

**Puppet/eer as god: the Metatheatrics of Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes**

by

Timothy Bandfield

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

of the University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English, Film, and Theatre

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Canada

August 8, 2014

© Copyright 2014, Timothy Bandfield

## ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, Canadian puppeteer/playwright Ronnie Burkett has garnered an international following for his provocative, text-driven, solo puppet shows. Still, as one of Canada's foremost theatre artists, he has received very little scholarly recognition for his unique and important work. My thesis seeks to fill this academic void by offering ways to define and explain Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes as metatheatre. I investigate the ways in which Burkett pushes the use of metatheatrics, inherent to puppetry, to bold extremes in his plays in an attempt to render his audiences receptive to honest, felt emotion and, at other times, to draw attention to the ideas being presented by deconstructing ideologies related to the binaries of creator/created, actor/character and subject/object. I turn my focus to the specificity of Burkett's medium—the puppet and puppeteer, respectively—and examine his performance texts through the lens of puppet, semiotic and reception theories. Doing so allows me to reveal how the many styles of his “living objects” stage a diametric tension between empathy and detachment, life and non-life, and, as such, how his puppet plays offer adult theatregoers both highly emotionally affecting and thought-provoking experiences unlike any other in the modern (puppet) theatre.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would never have seen its completion without the help and guidance from several individuals. First, I want to thank my parents for their unending support and reassurance throughout the duration of this seemingly unending project. I also want to thank my theatre professors at the University of Manitoba—Margaret Groome, Chris Johnson, Bill Kerr and Bob Smith—for fostering my love of performing and studying theatre. Bill Kerr, who also served as my academic advisor, deserves a special thank you, not only for the undeserving patience and flexibility he demonstrated during my many life transitions as a graduate student but also for leading me to see Burkett’s work in the first place and then encouraging me to study it. I want to thank the ever-so gracious Ronnie Burkett for taking the time out of his busy performance schedule in Montreal in April 2012 to sit down for an interview and for answering my (what could have seemed to be picayune) emails afterwards. My thanks also goes to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Manitoba for providing necessary funding towards the completion of this project. Lastly, words cannot describe the love and support of my wife, Becca, who has given me, amongst so many things, the drive and strength to write in moments when I had none.

for Archer—the newfound joy in my life and, I hope, future puppeteer

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One	
The Puppet as God .....	14
Chapter Two	
The Puppeteer as God .....	56
Conclusion .....	94
Works Cited .....	99

## INTRODUCTION

<b>CARL</b>	I don't want a career. Art isn't a vocation Fipsi, it's a discussion.
<b>FIPSI</b>	Of what, Carl?
<b>CARL</b>	Of the sacred versus the profane. And for that, all I want, all I need, is an audience.

*Tinka's New Dress (1994)*

In the summer of 2002, I saw my first marionette show, *The Secret Garden*, adapted and performed by American puppeteer David Simpich. The performance took place at an international puppetry festival in Bourbonnais, Illinois, which I attended, primarily, to participate in a performance workshop assembled of elite, handpicked teenage puppeteers called the “Dream Team.” Up until this point I considered myself a skilled puppeteer, albeit only familiar with Muppet-style puppets, but this weeklong workshop introduced me to new forms such as bunraku and rod puppetry and the potential for dramatic puppet theatre. On top of rehearsals and other demonstrations throughout the week, our director urged us to take in Simpich’s performance. Not only did he think it would be an excellent opportunity to learn about yet another style of puppetry, he deemed it one of the do-not-miss shows of the festival, something all serious puppeteers should see.

Later that week, the entire “Dream Team” anxiously filed into the medium-sized theatre and took their seats minutes before *The Secret Garden* was to begin. The house lights dimmed and the amber glow of the stage lights slowly illuminated a miniaturized proscenium arch center stage. We could not see the puppeteer, only the simply strung puppets, which played out the

action within the proscenium. To say that what occurred over the next hour was one of the dullest events of my life would be a gross understatement. The only details I remember were the squirrel puppets, whose chittering managed to provide some much needed comic relief, and that Simpich's female character voices were utterly convincing. At the 45-minute mark, I detached and lost all interest in the story, the voices and the manipulation. I struggled to keep my eyes open; however, I managed to stay awake, unlike some others, by repeating my director's words in my head, like a mantra: this would be *good* for me, a sacred experience. Sadly, at the end of the performance, not one of us felt that it had been even a *good* experience. And while the show was lauded as the pinnacle of artistic expression at the festival, it had no effect on me whatsoever. Furthermore, I told myself that if this is what marionette theatre was like, I wanted nothing to do with it.

Two and a half years later, in February of 2005, I saw my second marionette show—Ronnie Burkett's *Provenance*. The piece was similarly touted as a must-see by one of my theatre professors. On his word, I scooped up some of the last tickets during its sold out run in Winnipeg, Canada. When I arrived at the theatre and took my seat among the predominantly grey-haired audience, an usher informed me that the show would run at two and a half hours with no intermission. Immediately I feared that I would be subjected to an even more excruciating bout of boring puppet theatre. To my surprise, what followed over those two and a half hours was one of the most memorable, exhilarating, shocking, raunchy and touching experiences I've had in the theatre.

While *Provenance* was expertly performed, with convincing female voices and even memorable animal characters, it dared to do things that I had never seen done before in puppet theatre. In it, puppets swore; there were acts of violence and even a puppet rape scene. Puppets

can't say *that*, and they surely can't *do that*, I thought. But Burkett's puppets did. They were mesmerizing and hilarious and moving. These weren't cutesy Muppets, and this certainly was no David Simpich show. *Provenance* haunted and puzzled me for days. How could I have enjoyed something so naughty and provocative? How could a story so complex, richly layered and real—in short, so human—be told with puppets?

If Simpich's show was precious and twee, this show was its antithesis, promoting the destruction of all things sacred in the puppet theatre; yet, I found it profoundly sacred in a much different way. In *Provenance*, I had discovered something deeper in the characters and storytelling that I didn't know existed or could be achieved in puppet theatre. That puppets were the players in this drama evoking these very real feelings of empathy and revulsion from me and most members of the audience was a revelation.

This thesis, in part, springs from a reaction to my viewing of this performance and an expansion of my love of and desire to understand the perverse sanctity of Burkett's work.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, my examination will focus on his major, published plays—*Tinka's New Dress*, *Street of Blood*, and *Happy* (the three of which constitute *The Memory Dress Trilogy*), *Provenance*, *10 Days on Earth*, *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* and finally *Penny Plain*—and how and why they appeal so strongly to an adult audience.<sup>2</sup> My investigation necessitates that I study the puppets themselves and what I first found so captivating about them: how convincing and effective they are as performing subjects even, I argue, more so than human

---

<sup>1</sup> When I refer to the perverse sanctity of Burkett's work, I do not directly refer to Émile Durkheim's religious and sociological theory of the sacred and profane. Rather, I reference how Burkett's theatre stems from what Penny Francis lays out in *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice* as the two primordial taproots of puppetry: the sacred (all things magical, spiritual, fantastic and imaginative) and the profane (all things vulgar, parodic, satiric, politically and socially combative) (6). Burkett's theatre beautifully blends both.

<sup>2</sup> Burkett's newest, critically acclaimed stage show, *The Daisy Theatre* (2012), will not fall under my analysis. As it is mostly improvised, a published text is unavailable; however, I will offer a brief discussion of the production in my conclusion.



actors. It follows that I look at the complex relationship between the puppets and their puppeteer, illuminated by the practice of open manipulation—that is, of how Burkett performs in full view of the audience.

Unlike traditional puppeteers (like Simpich) who purpose to keep themselves and their trade secrets hidden, Burkett invites the audience's fascination and scrutiny as he manipulates his characters in plain view of the audience without any sort of masking or trick lighting. Thus, the creator/created metaphor, implicit in most puppet theatre, is made explicit in Burkett's work. Furthermore, by deliberately reminding his spectators that he is "pulling the strings" through his onstage physical presence and even more so as he plays human characters alongside his puppets, Burkett foregrounds the constructed nature of his craft and the illusory quality of performance. Even scene changes are visible as are the puppets being both removed from and returned to their resting positions "off stage." Yet his methodology is not overtly Brechtian; open manipulation is merely a theatrical convention here. In other words, the alienating effect becomes an established norm. I contend that this metatheatrical approach serves to heighten the audience's deep emotional involvement and investment in his characters. With the stage mechanics laid bare, there is no need to "authenticate" the performance. Instead, the stripping away of illusion renders the audience more receptive to the phenomenological power of the puppet. In an Artaudian sense, Burkett forestalls representation in an attempt to create "the true spectacle of life" (Artaud 7), an alternate living reality that "would wreak havoc with the mundane reality we know" (Fortier 55).

Nonetheless, to say that the reception of Burkett's productions is wholly phenomenological and structured around empathy is misguided. Artaud also believed his theatre to be a "drama of high intellectual importance" [...] which would not 'separate the mind from

the body nor the senses from the intelligence” (55), and Burkett’s theatre is the same. As the practice of open manipulation promotes our emotional involvement, it also unavoidably prompts questions regarding the ontology of the puppet and puppeteer. When Burkett draws attention to himself as manipulator, he compels us to consider the implications of the power dynamics at play. Furthermore, by employing other metatheatrical tactics such as direct addresses, puppetry tropes and self-references, he ruptures the already established theatrical framework, creating moments as equally thought-provoking as they are visceral. These moments reconcile Artaud and Brecht’s theories and stage a “dialectical tension between the gestural presentation of the [puppet] character in its social relationship and a realistic emotional foundation won through identification” (Rouse 43). Describing the type of theatre he likes to see and produce and its effect on the audience, Burkett says it should “grab my heart, and bash my head, then cuddle me at the end of it” (Personal Interview). Through the interplay of emotional engagement and theatrical distancing, his plays do just that.

Throughout this thesis I employ important dramatic theories to expound Burkett’s stage practice such as phenomenology and semiotics, which link directly to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and Brecht’s Epic Theatre. With that said, as my analysis centers on the puppet and puppeteer, I also ground my thesis with puppet theory, borrowing from three preeminent scholars—Henryk Jurkowski, Steve Tillis and Kenneth Gross. Additionally, because the texts under investigation are plays, I consider the ways in which spectatorship informs a particular reading. To analyze the performance texts—how the printed plays have been realized on stage before an audience—requires seeing Burkett’s shows in production, and I have been lucky enough to see four of them: *Provenance* at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg; *Penny Plain* at Place Des Arts in Montreal (twice); his newest work, *The Daisy Theatre*, at the Citadel

in Edmonton; and an archival recording of *Tinka's New Dress* during its world premiere run at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1994. I have also watched the 1992 documentary *Ronnie Burkett: A Line of Balance*, which includes performance snippets of an early work, *Awful Manors*, and have read numerous newspaper reviews of the shows I have not seen and spoken to others who have. These viewings, readings and discussions have substantiated my thesis with a solid understanding of specific staging requirements of Burkett's plays as well as his technique and performance aesthetic. Additionally, I have had the opportunity to interview Burkett in person as well as correspond via email.

In my first chapter, I turn my focus to the relationship between Burkett's puppets and the audience. Although the production company under which he performs is titled Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, his shows do not feature puppets solely of this type. Glove puppets, jointed dolls, and hybrid puppets, together with his string puppets, populate the world of his plays.<sup>3</sup> I begin by providing a working vocabulary and framework for my analysis by explaining the nature of each of these different puppet styles, their technical makeup and respective performance demands. I argue that Burkett's puppets' uncannily human verisimilitude can be attributed to both his meticulous craftsmanship as puppet builder and virtuosity as performer. It is this verisimilitude that lends to our perception of the puppets as "living objects." I then explore the theoretical implications of each puppet style, why Burkett chooses to vary them from character to character and from play to play and, more importantly, the profoundly different effects they have on the audience. While Burkett's realistic marionettes more easily sustain the illusion of life, I assert that his childlike glove puppets, frequently employed in fantastical

---

<sup>3</sup> With the advent of film technology and computer-generated imagery, Steve Tillis in "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production" divides the puppet into three broad categories: tangible puppets, virtual puppets, and stop-action puppets (192). Whenever I use the term "puppet" I always mean "tangible puppet."

sequences, possess greater emotional immediacy and, thus, gesture towards a greater possibility of truthfulness. Burkett's doll figures and hybrid puppets, on the other hand, foreground the presence of their operator more so than the other styles and, as a result, draw attention to the creator/created binary, which Burkett exploits and undercuts to great effect in *Provenance*, for example. Moreover, multiple puppets of differing styles may represent single characters, such as Leda in *Provenance* who appears as a marionette, doll and hybrid half-human puppet. Borrowing from semiotic theory, I discuss how each style and the context in which Burkett performs it either confirms the illusion of life or distances the audience from the performance. I also argue for how the combination of various styles, often iterations of the same character, and adroit switches between styles and semiotic codes work to engage and disengage the audience perpetually, eliciting both intense emotion and critical detachment. Using Jurkowski's and Tillis' puppet theories as touchstones, I ultimately argue for how Burkett captures what Jurkowski terms as puppetry's "opalization effect," the unification of theatrical illusion and distancing.

