

## **Billy Twinkle: Requiem For A Golden Boy**

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

Billy Twinkle: Requiem For A Golden Boy

The first presentation in the Barbican's bite strand to use the theatre space of the neighbouring Guildhall School of Music and Drama is also the fifth visit here by the former bad boy of Canadian puppetry, Ronnie Burkett. Burkett's works are usually thought-provoking, even disturbing, and unashamedly sentimental as well as technically audacious and fascinating. This time the technical wizardry is fully in evidence: not only does Burkett himself take an active role as a character in the story (a move that is heresy to conventional puppetry), but several of his marionettes even manipulate puppets of their own. However, instead of mental handicap, rape, war or Nazism (all of which have featured in one or another of his previous presentations here), the eponymous Billy Twinkle – portrayed primarily by Burkett himself – is a cruise-ship puppeteer undergoing a mid-life crisis.

It is hard not to read this as autobiographical, at least to some extent. Burkett does not work cruise ships and has never settled for the kind of schlock that Billy peddles. Nor, I'm sure, was his relationship with his mentor Bil Baird much like that of Billy to Sid Diamond, who appears in ghostly, bunny-eared hand-puppet form to a suicidal Billy before showing him various scenes from his own life. But young Billy's obsession with marionettes while growing up in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan has enough parallels with Burkett's own childhood in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and much of the show seems to consist of animated versions of his inner debates about the puppeteer's relationship with his figures, his craft and his audience.

That makes it a less intense and compelling experience, but also somewhat easier for being less demanding. We can simply enjoy the second-order puppetry (including a deliciously awful evangelical rap in which a Christian woman in marionette form manipulates her own glove-puppet Jesus), the jokes (among them - forgive me, but I have to acknowledge it - the most original knob gag I have seen in years) and the mastery of storytelling. Burkett keeps us from ever once questioning a 6ft man conversing with an 18-inch puppet on entirely equal terms, and even almost gets away with using the epilogue to *The Tempest* – but then can't resist giving himself the very last word.