artist's life unfolding right alongside each other, four decades apart.

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He's still raunchy and funny and wild, but Billy Twinkle sparkles with something else, too: the sort of wisdom and perspective that headstrong, precociously-gifted child stars have no clue about. How could they? They're still in the first act of their lives, the part where you get to experience a lot of firsts (love, sex, career, money, freedom). By the time Billy's life has rolled over to the third act, there's only one first left, and it's the one from which there are no do-overs. *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*, is Ronnie Burkett's warm, witty exploration of a worldly walk suspended by strings.

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