In my second chapter, I examine the complex and changing onstage relationship between Burkett and his puppets. At the same time that Burkett confirms his power as god, he often deliberately subverts it. For instance, in *Provenance*, he ruptures the trust between puppeteer, puppet and audience by raping one of his creations, a boy soldier named Tender. In *Street of Blood*, he literally plays god, conversing with both Edna and Eden as Jesus; however, in *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* Burkett incites a consideration of himself not as a higher, more powerful ontological being but as one of his own puppets. Working my way through his oeuvre more or less chronologically, I highlight these important metatheatrical moments where Burkett desires to be seen (and felt) alongside his creations. I not only discuss the many ways that Burkett can be viewed as human actor and puppet, but how fluctuations between these

perceptions challenge the concept of who (or what) does the manipulating. Further, while Burkett's practice of open manipulation mitigates Brecht's alienation effect, I argue that these metatheatrical ruptures, where Burkett interjects his presence in the puppet world, often represent true moments of alienation, jarring the audience emotionally and forcing them to reconsider divisions between puppet/puppeteer and actor/character. Moreover, in *Billy Twinkle*, the metatheatrics are dizzyingly multiplied, as the audience witnesses the staging of a puppet show-within-a-puppet show-within-a-puppet show. This ontological blurring between performer and performance suggests that theatrical fiction, and indeed puppetry, can be read as real and authentic and, as a result, can produce transformative, real-world effects. While *Billy Twinkle* celebrates brazen metatheatricality and the power of the puppet and puppeteer in confluence, the last play under consideration here, *Penny Plain*, stages the opposite. Burkett makes the deliberate choice to remove himself from the playing space altogether and manipulate more traditionally from the shadows above, as a demonstration of "trusting the power of the puppet" (René). The play represents a marked shift in his design and performance aesthetic and is seemingly the least metatheatrical. Nonetheless, I point out how the play thematizes the same metatheatrical concerns as Burkett's previous works not in its staging but its concern with the division between subject/object.

While the goal of my thesis is not to provide exhaustive, individual play analyses but an overview of Burkett's stage practice, I often discuss representative moments from his productions without giving much explanation as to plot and character details. To remedy this, I offer a few brief thoughts on each play here, as a helpful precursor to the chapters ahead.

*Tinka's New Dress* (1994) is the first of Burkett's plays to win him international public and critical acclaim and is the first of the *Memory Dress Trilogy*. The story takes place in a

“vaguely European city and an internment camp on the outskirts” (*Quartet* 6), which is ruled by an ominous, authoritarian party, The Common Good—perhaps Burkett’s most obvious metaphor for the Nazi regime. The politically charged play raises issues regarding social marginalization, oppression (artistic, political, sexual) and the nature and duty of the artist. It also boldly introduces Burkett’s drive towards the metatheatrical with its protagonist, Carl—a gay puppeteer—who performs his satiric Franz and Schnitzel shows in underground cabarets as a means of social resistance. When Carl is forced to make a decision whether or not to perform under the auspices of the Common Good, he chooses artistic freedom instead and, as a result, is quarantined in a heavily policed city sector alongside other dissidents like his sister, Tinka; her cross-dressing boyfriend, Morag; and Hettie, a fellow artist. As more and more characters stand up against the threat of censorship and subjugation, they are put to death, including Carl. At the play’s end, only Tinka and Stephan—Carl’s mentor—remain, and the two decide they must continue in Carl’s absence and perform the legacy of Franz and Schnitzel.

Set in the fictional Canadian prairie town of Turnip Corners, Burkett’s second major work, *Street of Blood* (1998), is “a grand guignol piece” (Francis 104) that references the AIDS crisis, the Red Cross tainted blood scandal, homophobia, vampires, and the second coming of Christ. Its themes are vast and varied, but the play remains grounded by the “blood relations” of three compelling characters: Edna Rural, a dowdy but lovable widowed housewife who has AIDS; Eden Urbane, her adopted son—a karaoke-loving, gay rights vigilante-cum-terrorist; and Esmé Massengill, their Hollywood idol—a faded, shrewish diva who also happens to be a vampire. When Edna pricks her finger while quilting, she bleeds onto her handiwork revealing what she believes to be the face of Christ. Deeming it the “Shroud of Turnip Corners” (*Quartet* 86), she is then visited by the Son of God himself, played by Burkett. Jesus wants to talk, but

Edna shoos him away. Her son, Eden, after having moved away to the big city, plans a visit to Turnip Corners upon hearing that Esmé (whom he fantasizes is his birth mother) has come to town as the star of a touring stage production. But Esmé isn't there to perform; she merely wants to hoard "[p]ure, uncontaminated blood" (99), and she targets Eden as her victim, wounding him, almost fatally. Jesus, however, intervenes and kills Esmé, saving Eden. At the play's end, mother and adopted son are reconciled, and Edna finally comes to terms with her HIV. *Street of Blood* explores issues of family relations, religious faith and homophobia, and, as the second piece in *The Memory Dress Trilogy*, it comprises a series of flashbacks relating to the liberating and debilitating power of remembrance.

The last of the trilogy, *Happy* (2000), raises similar issues concerning acts of remembrance. The play is a fantasia on human loss and trauma that recounts the experiences of a group of rooming house neighbours and friends. When Carla loses her young husband, Drew, she is thrust into a world of grief and despair. Although talking about her loss helps others come to terms with their similar traumatic pasts, she seems to grow more despondent. The five stages of her grief are actualized as parodic songs and skits in the netherworld of The Grey Cabaret—a visual and fictive counterpoint to the rooming house. Sadly, at the end of the play, Carla finds release by committing suicide, but it is her friend, the elderly and plucky Happy, who offers hope in his assertion that "if you want the rainbow, then you've gotta put up with the rain" (205). The play is less plot-centric compared to some of Burkett's other works. Instead, it is a moody rumination on the nature of happiness and what we do to achieve it, and it showcases some of Burkett's most fitting uses of puppets other than marionettes.

*Provenance* (2003) centers on young art academic Pity Bean and her quest to authenticate the mysterious painting and object of her desire named *Tender*. Her search leads her to a

Viennese brothel where she meets a host of oddball characters, including Leda, its owner. The play's three central characters—Pity, Leda and Tender—share a history of victimization and sexual and physical abuse, and as they reveal harrowing details about their childhood in a series of flashbacks, they unravel the mystery surrounding the painting. By sharing their stories with the other characters, the three eventually find healing and come to terms with their objectification, with Pity discovering at the play's end that “Beauty, the kind you stare at, the kind that makes you lose yourself in your own plainness, that's rare” (264). The play grapples with themes of beauty and desire, sexual trauma and the costly effects of the glorification of war.

*10 Days on Earth* (2006) concerns family, community and loneliness. Its central character is the mentally challenged Darrel who shows us his daily routines over the course of a week and a half, unaware that his aging mother, Ivy, has passed away in her bedroom in the house they share together. The play maintains two fictions—that of Darrell's real life and the realm of his imagination played out by animal characters of his favourite childhood story, *Honeydog and Little Burp*. The fairytale episodes with their charming anthropomorphic puppets and stylized, comical dialogue offer a parallel to how Darrell sees the world and navigates day-to-day social interactions. Throughout the course of the play, in the unknowing absence of his mother, Darrell learns how to survive on his own and discovers his independence and autonomy. More or less, the play is a character study and seems to be one of the least metatheatrical and most straightforward of Burkett's works. It is also, arguably, the most touching.

*Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* (2008) is a technically virtuosic memory play about an aging cruise ship puppeteer in the middle of a mid-life crisis who is forced by the ghost of his former mentor, Sid Diamond, to restage aspects of his past life as puppet theatre. In doing so, Billy reconnects with old friends, peers and younger versions of Sid and eventually



recaptures his love of puppetry and *raison d'être*. Think *It's a Wonderful Life* meets *A Christmas Carol*. Burkett plays the titular character here in his largest role as human actor, shamelessly visible to the audience, and collides with all four layers of reality established throughout the play—the reality of the paying audience sitting in the theatre, Billy's present and fictive reality aboard the cruise ship, Billy's past which he reenacts by means of marionette vignettes, and the doubly constructed world of the 3:8 scale miniature marionettes manipulated by the larger marionettes (which, in turn, are manipulated by Burkett-as-Billy). Although the play appears to be the most commercially accessible of Burkett's works, with its real-world scenario and simple themes, its complex metatheatrics raise important ontological questions such as: what is real and what is the nature of being? As such, it offers fertile ground for the discussion of the nature of puppetry.

Burkett last published play, *Penny Plain* (2011), is an apocalyptic, haunting tale about a blind elderly woman, Penny, and her interactions between the varied characters of her boarding house weeks before the ruin of civilization. When Penny's anthropomorphic seeing eye-dog, Geoffrey, leaves her to become a gentleman in the real world, she searches for another dog to take his place. She eventually settles on (and adopts, in a way) a young girl named Tuppence. Shortly thereafter, a romance begins to develop between Tuppence and Oliver, a seemingly orphaned boy termed "sweet Monster" (*Penny* 90) who has taken up residence in the house. A barren woman named Evelyn also appears, wishing for a baby of her own, and commissions another resident, a man named Geppetto—the actual famed puppeteer—to make her one. When strangers from the outside world threaten the livelihood of Penny and Tuppence, including a returning feral and flesh-hungry Geoffrey, it seems Oliver will be the only one to save them. The play concludes with Evelyn holding and rocking Peekla, Geppetto's answer to her puppet

child—not a human baby but a grotesque, anthropomorphic conglomerate of household plastic items. Thematically, *Penny Plain* addresses rebirth and regeneration, relationships between parents and their children, and our moral and ethical responsibility to each other and the natural world. Unlike the rosy endings of most of Burkett’s works, this one is less hopeful and ambiguous.

Ronnie Burkett’s internationally acclaimed puppet plays are wildly diverse in their characters and themes, but they share a common thread; they all function in one form or another as metatheatre. By examining the recurring metatheatrical devices throughout both the playscripts and productions, this thesis seeks to explicate how Burkett has captured the attention of adult theatregoers worldwide, those who attest to his shows’ undeniable “magical” quality when the magic is clearly illusory. The way in which Burkett combines marionettes with other forms of puppetry while foregrounding his own bodily presence in his performances, blurring the binary between creator and created, provides the scholar with new material to rethink the relationship between character, actor, performer and puppet. This unique form of metatheatre opens up a space, quite literally, “to investigate some of the questions posed only metaphorically elsewhere” (Dolan, qtd. in Bachmann 214) and, thus, allows me to make a valuable and detailed contribution to the existing but limited body of puppetry and Burkett scholarship.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Puppet as God

You had something to say, and you were hell-bent to say it. [...] But say it through the puppets, kid. Make us believe them so much that we forget it's you. Don't forget your technique, Carl. That's what supports your voice.

Hettie  
*Tinka's New Dress* (1994)

From the age of seven, when in his hands the World Encyclopedia fell open to the entry “Puppet,” Ronnie Burkett knew what he wanted to do with his life. After performing hand puppet shows as a teenager in and around his hometown of Medicine Hat, Alberta, he decided to pursue puppetry professionally and auditioned for Bil Baird in New York on his nineteenth birthday.<sup>1</sup> Burkett landed the job and, after a short while with Baird’s company, entered into a successful career as a children’s television puppeteer, winning a regional Emmy for his work on PBS’s *Cinderabbit* (Nunns). Yet, as “floppy-mouth” puppetry dominated the mainstream, he yearned to do something that was “old fashioned” and “theatrical” (Astle 111). Admitting “to one elderly puppeteer that what he really wanted to do was marionettes, he was advised to go back to Canada and follow his dream” (Cleveland, *Weirdsville* 4). Strangely, it would be easier finding an audience for adult-oriented puppetry in his home province of Alberta than in New York, “where Muppets ruled with a rubber fist” (Nicholls 32). So in 1986, Burkett incorporated his production company, Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, and began to stage highly

---

<sup>1</sup> Baird, famous for “The Lonely Goatherd” puppet sequence in *The Sound of Music*, ran “the only permanent Equity puppet theatre on the continent” (Nicholls 32). It closed within a year of Burkett’s joining.

successful musical send-ups of popular dramatic genres starring string puppets, first in Calgary and on minor stages around Alberta and then on major stages across Canada; however, his international break came in 1994 with the more serious marionette show, *Tinka's New Dress*, influenced by “the subversive underground puppet cabarets of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia” (34). After an absence of 19 years marked by popularly and critically acclaimed Canadian national and international tours, Burkett returned in 1999 to the city that fostered his dream—New York—to perform *Tinka*, which earned him a coveted *Village Voice* OBIE Award for Off-Broadway Theatre. Committed to performing with the puppets that were deemed outmoded and irrelevant at the time, Burkett has helped inspire a resurgence of interest in theatrical puppetry in the last 20 years and has legitimized the art form on professional stages across Canada and around the world.

This chapter begins with a discussion of his marionettes followed by the other types of puppets used in his shows. While my focus centers on the technical demands and theoretical implications of each style, I must qualify my approach with the admission that to perform an examination of the puppet as the exclusive player in Burkett’s theatre would be fraught. With the multitudinous forms of puppetry now present on international theatre stages, discussing the puppet solely in terms of its material and metaphorical status is fruitless, according to theatre scholar Margaret Williams, resulting in a “paradoxical (il)logic” (Shershow, qtd. in Williams 122). Furthermore, the fact that numerous practitioners and academics have defined the puppet in “quasi-mystical terms” (124) does little to further the scholarly investigation of how and why these figures have such power before an audience. Thus, Williams, in her essay “Including the Audience: The Idea of ‘the Puppet’ and the Real Spectator,” centers her concern on spectatorship, as do puppet theorists Henryk Jurkowski and Steve Tillis in their major treatises.

