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**Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy**  
A review by Marion Drew

This is no ordinary puppetry, and no ordinary story. With his fingers on his beloved strings and his tongue firmly in his cheek, Ronnie Burkett has created a piece of theatre that is hard not to be drawn into, not that one needs coaxing into the world of Billy Twinkle and his world of marionettes extraordinaire, and it is quite simply a delight.

The story tells of a middle-aged puppeteer Billy Twinkle who is fired from his job on a cruise ship, and is about to give up and die, when his old mentor and teacher Sid appears in the form of a hand-puppet ghost, in order to coax him back into the life he once so loved. Scenes from Billy's life are played out under the gaze (and hands) of the older Billy and Sid.

Ronnie himself plays the middle-aged Billy, and his intense verbal and physical interactions with his Sid puppet are delightful. Not only this, but Ronnie also wrote the script, hand-sculpted the heads of the puppets and designed their costumes and the set ... there seems no end to his skills! It is all done with meticulous care and attention to detail; for example the marionettes wear real, tailor-made underwear, and the shoes of each puppet are custom-cobbled.

The repartee between this marionettiste and his puppets and between the puppets themselves is nimble, clever and rapid, so rapid that one wonders how this man manages to play the voices of all the characters, manipulate the cast of at least 25 marionettes, set the stage and deliver excerpts from Shakespeare, line perfect. It is a feat of extraordinary physical and mental dexterity.

While sometimes the story line is a little frail, there is no doubting the sheer professional technical expertise evident in this show. The strings (sometimes 16 to a puppet) are worked with such incredible adroitness that the subtlest of body language is conveyed; a gentle sigh, a twist of a head, a shrug of shoulders, all so delicately done that it is difficult at times to remember that these engaging characters are in fact creations made from wood, cloth, string and paint.

Not only are the puppets worked by Ronnie, but the puppets themselves are puppeteers, manipulating tiny versions of Randy Rivers (a 'wronged woman of song') and Juliet (as in Romeo and). Billy junior at one point has two puppets of his own acting out a scene from 'The Taming of the Moo', all adding both to the layering of the story, and the level of technical mastery.

There has always been an edge to Burkett's productions, and in this case it is a very adult edge, the camp world of a gay boy, exploring the possibilities that his talent, his sexuality and his chosen work have to offer. There are moments of hilarious, shameless humour, the cabaret act of Bidy Bantam Brewster is wonderfully full of innuendo, as she rubs herself against Ronnie's leg with coy delight, but there are also moments of pathos as in the scene where the very elderly Sid appears tottering in a hospital gown with his incontinence bag (a red balloon).

The show as a whole is beautifully crafted, with lighting (Kevin Humphrey), music (John Alcorn) and costumes (Kim Crossley) all coming together in a seamless, magical whole and it comes as no surprise to learn that Ronnie is widely regarded as the foremost marionettiste in the world at the moment, having won multiple awards.

If you thought puppets were only for children and the faint-hearted, think again. As Benjy, a delightfully nerdy runny-nosed fellow would-be puppeteer tells our Billy at one point, 'you slapped my cold dead heart into beating', and you can expect the same from this audaciously entertaining production.