She posits, “Puppetry understood as a mode of spectatorship becomes a transparent theatrical medium, its value not guaranteed by the puppet’s presence but depending on what the puppeteer can create with it” (128). Regardless of the skill of the animator or the puppet’s technical makeup (a rock, rag, banana or bottle cap), the spectator is the arbiter of the puppet’s “life.” In other words, a puppet as material object only exists as a “living object” in front of an audience. Tillis includes the idea of spectatorship in his definition of puppetry. He describes puppets as “figures *perceived by an audience* to be objects that are given design, movement, and frequently, speech, in such a way that *the audience imagines them to have life*” (*Aesthetics* 28 [emphasis mine]). Audience members must not only perceive the puppet as having “life” but must also willfully *imagine* it as a “real” character. It is not simply enough to suspend one’s disbelief in the puppet theatre; spectators must, out of necessity, become conscious participants by lending their imagination to the figures they see before them. Given this concern for spectatorship, I maintain a strong connection to performance analysis framed by the discourse of reception theory as I distinguish, technically and theoretically, between the different puppet styles Burkett uses throughout the chapter.

### ***Marionettes***

With the exception of bunraku-style figures and some forms of animatronics, marionettes, or string puppets, out of all puppets—and certainly the ones used by Burkett—are most humanlike in their construction and representation.<sup>2</sup> Technically speaking, they are full-bodied, jointed figures manipulated from above by a series of strings attached to a control bar, and, depending on the nature of their construction and the skill of the performer, they are capable

---

<sup>2</sup> I recognize this is a contestable assertion. Here I am simply comparing marionettes to more “established” styles in the popular imagination such as shadow puppets, glove puppets and rod puppets. I recognize the inadequacy of such categories to account for the permutations in design, movement and speech that exist between them.

of replicating even the most nuanced gestures of the human actor.<sup>3</sup> For this reason Luman Coad, the Canadian puppeteer who designs and manufactures the control bars for Burkett's puppets, claims that marionettes are the most difficult puppets to operate, and I agree. The difficulty stems in part from the complexity of their design and the focused multitasking required to bring them to life. Yet, when inspecting Burkett's marionettes hanging offstage, like many audience members do after his shows, one does not notice their complexity of design but their beauty. They are exquisite works of art, handcrafted in amazingly fine detail, sculptures awaiting some sort of further life. Only upon closer investigation does one realize the time and effort it takes to produce a puppet that looks as lifelike as it behaves.

Most marionettes are either sculpted from wood or papier mâché, and Burkett uses both. He usually forms the heads and hands of his figures with Paperclay, a commercially manufactured papier mâché pulp. After first sketching a technical drawing for each character, he sculpts the small heads in modeling clay (such as Plasticine) and then casts them in plaster, latex or silicone to form negative moulds. After the moulds have cured, he removes the clay sculptures and then presses a wet Paperclay mixture to the inside of the mould walls to form positive impressions of each head. When the Paperclay dries, taking upwards of a week, Burkett then carefully removes the hollow heads from the moulds. Then he sands, primes (using a sealant such as shellac or gesso) and paints them.<sup>4</sup> For carving arms, legs, torsos and feet, Burkett uses

---

<sup>3</sup> Again, I am aware of the dangers of such a generalized statement. Steve Tillis in his thorough study *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet* warns that categorizing puppet types based on object-control taxonomies yields a vague, if not reductive, understanding of the puppet's sign systems. For one, the strings of Indian Kathputli marionettes are not attached to a control bar but are worn on the hands of the performer. That being said, the purpose of this study is not to provide an overreaching dissection of puppet types so much as it is to foreground a general understanding of the techniques employed by Burkett. Therefore, I have maintained chapter divisions based on puppet types common to the Western imagination to facilitate ease of discussion. In the case where I feel that a certain style or manner of performance deviates from what is considered "normal," I explain why.

<sup>4</sup> This is but one method of fabrication. In *Billy Twinkle*, for example, Burkett used brown Kraft paper and cornstarch glue in lieu of Paperclay (School of Puppetry). For *The Daisy Theatre*, he ditched mould-making altogether in favour of sculpting directly "in a mixture of Celluclay and Paperclay over styrofoam skulls" (Ronnie

basswood; however, on some designs requiring more detail on the neck and chest (specifically, if they will be visible to the audience), he uses the same sculpting and Paperclay moulding technique.

Regardless of construction material, creating a well-balanced marionette is crucial. Burkett applies a specific method of counterbalance first espoused by American marionettist W.A. Dwiggins—a great influence on his own mentor, Martin Stevens. In the 1992 documentary *Ronnie Burkett: A Line of Balance*, which showcases Burkett’s creative development of the gothic thriller/musical, *Awful Manors*, Burkett explains how each puppet receives a line of balance, or plumb line, which he pencils onto the rough wooden forms of his puppet bodies before carving them out. He says, “I carve in the characteristic stance. Gravity will always return [the puppets] back to that stance, after I’ve moved them. So it’s really not about pulling strings. Pulling strings just initiates the movement, but it’s the balance that puts [them] back into character every time.” When carving the figures he carefully retains this line of balance, onto which he then joints the appendages.

Jointing the intricate limbs and other body parts requires geometric precision, and Burkett’s praxis comprises a “smorgasbord” of American and British puppet building traditions (Burkett, “Private Püterschein” 4). Accordingly, his puppets are mechanistic hybrids, borrowing their string or pin joints from a myriad of his predecessors and mentors, including Dwiggins, Stevens, Baird and Tony Sarg. Removing the costume of one of his figures will often reveal “a Sarg knee joint, sometimes a Baird turnbuckle at the hip, the Dwiggens [sic] middle disk, the Stevens stance. All at once” (4). Personal preference and performance-based experimentation necessitate these differences in jointing.

---

Burkett Theatre of Marionettes). He shares his detailed papier mâché techniques (which he now considered outmoded) in the self-penned article, “Papier Mache Rediscovered.”

Nevertheless, Burkett is not bound to the techniques recorded in old how-to books; he has helped invent new hip and neck joints, which allow his marionettes to perform show-specific moves. In *Penny Plain*, for example, instead of jointing the head and neck as one sculpted piece to the carved torso, Burkett created a head that joints almost invisibly under the chin at the neck (now part of the same carved torso piece). Not only did this feature look more realistic in performance, essentially hiding the joint from view of the audience, it gave human-like freedom to the head to tilt up and down and to swivel from side to side, independent of the neck, as opposed to the puppet's head and neck moving as one (usually only on a vertical plane). The high-neck joint, as Burkett terms it, was particularly effective on blind Penny, who must use her other senses to interpret the world around her. By isolating only the head, Burkett could communicate her calm, sagacious presence with a simple lift of the chin or her active, though silent, participation in conversation by a slight nod. The Evelyn puppets also featured this design. In one performance I saw, at the top of the scene where Evelyn and Geppetto discuss Peekla's arrival, Evelyn's head became stuck, twisted to the side. Burkett continued to perform with the stuck head long enough for me to notice it as a mistake; however, he quickly ad-libbed a few lines and began to wring the control bar and jiggle the puppet in an attempt to free the head, turning the somewhat somber moment into a comic exchange.

EVELYN: My neck's been acting up this month.

GEPPETTO: If you think that's bad, wait 'til parenthood! (*Penny* perf. 18 Apr. 2012)

The head finally dislodged itself, and Burkett continued with the show, but the funny part about it is that the neck really *had* been acting up all month, as other reviewers and audience members took note of a similar incident. Some thought the stunt was part of the show. Others, spotting the



mistake, conceded that if Burkett is god, “he’ll intervene if necessary” (Wasserman). What this instance points to is not only Burkett’s aptitude as a quick-witted actor but his process of technical experimentation. With each new show he pens, he explores different methods of fabrication, refining “what the joints do and what the controls can do” (Crisolago). He continues to challenge himself not only in regards to dramaturgy and acting but also in the constant renegotiation of his highly refined methods of construction. Sometimes those methods prove to be less successful than others. In our interview he joked, “Every time I built a puppet I think that’s the best puppet I’ve built. Now I’m like, yeah that thing really bugs me [...] I’ve got to fix this neck.”

After Burkett’s marionettes have been jointed, intricate costumes, which have been similarly meticulously designed and crafted, are applied. Careful attention must be given to the nature of the textiles used because too heavy a fabric (such as wool) will limit the puppets’ mobility. Then the marionettes are suspended at table height and carefully strung to control bars using lightweight, braided nylon fishing line.

Aside from the design and construction of the marionette itself, the way in which it is strung greatly determines its kinetic potential. A more complexly strung marionette, with a greater number of joints that require stringing, yields greater expression and a greater aptitude for human mimesis, although it will be more difficult to manipulate; however, a skilled performer can convincingly imbue life into a simply strung marionette versus an amateur performer using a marionette with many strings. In our interview, Burkett spoke of other marionettists and their stringing techniques. The paddle controls of American Phillip Huber’s marionettes are relatively simple, he explained, compared to Joe Cashore’s highly specialized designs, with as many as forty-four strings attached (Blumenthal 52). Cashore’s elephant puppet,

in particular, requires individual strings connected to each of the puppeteer's fingers in order to manipulate the segments of its articulated trunk. While Burkett expressed his appreciation for these innovations, he explained that his goal is not to create marionettes of technical wonder; they must, more importantly, serve the story and support the text. He says that before *Tinka* he “had been writing to support the puppets [he'd] built, and then it switched. The puppets now support what [he's] writing” (Astle 112).

Some of Burkett's first humanoid marionettes had nine strings—two on each leg, each hand and each shoulder, two on either side of the head (around the ears or temples) and one affixed to the puppet's back—which is the most basic arrangement. The marionettes I described in Simpich's *The Secret Garden* were strung in the same fashion. While fewer strings beget cruder or more rustic gesticulation, fewer articulation points also have bearing on the figure's movement possibilities. Tillis makes a helpful distinction between the marionette's control points (places to which strings are attached) and its articulation points (its joints). For example, even though the marionettes of *The Secret Garden* had nine strings, like Burkett's earliest, they did not have wrist joints; the only articulation points on their arms were at the elbows and shoulders. Therefore, with only one control point at the wrist, the arm gesticulation was rather limited to broad sweeping motions. Although the marionettes of Burkett's earliest shows such as *Fool's Edge*, *Virtue Falls* and *The Punch Club* were strung similarly to Simpich's marionettes, they did contain more articulation points than his, including the very expressive hinged wrist joint. Still, as Burkett's aesthetic matured “to a softer, more naturalistic design” in *Tinka* (Burkett, “The Mentored Path”), the stringing followed suit. The move from titillating, cabaret-inspired lampoons to tender, human dramas necessitated the puppet's ability to move more realistically. And Burkett's nine strings soon grew to sixteen.

After continuing to refine his puppets and their controls following *Tinka*, Burkett now typically arranges his figures with fourteen strings. Each puppet in *Penny Plain*, for example, is strung as follows: at each foot (2), at each wrist, forearm and elbow (6), at each shoulder (2), at the back (1) and at both sides of the head and at the forehead or nose (3). The addition of the string affixed to the puppet's forehead allows for a more realistic range of motion and greater fluidity; it enables the figure to swivel its head easily from left to right by slightly rotating the control bar. Furthermore, the movement Burkett gains from the addition of his elbow strings, in particular, sets him apart from other marionettists. A simple tug of these strings pulls both of the arms up, which helps to convey the puppet's breath. Specifically, the movement can indicate a sigh of exasperation or a shrug of indifference. The character of Mr. Dollop in *Penny Plain* was fittingly marked by these small gestures, which indicated his knowing acceptance of the destruction of the world around him.

With 100 inches separating puppeteer from puppet, the marionettes' strings in *Penny Plain* are also the longest Burkett has ever used (Kaplan). The added length not only distances the creator from the created, it also demands more focused and nuanced manipulation. The longer the strings, "the weaker the impetus and therefore the softer the movement" (Francis 53). To perform a sweep of the puppet's hand, for example, Burkett has to modify and exaggerate the arc of his own hand as compared to operating the hand of a short-strung figure. The effect is worth the extra effort, however, for the longer strings allow for a more elegant and refined performance even if they are fussier and require more care to ensure against tangling.

Like his marionettes, Burkett's control bars are also specialty creations, custom-designed and manufactured by Luman Coad, who is most famous for his puppetry contribution to the popular film *Being John Malkovich* (1999). The unique design of Coad's diagonal, German-

inspired Bross-Roser controls allows Burkett to manipulate his characters with one hand more easily for scenes involving more than one puppet. The controls of one of the Penny marionettes, which I was invited to operate after one of the shows I saw in Montreal, was very comfortable. My hand gripped the central shaft like a joystick while my thumb and forefinger extended outwards and rested under the grooves of a small wooden toggle. By rotating the toggle clockwise then counter-clockwise, which involved moving my thumb up and forefinger down and vice versa, I was able to move the knees up and down to make the puppet walk. A second, small horizontal control bar, which could be removed from its resting place on the larger shaft and manipulated independently, operated the hands of the puppet. By twisting and moving this small bar about, one could achieve a great deal of expression in the arms and hands. By isolating one hand string, in particular, one could achieve very nuanced gestures. An example occurred in the opening scene of the production of *Penny Plain*. As Geoffrey and Penny listened to the fading doomsday news reports played over the loudspeakers, Geoffrey's left paw tapped rhythmically on the arm of his chair. While the marionettes were very still, although animated with slight turns of the head to convey alertness, the simple wrist movement drew the audience's focus. It conveyed Geoffrey's sense of (unconscious) restlessness or impatience with the escalating turmoil of the outside world before he would reveal to Penny his decision to take his leave "before it's too late" (*Penny* 11).

The whole construction process, from conception to finished marionette, takes many months to complete, and it is not uncommon for Burkett to spend an entire year designing and building a show; however, this is just the first stage in realizing the "living object." The marionette must then be brought to life in front of the audience through the highly specialized

process of animisation. Quoting his most influential mentor, American marionettist Martin Stevens, Burkett likens this process to playing an instrument.

Doing a puppet show is like playing the organ [...] It's stops, pedals, and keys and flipping the sheet music, and you have to rehearse those separate elements [...] and] if you rehearse and practice enough, at one point, in your pulling and pedaling and playing and flipping pages, you are no longer worried about individual elements, you are playing music. (Astle 116)

Speaking rudimentarily, a marionette performer must first learn to establish a proper height when holding and operating the control bar, so as not to lift the puppet's legs off the ground or cause it to slump at the knees. Maintaining a consistent height while holding the puppet for the duration of a scene, let alone multiple puppets for nearly two hours (roughly the length of most of Burkett's shows), requires immense physical strength and stamina.<sup>5</sup> Next, the puppeteer must learn how to operate the controls (consisting of multiple strings, toggles and separate control bars) to execute simple gestures such as waving, nodding, and sitting. In time, these gestures must then be combined to create fluid movement, such as walking, which requires moving "beyond thinking about which string to pull and where to find it" (Coad 19).

At this stage in his career, Burkett is a master at all of this. The care and precision he brings to his highly refined marionette construction, as previously outlined, combined with the virtuosic and nuanced animation of his figures sets his theatre apart from others in the field. Liz Nicholls notes that Burkett's marionettes, in particular, "reach a new level of natural expressiveness in the tiniest hand movements, emotional communication in the slightest inclination of a head, slouch of a shoulder, bend of a leg" (34). They are not clever objects to laugh at; in the hands of their creator they transform into objects to call out to and to cry with,

---

<sup>5</sup> To alleviate strain, Burkett has developed what he calls "gallows"—sturdy metal rods in the shape of upside-down L's mounted to the set from which he hangs his marionettes. Burkett continues to give life to the puppets at rest on the gallows by tilting the controls or plucking certain strings without having to support the entire weight of them.

and audiences around the world who fill Burkett's theatres attest to a magical experience "between stage and audience that makes one believe that communication, that connection is possible, that theatre can transcend the gap between stage and audience" (Kerr 5).

It is this genuine and seemingly "real" response to his characters that makes Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes particularly effective for staging aspects of the human condition. Often more so than the theatre of the live actor, the marionette theatre shows us what it means to be alive, ironically, because of the way its self-contained, microcosmic nature opens up a parallel imaginative space. Kenneth Gross in his illuminating book, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*, expands by saying, "The world evoked is one the puppets are most skilled at showing to us, a world into which humans are invited to enter, in which they can recognize themselves more truly and more strange" (73). I maintain that the realm of marionette theatre is more entrancing than orthodox theatre precisely because of the nature of the marionette's duality. Owing to its human-like corporeality, a marionette is, at once, familiar but altogether strange, too, given its status as lifeless object, manipulated thing. The double nature of the puppet as something familiar yet strange—alive yet dead—links it to Freud's theory of the uncanny, and Janne Cleveland in both her doctoral dissertation and published article on Burkett, "Mourning Lost "Others" in Ronnie Burkett's *Happy*," offers helpful scholarship that expounds this concept. My analysis here is not a psychoanalytic one, but the idea of the uncanny still holds, as the puppet theory I use defines the puppet in similar terms—as a "living object," a figure often constructed from wood and paper that when given speech and movement transforms into something mystical, magical, "belong[ing] to a different kind of life" (28).

Throughout the centuries, scholars and practitioners have tried to explain the source of the marionette's magic. Perhaps the most famous is Heinrich von Kleist, who saw the

marionette's reach beyond that of the theatre altogether, connecting us to something metaphysical. His anecdotal essay "On the Marionette Theatre" (1810) argues for the marionette as superior to a living dancer because of its unaffected grace of movement.

For affectation appears, as you know, when the soul [...] locates itself at any point other than the center of gravity of the movement. Because the puppeteer absolutely controls the wire or string, he controls and has power over no other point than this one: therefore all the other limbs are what they should be—dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers. (24)

Kleist asserts that the puppet's lack of consciousness and complete surrender to the forces of nature (gravity, inertia) are advantageous over the dancer's "desire to charm" (Jurkowski 9). The unselfish marionette produces an ethereal power that elevates it to a status beyond that of humanity. As opposed to the self-consciousness of the live performer, the mechanical puppet possesses "infinite consciousness," aligning it with divine beings.

Edward Gordon Craig in his influential essay "The Actor and the Über-marionette" (1911) similarly argues for the puppet as divine; however, his call is to reconnect with the puppet's ancestral roots in the sacred ritual. He denigrates "debased stage-realism" and the human actor, advocating instead for the Über-marionette—not a lowbrow vaudevillian but a reformed image who "will not compete with life [...] will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance—it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit" (Craig 81, 84-5). A figure both dead and breathing—an actor as "living object"—enticed Craig because he desired total directorial control over his symbolist stage productions. By replacing the actor with a divine puppet, and thus by stripping away human sensibility and experience, he would be able to eliminate emotional artificiality in performance. Scholars

disagree as to the exact nature of Craig's Über-marionette; however, the connection between the marionette and its unaffected quality of performance remains.<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely Burkett's marionettes' unaffected nature, their fixed expressions and blank stares, which invite the audience's emotional engagement. Robert Astle asserts, "[W]e transfer much of our imagination, as well as our hopes and fears and even our expectations, onto the puppets, more so than we do with live actors" (108). This subjective—and childlike—process of transference occurs as an audience so enrapt in the performance begins to "fill the gap" for what they do not see onstage. Scholar Claudia Orenstein adds,

[W]e take joy in the recognition of the gap between "us and them" [...] offering them all the dimensionality they lack through the workings of our own imaginations. This engagement with the characters and filling them out implicates us in the success of their performance such that we are ready to embrace all their small triumphs. (Orenstein 155)

The psychological complexity that the audience ascribes to Burkett's marionettes is also a product of the marionette's very materiality. As compared to the half bodies of simple, floppy glove puppets, the intricate, full-bodied, rigid marionette suggests a sense of wholeness, of a life completely unto itself. This idea of wholeness lends Burkett's marionettes the ability to more convincingly represent whole characters with complex inner lives. Furthermore, the marionette's strings provide not only a physical gap between puppeteer and puppet but a psychic one (Jurkowski 21). As opposed to direct physical contact, manipulation via strings implies mediated control, or control from a distance, which gives the figure a sort of subjectivity or half-freedom. The string length also visually separates the puppet world from the human world, suggesting the microcosmic marionette drama might be more autonomous than, say, one involving glove puppets. Accordingly, the marionette as puppet actor is best suited to the dramatic, adult

---

<sup>6</sup> See Patrick Le Boeuf's "On the Nature of Edward Gordon Craig's Über-marionette" for a compelling discussion of the Über-marionette as not a mystical ideal but an actual full-bodied puppet.



situations that Burkett stages because of their affinity to “life” compared to some of his other more experimental styles.

Given that Burkett’s marionettes are carved from wood, their organic corporeality also suggests a connection to the natural world and to life. Burkett remarks, “[C]arving has a historical practice to it, an ethos, if you will” (René). In the opening stage directions of *10 Days on Earth*,

*[a]n elderly woman appears at the top of the stage left stair landing. She is as old as the house, but worse for wear; wizened and wrinkled and white like a ghost. [...] Like the clock, she is part of the house, her whole life written in this quiet oak. **A life in wood, carved out over time**, wrapped in the curve of a worn banister, every breath – first to last – held in the tread of a stair. (10 Days 5 [emphasis mine])*

The woman is Darrell’s mother, Ivy, who is about to die, and Burkett likens her to the house’s interior. While he suggests her life is metaphorically carved into the set’s wooden framework, I suggest the very carving of her wooden puppet body also enables her imagined, provisional life. By breathing life into a block of wood (a material that once lived, as opposed to inorganic, plastic matter) Burkett demonstrates his power to animate the material world and to create marionette characters that sustain a perceived lived presence to a greater degree than other theatrical figures.

Burkett’s marionettes are also convincing human characters because of the verisimilitude of their representation. Not only are they costumed and painted in a highly detailed, lifelike fashion, many iterations of the figures at multiple ages appear throughout the plays. In human drama, the same character of differing ages will usually be played by different actors or the same actor in costume and makeup. No matter how convincing the portrayal, each representation is still clearly put-on, performed. In puppetry, however, the manipulated figure does not “act”; it

simply *is* the character, created intently for that specific role. Craig formulates that “[t]his is different from the actor who plays many parts and must therefore pretend. The Marionette [sic] never pretends . . . therefore the Marionette [sic] can save the Theatre” (qtd. in Jurkowski 161). Whether or not Craig is correct in his prophetic and dogmatic views of the marionette, multiple marionettes of the same character at different ages can foster a sense of realism to a greater degree than live actors who must rely on makeup, costuming or the distortion of their voice, exclusively, to convey temporal shifts. For instance, Burkett uses twelve Esmé marionettes, at three different ages, and six Ednas at two ages in *Street of Blood* (Nicholls 36). Billy Ruggles transforms from child to adult in eight marionettes in *Billy Twinkle*, and is represented at six different ages—11, 12, 15, 25, 45, and 47. In *10 Days on Earth*, there are nine incarnations of Darrel at his present age, 49, and at least two as a child at 10 and 12 years old.

Although it is naïve to assume that any puppet, even a complex marionette, can sustain a type of “life” on the same level as the human actor, the marionette is especially adept at performing certain moves more convincingly than other puppets. For example, the marionette’s propensity for stately, gentle expression can make it the best choice for the theatre artist who desires realism and subtlety. In *Penny Plain*, Geoffrey—an anthropomorphic seeing-eye dog—bids his long-time companion, Penny, adieu in search of a new life in the outside world. Penny, now alone in the house, falls to her knees and laments, “My old dog is gone” while her “*hand makes a small stroking motion, as if petting an invisible dog*” (*Penny* 14). The clarity and precision with which Burkett performed this move elicited a vocally emotive response from the audience on both nights I saw the performance. It was a beautiful and touching moment indeed. The way in which spectators (and specifically those who have lost a pet) saw themselves reflected in the diminutive motions and gestures of the marionette speaks to its power as an

affecting and effective theatrical figure. In *10 Days on Earth* as Ivy prepares for bed (and for her imminent death), she “*very slowly slides her feet out of her slippers at the top of the stairs where they will sit for the entirety of the play.*” Then “*she walks to the hallway at extreme stage left [...] to a point at which she is hung up on the puppet hanging rack (10 Days 9).*” Burkett explains that the gingerly act of removing her slippers, as a surrender to sleep and to death, almost always elicited a similar audible reaction from the audience. The gesture was profoundly mimetic, simple yet astonishing, and immediately directed the audience’s empathy toward the frail, world-worn character. If one of Burkett’s glove puppets or jointed dolls performed the action, the emotional impact of the moment would have been sacrificed, for it is harder for these figures to sustain human verisimilitude. Burkett’s body would have also been more prominent in the stage picture, forcing us to consider the ways in which a puppet of this type was being manipulated. On the other hand, the move performed by a live actor would likely have been read as ordinary, commonplace, and thus emotionally destitute. Therefore, the marionette, expressly capable of communicating subtlety and gentleness, and in doing so, of reflecting the subtleties of humanity, yields greater semiotic richness as a performing subject not only compared to other forms of puppets but human actors as well.

While some practitioners believe that the marionette’s gait is its weakness—often clumsy or unnatural—Burkett is also able to make his puppets walk fluidly and convincingly. Again in *Penny Plain*, “*GEPPETTO Jones walks around the upper bridge gallery*” at the top of the show (4). This moment was captivating in performance because of how controlled and precise Burkett was able to render the puppet’s movements. Not only were Geppetto’s feet stepping one after the other in a lifelike, steady rhythm, but his body also swayed gently from side to side and Burkett

gave the figure an appropriate weight as he moved. Tillis posits that a marionette does not need to perform a vast array of complicated gestures to convince the audience of its life.

One movement, toward the perfection of which the intrinsic variables are created – such as the supple wave of a hand, with the wrist flexing and the fingers spreading out – is enough to set the audience to imagining a fully rounded life of movement for the puppet. (*Aesthetics* 143)

When moves like those aforementioned are performed well, we believe that the puppet is able to perform all other moves equally as well. Furthermore, when we recognize the humanity in those moves, we feel connected to the marionette in a strange way. How we see ourselves uncannily reflected in their gestures in miniature imbues Burkett’s performances with their seemingly magical power.

While the marionette possesses a graceful, almost super-human quality to its gesticulation, it is certainly not limited to statuesque movement. As Tillis reminds us, “[I]t is impossible to characterize marionette movement as simply and always staid. Marionettes [...] happen to be very good at slow and stately movement; but they may also be swung around with great force” (*Aesthetics* 135). The Sicilian Opera dei Pupi tradition with its raucous fight scenes and frequent acts of puppet dismemberment is one such example.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Burkett’s marionettes also excel as comedians who perform quick, impulsive and somewhat jerky moves to great effect. In *Tinka*, for example, Schnitzel’s hilarious attempt to climb the back curtain of the Franz and Schnitzel stage in order to “see the face of [his] maker” (*Quartet* 22-23) was amplified by how Burkett made the puppet’s legs flail helplessly. In the same production, Burkett flung Morag, Hettie and Mrs. Van Craig against his shin at various points to punctuate the campy, comic nature of their dialogue. The miniature marionettes featured prominently in *Billy Twinkle* and in *Tinka* and *Penny Plain* were almost always manipulated in a stylized, jerky

---

<sup>7</sup> These marionettes are controlled primarily with metal rods from above, not strings.

fashion. And part of the appeal of Geppetto's realistic gait in *Penny Plain* was its juxtaposition with the crude jiggling of the tiny dancer he manipulated afterward.

Burkett's marionettes also possess elements of the fantastic, the potential to leap up at any moment. These moments purposely challenge the illusion of performance and our perception of their "life." Gross writes, "Marionettes have a wonderful power to fly aloft, to leap and turn, and float free of gravitation; they can saunter and slink and rotate *in ways no human can*" (65 [emphasis mine]). The marionette is not strictly bound to the stage floor precisely because the puppeteer can lift or yank its strings on a whim. Representative moments of this quality are found at the endings of both *Happy* and *Provenance*. In *Happy*, the play concludes as the titular character rests on Burkett's foot, a metonym for a park swing (Cleveland, *Weirdsville* 158). After revealing how his young son tragically died by jumping off the roof of his house in an attempt to fly, Happy shows the audience how he copes with the loss: by "swinging into the nebulous sky" and dreaming of "what's behind all that grey" (*Quartet* 205). The swinging motion begins simply, as Burkett rocks his foot back and forth, but it gradually grows unrestrained, wilder, and more unnatural. "[T]he music swells as HAPPY swings higher and higher" and without the aid of Burkett's foot (206). Happy literally begins to fly, carried only by the strings of his controls in Burkett's grip, backlit by the candy sky, the set now awash in a rainbow of colour. This final moment is one of genuine hope, of transcendental theatre magic—and the audience wept (Kerr 10). The illusion of life Burkett worked so hard to establish through grounded, virtuosic technique is quickly undone here, but even as we are made aware of the materiality and artificiality of the performance, we don't mind. The moment transports us beyond the natural realm to that of the imagination, a realm where the puppet most suitably dwells and by which release is made possible.

Burkett stages a similar ending in *Provenance*. Upon realizing that beauty resides all around her in that which is plain, Pity ice skates freely around the set, which is lit like a blue frosted pond. As the final music crescendos, “*she jumps into the air. Lights snap to black*” (*Quartet* 266). Here, Burkett exploits the marionette’s ability to perform the fantastic to underscore the absolute Tender, Leda and Pity experience in the play’s final moments. The ultimate apostrophe to beauty—“Beautiful, there you are / All this beauty / All of you,” which is not only directed by Tender to Pity but also by Burkett to the audience—is a mutual declaration of recognition and acceptance. The way in which Burkett holds Pity in the air, as if she is suspended in time, typifies the characters’ and the audience’s desire for release—“to fly.” This image feels so beautiful that it almost cannot be described in words, a notion with which Pity identifies. She states earlier, “I want to talk about art [...] I will not stand here and tell you what I think about art. No. I want to talk about how I feel about art, and how it makes me feel [...] It makes me feel something I get nowhere else in the world” (227). Similarly, the fantastic nature of Pity’s ice-skating routine embodies a type of felt poetry in motion. Only in the marionette’s fantastic movement is transcendence made possible, and the way in which Happy’s realistic swinging and Pity’s convincing skating gives way to uninhibited, fantastical, pendulum-like movement confirms what Kleist saw as the unaffected, grace-like power of the marionette.

Perhaps Kleist and Craig were correct in their assertions that the marionette connects us to the metaphysical, for the marionette has the ability to express the inexpressible, sublime quality of art through form and movement. Certainly Burkett’s marionettes’ ability to make us feel and even react audibly during performance speaks to their phenomenological power as performing subjects. Gross theorizes, “Their force comes from their being smaller than life, and so able to grow larger, more real in our minds. They can become, for a moment, more real than

ourselves” (40). As the marionette reflects our own behaviours and gestures amazingly in miniature, we cannot help but marvel at how alive they seem. And yet, their capacity to perform the fantastic—the super-human—which might convince us of their unreality, does not foreclose emotional involvement but promotes it. In contrast, the three following puppet styles I describe provide counterpoints to the “reality” Burkett establishes with his marionettes, representing characters and ideas far more fantastical and conceptual in nature.

### *Glove Puppets*

Glove puppets (also commonly referred to as hand puppets) are some of the simplest types of puppets and share a well-documented provenance and rich history in the Far East with shadow figures and marionettes.<sup>8</sup> Notable examples are the Chinese glove puppets of the Fujian Province who perform feats of technical prowess. In their energetic shows, performers hurl the puppets into the air only to have them land back on their hands, remarkably, “with no break in dramatic rhythm” (Stalberg, qtd. in Tillis, *Aesthetics* 137). To the Westerner, however, the glove puppet’s most recognizable ancestors are raucous and rebellious European folk characters such as England’s Punch, France’s Guignol and Germany’s Kasper, who gained popularity from the late seventeenth to nineteenth century as the stars of roving stage shows, performed from inside portable booths on street sides, boardwalks and in parks.

Regardless of cultural tradition, the glove puppet is usually composed of a small, sculpted head made from either wood or papier mâché attached to a simple cloth body with two floppy arms. The puppeteer wears the puppet on the hand like a glove and manipulates the figure by

---

<sup>8</sup> The terms “glove puppet” and “hand puppet” can be used synonymously. Burkett posits that glove puppet is the British preference while hand puppet is an American term. I prefer glove puppet and use it here because of the implicit reference to its material construction and because hand puppet can now denote any sort of moving mouth puppet. Burkett’s have no such feature (with the exception of Big Boy in *Penny Plain*).

inserting the index finger into the puppet's head, usually, and the thumb and pinkie finger into the two arms, while the middle and ring fingers are tucked into the palm. Despite the glove puppet's limitations (swinging legs, if any; limp body; lack of shoulders), it "is the most versatile and lively of puppets" (Coad 17). It can perform simple motions such as clapping and can grasp objects by bringing the thumb and pinkie finger together. By bending the index finger, the puppet can raise or lower its head, and rotating and bending the wrist allows the entire puppet to turn from side to side or bow. Glove puppets that are more complex require both the index and middle fingers to be inserted inside the puppet's neck, and a swiveling head motion can be created by gently moving these two fingers back and forth. Some require a third (Francis 58).

Because glove puppets are generally restricted to simple arm and neck movements, their manipulation is cruder than that of a marionette; however, this does not discount the figure's expressiveness. Its simple construction forces the puppeteer to gesture in a clearer, more focused way, and the spectator is drawn to the simplicity of the movement. In this way, the economy of the glove puppet allows it to communicate with greater immediacy, and a performance of this sort requires less premeditation on the puppeteer's part. There are no tangled strings or sticky joints to worry about. There is also no separation of space between puppeteer and glove puppet, no barrier between actor and character, no mediation between producer of signs and the site of signification. The figure is thus more electric in its spirit compared to the marionette because of the direct kinetic transfer of energy from puppeteer to puppet. As such, the glove puppet's free spirit enables the portrayal of characters less burdened by thought and reason.

The distinguishing feature of the glove puppet is the confluence of both object and puppeteer. While a marionette requires an external force to bring it to life, the glove puppet's life source comes from within the figure itself; the human hand is both the puppet's skeleton and



locomotive force. Because of this confluence of form, German writer Fritz Eichler concluded that the glove puppet was not a pure puppet at all (Jurkowski 21). He reasoned that because it simply concealed the hand of the puppeteer it was a “‘prolongation’ of the actor” (21).

Paradoxically, the act of human agency is both concealed and emphasized. Although there are no visible strings or rods attached to the figure, the shape of the puppet resembles a hand, and the figure’s dexterous, swift movements are human born. After all, “[h]and puppets are hands dressed in gloves” (107).

The nimbleness and dexterity of the human hand inside the puppet allows for adept jabs, jerks, twists and turns. Jurkowski notes “the disposition of the hand puppet [is] to fight [...] grasp and handle objects” (107), and the routines of Punch and Judy certainly demonstrate the effectiveness of this crude manipulation style to elevate comic and violent scenarios. Gross elaborates: “Punch’s wild, quick, and rhythmic movements convey something of the freedom of the human hand inside that head, its flexible speed and power to grab, hit, caress, manipulate, and prod” (Gross 69). The non-technical, reductive makeup of the glove puppet also alludes to its quality as puppet, as thing. Gross asserts that Punch performances suggest an awareness of the puppet’s “puppet-ness” and invite a type of self-reflexive critique. The character’s “brazenness and violence, as well as his comic will to survive, reflect his existence as a thing with a head of wood, without human feelings of pain and shame. He makes his wooden head into the proper material of clowning” (69).

Owing to its simplistic construction and historical and cultural ties to popular children’s entertainment, the glove puppet is seen as more childlike.<sup>9</sup> In our interview, Burkett agreed to the

---

<sup>9</sup> In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, glove puppets became synonymous with children’s entertainment, particularly in Canada given the popularity of television shows such as *The Friendly Giant* and *Mr. Dress-up*, as well as the

kinship between the glove puppet and childlike wonder. Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that he often employs glove puppets to enact the most childlike, magical or “unrealistic” moments in his plays. If marionettes are signifiers for real human characters, Burkett’s glove puppets signify fantastical characters, those furthest from the reality of the story—in short, those less “real.” Yet the way in which Burkett exploits the form, giving notice to its theoretical implications, provides the audience with a greater understanding of his characters’ inner lives.

Such glove puppets exist, for example, in *Provenance*. One of the regulars at Leda’s brothel, Herschel (in marionette form), explains to Pity his devotion to Maybelline—the love of his youth, an American dancer who works for Leda. He fantasizes about what could have been if he had returned to Vienna to find Maybelline waiting for him, after having been forced to part ways at the outbreak of WWII. Younger glove puppet versions of Herschel and Maybelline joyfully enact the fantasy as the elderly marionette Herschel narrates the sequence from his hanging position on a downstage chair.

I would dream of returning home to Vienna. And she would be waiting for me.  
And the streets would open up to our joy, as we reclaimed the city as ours.  
Everything had changed. All the horror and secrets of the past forgotten in the  
dawn of a new day. Neither she nor I were looked at as different, as less, as  
disposable. (*Quartet* 233)

Fittingly, the freedom of which Herschel speaks is punctuated by the free, simple movement specific to glove puppets. Moreover, the childlike, playful quality of the form heightens the idyllic, youthful picture Herschel paints for Pity and for the audience. And the simplicity of their manipulation, the fact that the characters are no more than Burkett’s clothed hands, gains particular resonance given Herschel’s final words, “We were *simply* part of the heartbeat of Vienna, *hand in hand*” (233 [emphasis mine]).

---

American *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. It should be noted that Jim Henson’s Muppets, while not true glove puppets, share similar roots in this style.

Burkett also employs glove puppets to enact one of Penny's flashbacks in *Penny Plain*. When Tuppence, an orphan under Penny's care, asks, "But how could you like colour? You can't see them" (*Penny* 80), blind Penny divulges the childhood tragedy that turned her colourful world to blackness. The ensuing monologue is performed with glove puppets, but, unlike Herschel's in *Provenance*, hers is not a fantasy. It is a "childhood flashback" (80), and the puppets are representations of Penny as a young girl and her faithful dog, Big Boy. The playfulness of the glove puppets aptly suggests the innocence of youth and the purity of the relationship between Penny and her pet. And how Burkett's hands perform with the glove puppets, not in a grating fashion, like the quick jabs of Punch, but with smooth and controlled gestures, marked by embraces between Penny and Big Boy, visually parallels the lyrical quality of Penny's text.

The emotional immediacy of the scene is also supported by the immediacy of the glove puppet. Penny watches her father, who has mistaken Big Boy's gentle tugs for an act of violence, and says,

He grabbed Big Boy, roughly, not the way a man should treat his son, but manhandled him like a dog. Scruff of the neck, dragging him across the field.

[...]

I struggled to my feet and saw my father, now small again and far away, standing at the barn, shouldering his gun, pointed at the ground. Why? Why kill the earth? What was there? Nothing, nothing but Big Boy, cowering. I tried to run, I tried to scream, but I could do nothing, nothing at all, but watch the last thing I would ever see, forever. My old Big Boy, suddenly red, red like apples covering the ground, too many apples, too much red, red everywhere as my brother dog lay dead. (82-83)

At this moment in the production, Burkett removed his hand from inside Big Boy and grabbed the puppet by the scruff of the neck as Penny describes. The softness and malleability of the puppet's cloth body—which at the top of the monologue communicated a sense of cuddliness

and comfort that a child might derive from a stuffed toy—now limp in Burkett’s fist demonstrated the character’s helplessness at the hand of his master, the puppet’s fragile existence at the hand of his puppeteer. The death of Big Boy and the transformation from animated life to mere prop were made more effective given the fact that the puppet was a gloved character. Seeing Burkett remove his hand from inside the figure evoked a visceral response from the audience, as it was a shocking (and inventive) expression of the passing from life into death, from liveliness to stillness.

Sometimes Burkett’s glove puppets do not represent characters wholly fantastical or those in flashback but rather something in between, less definite. One such character is Sid Diamond, who appears to Billy in *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*. As Billy (played by Burkett) contemplates suicide by jumping off the bow of the cruise ship where he works as a puppeteer/entertainer, the ghost of his chief mentor, Sid Diamond, calls him back to life. Burkett-as-Billy converses with the glove puppet Sid like one would see in a ventriloquism act, but the convention is established that “*BILLY’s mouth visibly moves with no attempt to hide the fact*” (*Billy* 13). After some comic banter, which is amplified by the fact that audience knows and *sees* Burkett performing as a version of himself (with himself), Sid makes the reason for his presence known: “I’m here to see you retire that old man with the bunny ears routine and make things right so I can cross into the light” (17). Sid explains that he has not truly been able to “die” because Billy had created a comedy routine involving an effigy made in Sid’s likeness. Later in this play, we see exactly what Sid describes. Billy performs a short act involving a Sid caricature marionette named Bunny, who wears pink bunny ears for “*no apparent reason other than the visual absurdity of it*” (77), and blows up a balloon that hangs out of the puppet’s underwear (essentially, his penis). The performance is ridiculous, more send-up than homage to his mentor,

and the marionette as fetish object captures a part of Sid's spirit, disallowing him from crossing fully into the afterlife. The incarnation of Sid as glove puppet is a reductive expression of his corporeal presence—his half-life—a sign for how he is caught somewhere between death and the animated life of the “real” marionette of Sid we see Burkett-as-Billy perform in flashback.

Nevertheless, Sid as glove puppet has a strange agency that neither Billy nor any of his other puppets possess, and his agency extends beyond the stage. Sid jumps off the set of the ship deck, pulling Billy with him. After watching Billy writhe and gasp “*as if drowning in a pool of water,*” (19) he yells, “Turn up the lights!” prompting “[*t*]he house lights [*to*] come up to half in the theatre” (20). Sid explains that he and Billy are not on a cruise ship after all but in a theatre and announces that Billy is starring in a new production, “condensed and in miniature” (20). Glove puppet Sid then forces Billy to relive many of his memories, which Billy performs with marionettes, and these flashbacks pattern the arc of the play. As ridiculous as the scenario seems, I argue that the audience readily believes the glove puppet Sid to be the ghostly manifestation of Billy's mentor simply because he is a glove puppet. The childlike quality of the form allows for childlike reception, and the agency that Sid has to recall Billy's memories and force him to relive them is perpetuated by the audience's ready willingness to trust this agency. Furthermore, by drawing our attention to the metatheatrical—that the puppet is knowingly animated and voiced by Burkett-as-Billy—the glove puppet Sid gains agency through self-reference. When Billy questions, “You've been using my mouth, Sid. What the hell is that about?” Sid exclaims, “I'm a puppet and you're a puppeteer. Figure it out, asshole!” (18). Like Punch, who “knows himself to be a puppet” (Gross 70), Sid is similarly enabled by his material knowingness.

In *Provenance*, the resident singing monkey of the brothel, Plato, can be described in similar terms, as a character caught somewhere between memory and reality. The glove puppet

Plato is gifted to Leda by her bovine conscience, Aunt Sari, represented by a cow headband puppet. Again, despite the outlandish scenario—the fact that the “imaginary world interact[s] with physical reality” (*Quartet* 251)—the audience accepts it as “truth” because of the medium in which it is represented.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the fantastical elements of the play are made believable by the fantastical characters that perform them. When Plato is first seen in the brothel, he appears as a roller skating marionette. Onstage alone, he sings the apostrophic “Ah Beauty,” a call the invisible Leda to “Settle here and steal my gaze / Nestle close and spend your days / And waken me to God” (221). In all other scenes, Plato is represented by a glove puppet, as he only appears to Leda. And it is only during the last scene that Plato’s seemingly nonsensical existence is made clear. Leda says to him, “I should have let you be a man again, Dooley,” to which he replies, “I don’t mind being a monkey” (263). Plato can be considered an extension of Leda’s memory, an anthropomorphized manifestation of her husband’s disavowed presence. He is Dooley reborn but as a human animal, simpler in form. Like Sid, his identity is less stable than the characters that are exclusively represented by marionettes and, thus, is aptly personified as a simple glove puppet. However, his reunion with Leda in the final scene fulfills his desire in “Ah Beauty” to “nestle close.” His material form as glove puppet, as a clothed human hand, enables him to make an intimate, human-like connection; he is finally able to hold Leda and comfort her. Fittingly, at the conclusion of the scene “the handpuppet of PLATO is removed and rests beside LEDA” (263).

---

<sup>10</sup> To avoid slippage, let me qualify what I mean by the marionette’s “life” and the glove puppet’s “truth.” Burkett’s marionettes, more so than his glove puppets, signify human “life” because they are more imitative of live actors in their design and movement. The glove puppet as signifier is more stylized in design and movement, and thus the audience (and puppeteer) must work harder to overcome the physical improbability of its soft, malleable body in order to ascribe it human “life.” However, where the glove puppet excels, more so than the marionette, is in its imaginative ability to cut through pretense. Its “truth” is aesthetic and derives from the childlike simplicity of its reception.

Glove puppets make their first appearance in Burkett's major works in *Happy* in the most conventional and recognizable form, as Punch and Judy look-alikes. After Carla loses her husband, Drew, and spins downward into a grievous cycle of mourning, Burkett performs her grief, fittingly, as an angry Punch and Judy routine; however, instead of wily Punch delivering the majority of the slapstick and often-violent humour, Carla-as-Judy becomes the raging rapsallion. When Drew asks for a kiss, Carla retorts, "I will brush your cheek, you rake! Take that!" (171) and slaps him. Using glove puppets here, and particularly ones dressed as Punch and Judy, bolsters the comic quality of the routine. Although Burkett reverses the archetypes, the familiar characters with their senseless aptitude for physical and verbal jabs provide a safe emotional blanketing for the audience from the real violence that takes place. Still, the slapping continues throughout the scene and soon turns into senseless beating, while the dialogue morphs into something more naturalistic, distinct from the elevated repartee of the Punch and Judy show. Drew, increasingly confused about the situation, no longer inhabits his role as Punch and asks for Carla's forgiveness, to which she replies, "Why should I absolve you, asshole?" Drew barely gets out his line "Because I died, baby" before the "*handpuppet of DREW slips off, revealing Ronnie's bare hand*" (172). Similar to the scene involving Big Boy in *Penny Plain*, Burkett's bare hand signifies the lifeless body of Drew here at the same time it signifies the very source of the puppet's locomotion—the extremity of its manipulator. This reveal is shocking, inciting a shift from parody to something darker, more visceral in nature. That the audience comes to realize Drew's death through the exposure of Burkett's fleshy hand versus a lifeless puppet flopped about the stage makes the moment more startling because of its discordant signification. The audience is confronted with the real as a representation of the dead. Furthermore, unlike

witnessing Burkett's hands manipulating the controls of his marionettes, we feel that Burkett's exposed hand here is something we should not be able to see, a violation of the rules of puppetry.

A theatrical figure integrating the exposed flesh of one or more body parts of its operator is neither unique to Burkett's stagecraft nor uncommon to puppetry of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Pioneering Russian puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov experimented with the ways in which an audience would still ascribe life to a glove puppet the more laconic in appearance it became. One of his innovations, typified in his performance of Mayakovsky's poem "Attitude to a Lady," involved stripping his puppets of their costumes and placing simple balls as heads atop his exposed fingers. He was convinced that, even after doing this, "the puppet remains a puppet" (Obraztsov 186). Broadening Obraztsov's belief that "the bare hand [is] 'the visible soul of a hand puppet'" (Jurkowski, qtd. in Williams 122), Burr Tillstrom performed a famously imaginative and evocative vignette using only his hands as figures on opposite sides of the Berlin Wall who are forced to part after briefly meeting. In each of these examples, it remains important to the illusion of puppetry that "the hand that wears [or is] the puppet "lives apart," and is perceived apart, from the actor [...] That is, it is perceived no so much as a hand, as it is an object" (Tillis, *Aesthetics* 19).

Preeminent Burkett scholar Janne Cleveland contends that when Burkett's hand is revealed in *Happy* "[t]he contested duality of subject/object relations [...] signified by the fact that Burkett's hand is simultaneously part of his own human body and the "dead" body of a puppet character [...] supports the notion that 'the puppet's abstracted signs of life provoke the process of double-vision'" ("Mourning" 48). On the contrary, I argue that this moment does not provoke double vision. The two defining characteristics of Tillis' theory—that the puppet is to be perceived as both an object and as imagined life—do not hold, as Burkett's hand is not given



signs of movement or speech (for Drew, having been stripped of his habiliments and head, is no longer animate). In fact, the reveal of Burkett's lifeless, bare hand is a shocking destruction of the magic of puppetry, of double vision.

After the harrowing realization that Drew is dead, Carla drops her persona as Judy and “begins hitting the bare hand, and as she continues to scream it becomes violent punching with the CARLA handpuppet as a fist against the bare hand” (*Quartet* 173). The transfiguration of the Carla glove puppet to fist signifies the dissolution of Carla as imagined life and her transformation into a mere appendage of Burkett, as well. Accordingly, as Burkett beats his bare hand with glove puppet Carla, the action moves beyond the realm of puppetry to that of human violence. The fact that Burkett is perpetrating this violence against himself, almost as an act of self harm, evokes a stronger sense of discomfort than if we were to imagine Drew and Carla engaged in a similar fight. Rather than a simultaneous acknowledgment of puppet as both subject and object, that which confirms the process of double vision, this moment begets what semiotic scholars Green and Pepicello helpfully term as an oscillation between an understanding of Burkett's hand as the soul of Drew and that which might form a fist to crush and kill.

### ***Doll Figures***

The dolls that Burkett uses to represent a myriad of characters in a number of his plays also nearly always elicit from the audience's perspective an oscillation between subject and object. Ones that deserve close attention are those used in *Provenance*. Burkett terms the ones that first appear in the play as “table-top figures” (209). Leda, Pity and Tender, about the same size as their marionette counterparts, sit in repose on chairs on top of the bar unit. They are jointed in such a way that Burkett is able to fix their poses so that they retain energy and certain

aliveness in their stillness, unlike his pendulous marionettes, which always return to their neutral characteristic stances after being moved. Also, unlike his marionettes, Burkett voices the dolls from behind, occasionally reaching forward to perform a gesture, such as removing Leda's glasses, and his manipulation of them is intermittent. One might consider the figures more as props than puppets, for they neither steal the audience's attention nor demand an imaginative investment like their marionette counterparts. Instead, the audience's focus oscillates wildly between them and Burkett. This oscillation discourages the audience from any sort of emotional attachment to the characters and incites a consideration of the puppets as items of beauty, things to regard and behold. This perhaps may be Burkett's reasoning for staging the beginning of the play with such figures, for *Provenance* grapples with beauty, "our obsession with it, our fantasies about it, our addiction to it, and our ownership of it" (*Quartet* cover page). However, it may be argued that the static dolls are more than statuesque props.

[T]he puppet in performance can remain motionless for extended periods of time, and can, on rare occasions, remain without actual motion for the duration of its performance, and yet be something other than a mere figure of design – that is, something other than a statue. This is because the sign-system of speech is also available to the puppet, and in the absence of puppet movement, the possibilities inherent in this sign-system, in conjunction with those of design, can allow the audience to imagine the puppet as having life. (Tillis, *Aesthetics* 24)

Following the dimming of the house lights, Burkett enters the stage, stands at center and says, "Follow my voice" (*Quartet* 215). He then speaks the first passage of the play not as one of his characters but as himself, poetically recounting the scene depicted in the painting behind him. The passage conflates Burkett's own consideration of the painting's composition as admirer or perhaps, more interestingly, as the painting's real-life creator with the subject of the painting itself. As he remembers a scene with "trees in the background," (215) a scene to which Tender was once witness, Burkett claims Tender's story as his. Stage lights then come up on Leda and

Burkett begins to speak in her voice and commits to speaking as his characters for the remainder of the play.

The opening line is significant because it suggests that in *Provenance*, more so than in any other play, Burkett's voice will vivify the characters rather than his physical manipulation. Practically, this acknowledgment helps the audience negotiate the switches between many different styles of puppetry unique to this work—table-top figures, marionettes, glove puppets and puppet heads attached to headrigs—and how the same characters are represented by puppets of more than one style, such as Leda and Pity (both as table-top figures, marionettes, dolls and headrigs) and Plato (marionette and glove puppet). With such switches in modes of representation and thus in constitutive signs, Burkett's voice is the only constant, the thread that weaves the story together. That we might see Leda as a child in doll form then as an adult marionette followed by an elderly-looking sculpted head attached to Burkett's forehead in as little as two pages of text speaks to the heightened role of the sign-system of speech, more so than design and movement, to delineate character. And this opening scene successfully demonstrates the power of speech not only to establish character but also to give and hold focus.

Doll puppets are also used later in the play to suggest the porcelain-like fragility of Leda, Tender and Pity, all of whom are victims of sexual exploitation. In a long-form monologue, Leda recounts being raped as a child by her father and subsequently being whisked away to France by her protective nanny. While Burkett tells the story, he manipulates a “*doll figure of child LEDA*” (255). Stage directions also note that the “*whole scene (undressing, travel by boat across the channel, etc.) is played on top of the bar with this single jointed figure*” (255). The scene is stylized and played for effect, as Burkett does not manipulate the doll in such a way that the audience perceives it to have life. Rather, as a stiff object, it becomes a tool in his hands to act

upon and with which to create stage pictures. Specifically, the way he cradles the figure in his arms at one moment, as one would a baby, aptly suggests Leda's innocence, her sexual vulnerability, and the comfort and safety Burkett subsequently provides as creator.

If Burkett can be perceived as benevolent creator in *Provenance*, he can equally be perceived as defiler. Similar to the child Leda, Burkett performs with a jointed doll version of Tender in uniform—a physical manifestation of the “little toy soldier” (257). As Burkett-as-Tender recounts his similar rape by a fellow army officer, Burkett enacted the scene by tying the figure of Tender to his chest. He then forcefully thrust his own hips into the bar in front of him, performing the role the offending officer. Although the moment was not overtly sexual and more stylized than graphic, the staging of the power dynamics implicit to the rape made the moment nearly unbearable to watch in production. The sound of Burkett's body slamming into the bar unit in front of him punctuating the harsh delivery of the text also made the moment brutally visceral. Many audience members have since commented that they felt betrayed by Burkett because of this scene. I believe such was the case because he asked the audience to “follow his voice”, coaxing them into his created world—a world in which they were made to understand what can and cannot take place between subject and object—and then suddenly violated its rules. And more so than a violation of Burkett's rules, I argue that the rape represents, more generally, a violation of puppetry. The figure of Tender who throughout the monologue has been intermittently ascribed abstracted signs of life, or as Burkett puts it, “acted on” (257), is forcefully robbed of this ability to “act” altogether. The figure transmuted from performing object to mere props in seconds, powerless once tied to Burkett's chest. The absence of wires, rods or strings on Tender's doll body suggested that he had no form of resistance or way of

escape of his own. And Burkett's hands, which we regarded as the source of the puppet's anima, became the means by which the figure was literally abused and tortured.

This moment also felt more harrowing than any rape I have seen enacted on stage because it ruptured a world of innocence, and the idea of innocence is strongly linked to the figure of the doll. In rape scenes involving human actors (no matter how convincingly they are performed), the audience becomes hyperaware of their artificiality. The scenes are carefully choreographed and rehearsed to ensure the safety of those involved. However, by using a doll puppet as the rape victim, Burkett decentralizes our concern for how "real" this moment feels or for the safety of the actors, instead forcing us to witness the ruin of doll-like, childlike virtue. As such, the moment in performance rendered the audience more susceptible to the physiological brutality of the rape through the collision of Burkett's phenomenological presence and the "dead" object. The way a puppet-object so lovingly created could then be abused and sodomized so harshly by his creator begot a powerful emotional disjunction, altogether unsettling and almost necrophilic in nature.

Contrapuntal to this scene is one involving Pity who willingly offers herself as a prostitute to Mr. Hiro. Like Tender, she is represented by an unmoving doll figure lying "*flat on her back*" (*Quartet* 261) on a small tray, which demonstrates her complete surrender to the objectification of her body. The sexual act is highly stylized as Burkett (as Mr. Hiro) smells the length of Pity's motionless body and devours a "*small piece of food*" (261) placed on top of her. The theme of sexual exploitation is again aptly communicated through the juxtaposition of powerless, static doll against imposing, live figure. The scale of looming puppeteer versus diminutive puppet also serves to heighten this imbalance of power. Only after Mr. Hiro exits the scene does Burkett touch Pity, moving her into an upright position to deliver this line toward the

painting of Tender: “Now I know how it feels. Poor you” (262). As active witness to this trauma, the audience seems to know how it feels too.

If it is difficult to term the dolls in *Provenance* as puppets because of the way in which they provoke an oscillation in perception between imagined life and object, it is even harder to see “The Populace” in *Tinka’s New Dress* as such. “The Populace” consists of the unnamed citizens who occupy the environs of the play’s suggested European city—static, soft sculpted, featureless figures in “neutral cloth” (9). These statue-like figures are the first characters to appear in the play, and Burkett silently moves them one at a time to their opening positions (8). As they are strategically arranged at the beginning of many scenes, they transform into various members of the general public—spectators who come to watch Carl’s performance in the park of “The Franz and Schnitzel Show,” guests at Mrs. Van Craig’s party and visitors to the internment camp. Their descriptions in the stage directions are merely suggestive, such “the Thin Man,” “the Thin Woman,” “the Fat Woman,” “the Fat Gentleman,” “the Little Girl” and “the Little Boy.” Apart from being arranged by Burkett to form various stage pictures throughout the play, they are given no signs of speech and movement. They are objects of mere design—characters only defined by their physical shape and age, and thus without any sort of agency or means of resistance. While they may be less realized than the marionettes of the play, their inability to act yet capacity to watch implicates them as surrogate audience members. As the actual audience witnesses the staged action in unmoving silence like the Populace figures, they too become, by extension, members of this Populace. By uniting the collective experience of the audience with that of his performing objects, and specifically in *Tinka* where the chief theme is social and political resistance to tyranny of all kinds, Burkett forces us to consider our response to perpetrators of injustice not just in the theatre but in the world at large.

This approach is essentially Brechtian in nature. Unlike Burkett's marionettes that prompt our emotional attachment because of their mimetic power, his doll figures promote critical reflection because of their strangeness. Although they look like marionettes, they do not appear to move on their own; they are inert, more object than subject, constantly alerting us to their material constraints and means of manipulation. In essence, they are Brecht's cigars—those items that combat the spectator's all-absorbing empathy (Osman 19). Brecht believed that "if the spectator smokes, she can engage critically and watch the show with a detached and questioning gaze. If a performance raises questions—or even better, causes a brawl—then change outside the theater is possible" (19). While Burkett does not insist on the same level of didacticism that Brecht did, he does raise specific social concerns. The use of dolls underpin, first in *Tinka*, the overwhelming difficulty of maintaining autonomy under authoritarian rule and, second in *Provenance*, the objectified nature of victims of sexual abuse. As Burkett switches between modes of representation, from marionette to doll, he prompts us to consider the social implications of his characters made powerless and innocent in the hands of agents of control.

### ***Hybrid Puppets***

The term hybrid describes those creations that do not fit into the more traditional puppet categories as previously discussed. More specifically, the name evokes a fusion of forms, and the puppets in consideration here are composites in their design and movement—half-human, half-puppet. The first hybrid puppets I will examine are what Burkett terms "headrigs" that appear throughout *Provenance*. Headrigs are essentially sculpted puppet heads, replicas of their marionette counterparts, which Burkett connects to his own head via rigid wire. Two black wires jut out from the back of the puppet head and attach to the front and back of a black fabric headpiece which Burkett wears around his head like a sweatband. The effect of the puppet is

similar to that of a mask. It gains its anima through the puppeteer's head movements while its body is suggested to be that of the puppeteer's; however, the form differs from mask in design and function in that the sculpted head is a round object, quite small in comparison to Burkett's head, and sits at about eight inches directly in front of his face. The latter is the most important feature, distinguishing the form as puppetry, because it suggests the creation of "a separate being with its own anatomy" (Blumenthal 39).

To use Blumenthal's term, this type of hybrid puppet is a parasite character, for it attaches itself to the puppeteer's body. "The puppeteer's head," she expounds, "despite its unimpressive range of motion, is a popular site for parasite puppets. Proximity to the center of consciousness seems to give the puppet a leg up on coming alive: 'I'm attached to the brain, which thinks: therefore I am'" (39). Yet the headrig is not parasitic like the glove puppet is because there is a physical schism between performer and puppet, which divides the producer of the signs from the site of signification. While Burkett performs animatedly, his head is relatively unimpressive in its range of motion, too inexpressive to give "life" to the sculpted head. Thus, the audience must rely on the sign-system of Burkett's own movements (gestural, facial) to bring the character to life. In fact, I found Burkett more interesting to watch than the small bobbing head in front of his face during the production. The proximity of the puppet head to his own allowed the audience to "check in" more easily with the performer and use his deployed signs as actor to establish character and mood. The question remains: Do we identify with the character as a headrig in the same way than when it is a full-bodied marionette? I argue no because the headrig presents a character that is not perceived to have life of its own. Essentially, Burkett performs as the puppet here. Because he deploys the signs of life and at the same time houses the meaningful sites of signification on his own body, this type of performance does not even qualify



as puppetry, according to Tillis' definition. As well, the sculpted head that bobbles in front of his face is merely a referent to the representation of the character already established in marionette form. Its function is purely symbolic, not imitative. Semiotically speaking, it is a sign of a sign of a sign—a disembodied sculpture pointing to a wholly corporeal marionette, which signifies the stage character. The same can be said for the headrig of Mr. Hiro that appears later in the play.

However, the second headrig of Leda used near the play's conclusion is different in its design. Attached to the sculpted head is a long, flowing piece of green chiffon, to which Burkett attaches his thumbs by means of elastic at its corners. Stage directions indicate that “[h]is hands become hers” (*Quartet* 262). As Burkett gestures, the fabric moves accordingly, creating the illusion of Leda's body, however conceptual in nature. The transparency of the fabric in motion is a fitting visual parallel to her final song, “Holes,” in which she transparently sings of her reckoning with her traumatic past, of the “Gaps in the journey forgotten with time / Beginnings unfinished / Endings not met / Bushels of middles I choose to forget” (262-3). The song concludes with her ability to accept vulnerability and forgiveness for the first time. Before she dies, she apologizes to her lover, Dooley, for breaking his heart and offers her love to him with the closing line, “this is the version you get.” Appropriately, the headrig version of Leda that we get in this scene—different than we have seen before—symbolizes a restoration of her personhood. As she reclaims her subjectivity by coming to terms with her traumatic past, she is rendered a more complete puppet; she is no longer a floating head but a head replete with a material body. And the chiffon does well to mask Burkett's presence here, which was overwhelmingly apparent in the other headrig designs. As Burkett moves, the abstracted signs of life are more readily transferred to the fabric body. While the audience may not be wholly

convinced of the puppet's autonomy, the poetic image complements the poetry of Leda's song and emotional reconciliation with Dooley.

Disembodied sculpted heads are also used in *Happy*, but they are not attached to Burkett's body at all. Instead, they are "*taken from Ronnie's apron pocket and held with one hand*" (176). The two heads are grisly representations of Happy's young friends, Johnny and Seamus, who we are told have been killed during wartime combat. As Happy conjures the memory of how his two friends Johnny and Seamus ran "[s]traight into the mouth of hell" (176), Burkett begins to thrust the heads in his hands forward. Jurkowski states, "If a performer produces an object in order to turn it into a stage character, the task is more complex than that of presenting a puppet character" (152), for the performer must first contradict "the iconic and practical value of the object and next [endow] it with new functions and a new appearance to make it recognizable as the intended character" (152). Burkett makes no effort to do so. Even though the heads are given design signs, they are not ascribed meaningful signs of speech or movement. The manipulation in this scene is crude and is merely suggestive of their reckless running, more conceptual in nature. Therefore, the heads remain objects in his hands, not puppets.

### ***The Puppet and Audience Perception***

In *Aspects of Puppet Theatre*, puppetry scholar Henryk Jurkowski discusses the tenuous nature of the puppet in relation to its perceived onstage identity. A puppet is, at once, an object and may be perceived as such in performance if devoid of movement, gesture and speech; however, "[w]hen movement fully dominates an object, we feel that the character is born and present on the stage" (73). The process by which a puppet is perceived as both object and

character at the same time Jurkowski calls “opalization.” As previously discussed, Steve Tillis expresses the unification of this duality—that of object and character—as a puppet’s “double vision.” Green and Pepicello call it “oscillation.” Tillis points out that other critics, such as Péter Molnár Gál and Jan Kott, describe this process similarly but have no special term for it. Margaret Williams likewise discusses the audience’s “diverse and fluctuating perceptions” (124), but suggests that it is unlikely that a puppet throughout an entire performance is able to simultaneously evoke its status as both object and character. In other words, a puppet’s two natures cannot exist reciprocally for an indefinite amount of time. This is an important concept, and essential to the work Burkett stages.

Both Penny Francis and Steve Tillis assert that Jurkowski’s term “opalization,” Green and Pepicello’s “oscillation” and Tillis’ own “double vision” connote the same meaning, more or less; however, I am less inclined to believe so. Tillis qualifies his definition, saying “the audience sees the puppet, through perception and through imagination, as an object and as a life; that is, it sees the puppet in two ways *at once*” (*Aesthetics* 64 [emphasis mine]). However, in numerous instances previously described, despite the presence of design, speech and movement, Burkett’s audience is not convinced of the puppet’s life, and quite deliberately so. Moments of Brechtian alienation signaled by the presence of the actor-puppeteer disrupt this process of imagination and identification. Tillis remarks that the term “oscillation” “unnecessarily suggests a continual wavering in the audience’s acknowledgment of the two aspects of the puppet” (64); yet, this wavering describes precisely my understanding of and own reaction to Burkett’s work—the constant shifting dynamic between puppeteer and puppet, between theatrical distancing and emotional engagement. Though “oscillation” is suitable a term, I prefer Jurkowski’s “opalization” for its poetic resonance. Puppetry is poetry, the theatrical embodiment of an idea or

expression, and what I think Jurkowski also aptly allows room for in his definition is the possibility of a separation in the puppet's unity only "to be regenerated after a moment" (Jurkowski 73)—a condition we have seen Burkett demonstrate moment after moment throughout this chapter.

Contrary to Tillis' theory, it is impossible for an audience to be perpetually reminded of the puppet's dual nature as object and character. Momentary lapses of this "double vision" pull us in either one of two directions: we become convinced of the "truthful reality" of his characters and narratives, forgetting that Burkett is onstage, or we remain cognizant of the way in which he manipulates and controls his puppets. What I find unique about Burkett's productions are his highly refined puppets and the representation of characters by marionettes of differing ages and by figures of differing styles. Each of these styles constructs a unique semiotic code and, together, provides a richer, full-bodied understanding of his characters. As we are given multi-dimensional representations of their forms (as marionettes, glove puppets, dolls and even headrigs), we come to understand the multi-dimensional nature of their personalities. In the transmutability of their existence (across artistic mediums), they are made more complex and more compelling to us.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Puppeteer as God

<b>PINO</b>	A puppet is not a person, Dad. And a son is not a thing.
<b>GEPETTO</b>	I gave you life, I created you!
<b>PINO</b>	Dad, stop it! You're not God, you're just a puppeteer!

*Penny Plain* (2011)

Early on in his career, Burkett established the convention of open manipulation, of operating his marionettes and other figures directly in front of his body on the same stage level and in full view of the audience. Of the plays considered in this study, *Tinka's New Dress*, *Happy*, and *Provenance* are performed exclusively in this style. Plays that combine this style of manipulation as well as more traditional marionette manipulation from bridges above the playing area are *Street of Blood* and *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*. In later plays, *10 Days on Earth* and *Penny Plain*, Burkett manipulates exclusively from bridges above the stage but still remains visible to the audience, as are the controls of each marionette and, oftentimes, each marionette hanging “offstage” when not in use.

While Burkett has helped to popularize the practice of open manipulation in contemporary puppet theatre, he is neither its pioneer nor sole practitioner. In the Kathputli tradition of Rajasthan, India, for example, simply strung marionettes dance in plain view in front of their human operators. In the 1920s and 1930s, well-known Western marionettists such as Frank Paris and Albrecht Roser began performing without any sort of masking (Blumenthal 72). Even some of Burkett's contemporaries such as Joseph Cashore and Phillip Huber dazzle audiences unmasked alongside their puppets; however, their practice is quite different from

Burkett's. Despite their onstage presence, the puppet remains the focus, as their desire is to remain neutral and eliminate expressions and gestures that would prove distracting. Therefore, puppeteers in this type of performance create "the notion of symbolic invisibility" (Astles 24). Starting in the 1980s, however, a shift occurred in professional puppetry performance—in Europe, in particular—that favoured the actor-puppeteer in lieu of the puppeteer-manipulator.

For puppeteers working 20 or 30 years ago the medieval image of the world at the centre of the planets which revolved around it was useful as an image for the puppet: all focus and attention on the puppet, which was the core of action, character, narrative and plot. This image, however, no longer predominates in contemporary puppet theatre where today the 'puppetesque' aesthetic is often one of a moving dynamic[.] (23)

Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes typifies this aesthetic, where the audience's focus oscillates between puppet and puppeteer, and purposefully so. Burkett's open manipulation does more than expose the technique of the artist; it is not an arbitrary convention but a deliberate design choice. For one, in the presence of the operator/speaker, the puppets' design-signs are rendered conceptual—not imitative—because of the visual emphasis on the puppet's puppet-ness (Tillis, *Aesthetics* 132). When the puppet's objectival nature becomes the focus, it forces the audience to consider how the "living object" receives its life in the first place, triggering broader questions as to the nature of control, subordination and possession. Burkett also desires to be visible onstage because he often interacts with his puppets and plays characters alongside them. These instances bring the creator/created metaphor to the forefront, compelling the audience to reconsider such binaries, opening up discussions regarding the ontological status of the puppet and puppeteer. Burkett's lived presence also provides the audience with multiple levels of signification on top of those communicated by his wooden characters, adding intellectual dimension to the themes of life and death he frequently revisits. In short, Burkett consciously exploits the metatheatrical possibilities that appearing onstage with his puppets presents—

transforming beyond the role of manipulator into actor and puppet (and sometimes all three simultaneously)—in order to shock his audience into new ways of thinking. At times, these moments are more Brechtian in nature, more alienating and critically inciting; others take on qualities of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, which cause us to think “first with all of [the] senses” (Artaud).

This moving dynamic between puppet and puppeteer, between empathy and detachment, “is among the most difficult of performance modes” (Meschke, qtd. in Astles 32), not only for the performer but for the audience, too, because of the need to make meaning of the numerous switches between semiotic codes. Throughout this chapter, I seek to explain these complex and meaningful switches in order to better understand the powerful reception of Burkett’s plays. I have divided the chapter by headings to help guide the reader throughout my analysis relating to the perception of actor/puppet/manipulator that Burkett inspires as he performs visibly alongside his creations. Moving through Burkett’s dramatic trajectory more or less chronologically, my goal is also to highlight the ever-increasing complexity of his metatheatrics culminating in the production of *Penny Plain*, which marks a decided switch in his stage practice and a return to a more traditional but not anachronistic form of marionette theatre.

### ***Colliding Worlds: Burkett as Human Character***

In *Street of Blood*, Burkett acts alongside his puppets for the first time in three distinct roles not represented by any sort of constructed figure. Perhaps the most effective is his portrayal of Edna’s husband and Eden’s adopted father, Stanley. The play begins many years after Stanley’s death from AIDS-related complications brought on after receiving a tainted blood transfusion. By means of Edna and Eden’s collective memory, Stanley’s physical presence is

conjured onstage in a series of flashbacks; however, if the marionettes of Edna and Eden represent “real” characters reacting and responding in the present, it is paradoxical that Burkett stands in for a dead character brought-to-life, for we understand it is the lifeless puppet who finds its anima in performance. Furthermore, the signs deployed by Burkett-as-Stanley suggest a phenomenological presence more “real” than that of his wooden actors. Nevertheless, that presence is equally unstable, fleeting, and less permanent as Burkett steps in and out of the role. A change to his voice, accentuated by lighting and a “black cap” are the only means by which he assumes Stanley’s character. While an actor can only represent, a puppet simply *is*, and, as such, Stanley exists only in performance, unlike Edna and Eden who, once hung offstage, still cling to the very essence of their character (Cleveland, *Weirdsville* 90). Burkett presents to the audience the spectre of Stanley.

As the spectral figure of the play, not only does Stanley register as a present absence, he registers as *both and neither* subject and object [...] Unlike his co-stars Stanley does not continue to exist as an object outside the space of representation. As not subject and not object, both inside and outside the confines of the performance time and space then, Stanley can only register as an abject presence—that which resides in the liminal space. (90)

If Burkett represents the spectre of Stanley, he (as actor-puppeteer) must *also* be read as spectral, for he is like a ghost figure, disappearing into and reappearing from the stage shadows. When Burkett plays Stanley, he inhabits the bridge, an elevated platform especially designed for manipulation of long strung marionettes. As such, the bridge represents a concretized limen between the constructed, inner world of the puppets and his “reality,” the world outside of theatrical illusion.

When Burkett steps in and out of this limen, he demands audience focus and incites questions as to Stanley’s social status as patriarch and husband. A prime example occurs during



the character's introduction to the audience. Rather than being wholly alienating, however, the moment is paradoxically one of the most emotionally affecting of the show. Burkett dons a black cap and "*climbs off the bridge to deck level*" (*Quartet* 102) to tenderly feed Edna breakfast after learning that she "can't have a baby" (102). The moment is semiotically complex as Burkett mimes Stanley's action on the lower playing deck while handling a younger Edna marionette and speaking as older Edna, represented by another marionette who sits still-in-repose nearby—the narrator of the flashback. While Burkett's voice gives life to Edna and her story, it is his body that becomes the locus of attention. He ties a puppet-sized apron around the young Edna marionette and mimes feeding her bacon and eggs. Edna says, "We stayed there for a long, long time. Me in my wedding dress and an apron, Stanley on his knees before me. Me and my man. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Rural. Crying over a plate of bacon and eggs" (102-3). This is the first time the audience sees the entirety of Burkett's large frame contrasted with the small, delicate marionette.<sup>1</sup> The marionette's relative size—that is, its perceived height on the stage in relation to the miniaturized set pieces and other puppets around it—is immediately upset by Burkett's presence. As the actor-puppeteer steps down onto the deck, marking the dissolution of the theatrical fiction, he foregrounds the puppet's "absolute size" instead (Tillis, *Aesthetics* 123). The moment is a Brechtian alienation device par excellence. The audience recognizes Edna's nature as object as central to her character. She is smaller-than-life and fragile, easily influenced by others, and her stasis—because she is hung from a gallows in this scene—reinforces her emotional paralysis upon receiving the news of her barrenness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Burkett also manipulates short strung Esmé marionettes in front of him on the bridge for the movie memory sequences, but he is meant to be "invisible." The staging simply offers physical separation between Edna and Eden on the deck below and their filmic reminiscences.

As a counterpoint, Burkett-as-Stanley is active and strong but also tender, in whose arms Edna finds comfort and support. The scene ends with Burkett “*on his knees, embracing YOUNG EDNA*” (*Quartet* 103). This moment is powerful—and sentimentally so—because Stanley’s embrace is unexpected given how Edna previously describes him as taking “his husbandly way” with her on their wedding day and how she has grown to “tolerate [him] climbing on top of [her] at night” (101, 102). The non-sexual embrace visually reinforces a horizontal, reciprocal connection between husband and wife and puppeteer and puppet versus a vertical one—of one on top of another, of control and subordination. Furthermore, the effect of seeing a human body and puppet body embrace gives rise to a stronger emotional bond between audience and character because of the way in which Burkett cradles and comforts the small, helpless puppet in the way the audience might want to in that moment. Therefore, Burkett-as-Stanley first invokes the audience’s critical detachment but later wins their empathy. He performs uncharacteristic compassion and tenderness juxtaposed against the way the character is described elsewhere in the play as an uptight farmer unsympathetic to Eden’s homosexuality.

However, the audience’s perception of Stanley fluctuates as Burkett’s massive size compared to his small puppets resurfaces later in the play not to highlight the character’s absorbing compassion but his menace. Prompted by Jesus, Eden re-imagines a moment from his childhood in which he plays “wedding” with his friend Ogden. Ogden assumes the role of the dad and strips down to his underclothes, saying “[i]t’s what my dad wears to bed” (116), while young Eden pretends to be his wife dressed in his mother’s wedding gown. The boys’ role-play is unexpectedly interrupted by “*a strong, harsh backlight*” that “*shines on Ronnie*” (117). Burkett’s presence abruptly decentralizes the established, intimate stage picture below, and his body, once lit, eclipses those of the puppets. While still manipulating the two marionettes,

Burkett channels Stanley and tells Ogden to go home. Now alone with Eden and noticeably upset by his non-normative behaviour, he bellows, “Take that dress off and come here. Now!” (118). When Eden hesitates, Burkett “*grabs the strings of the marionette and violently pulls the puppet of young EDEN up to his level*” (118). This sudden move demonstrates Burkett’s omnipotence as both puppeteer and the enraged Stanley. It engenders anxiety because the tenderness and comfort the audience has come to associate with Burkett-as-Stanley is overshadowed by aggression, and, throughout the scene, Stanley’s aggression escalates.

**STANLEY**                      Look at you. Look at... this. Eden, the spoiled fruit!

**YOUNG EDEN**                Daddy, no! Please Daddy!

*Music sting. Short, brutal, loud. YOUNG EDEN is “thrown” down to the stage level, bent over the chair and facing upstage, revealing the bloodstained back of the wedding dress. (118)*

Eden’s very name and the fact that he is cast down by his father, literally “thrown” away as the “spoiled fruit”, alludes to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden following their disobedience. Indeed, Burkett is creator here but a cruel and unmerciful one. The way in which he hurts—and, in this case, implicitly beats—his creation seems to violate the trustful code Burkett establishes early on between puppeteer, puppet and audience.

Furthermore, the Artaudian barrage of shouted text and loud music coupled with the image of blood evoked a visceral reaction from the audience. Those who saw the production spoke of how the moment felt incredibly violent, and uncomfortably so, because of the layering of sensory phenomena and the idea of the helpless puppet at its centre. In response to similar violence enacted in *Provenance*, reviewer Ian Shuttleworth charges that “because we have seen puppeteer Burkett take such care with the figure [...] gently manipulating what is literally his own creation, this sudden cruelty is the more disturbing.” The way Burkett violates puppet Eden brutally and

viscerally renders the homophobic violence of father against son. The helplessness of the young boy at the hand of his father gains particular resonance because of the inert quality of the marionette, a mere object at the hand of the all-powerful puppeteer. Burkett's presence is integral to the moment, too, for a puppet version of Stanley performing the same violence might seem bizarre, if not laughable. In short, Burkett exploits differences in scale and the metaphor of creator/created to amplify the power dynamics implicit in patriarchal violence in order to shock the audience and render them more susceptible to the phenomenological effect of such violence.

Similar to the violence against the young Eden marionette made brutally visceral by Burkett's lived presence is the scene involving the rape of Cora Jean Pickles. The moment is chillingly staged during Edna's confession to Eden about his real birth mother. As Edna announces, "Cora Jean was...raped,"

*Ronnie yanks the toque onto his head and jumps down off the bridge, standing in the alley between the stage left side tower and the stage left bridge [...] As the music reaches its strange, violent crescendo, he grabs the puppet [of CORA Jean]. There is a scream—CORA Jean's—and he covers her mouth. Saturated red light and music peak as Ronnie thrusts forward. He releases CORA, quickly climbs back on the bridge and removes the toque. (136)*

As in the rape of Tender discussed in Chapter 1, the transgression of puppeteer against puppet enlivens the power dynamics of the rape in this scene. That Burkett transforms into the silent, nameless perpetrator—"some man" as Edna calls him—decentralizes his humanity and places the emphasis on his body as an object of brutal force. The suddenness with which Burkett slammed onto the deck combined with the violent musical crescendo, Cora's scream and expressionistic lighting also contributed to the uncomfortable, Artaudian quality of this scene in performance. Nevertheless, I contend that this rape did not have the same shocking, phenomenological effect as Tender's in *Provenance*. For one, it was relatively short and

wordless. In contrast, Burkett drew out Tender's rape excruciatingly, first by slowly tying the doll to his chest and then by prolonging the physical thrusting, underpinned by the officer's shouted insults: "Coward, coward, worse than a girl" (259). Furthermore, Burkett did not lovingly handle the marionette of Cora Jean in the way he handled Tender. She is revealed early on in *Street* but merely as xylophone player for the Turnip Corners Ladies Orchestrale; she is neither a principal character nor a sympathetic one. Because we did not grow to care for Cora Jean as a character in the same way as Tender or Eden, the moment felt more alienating, more so a cerebral demonstration of the omnipotent puppeteer than a personal violation of Cora's sexual innocence.

Apart from Stanley and the nameless rapist, Burkett integrates his body into the puppet world in *Street* a third time by playing Jesus. After pricking herself while quilting, marionette Edna Rural bleeds onto her handiwork in a pattern she believes to be the face of the Son of God. As she "*holds up the quilt square*" and declares, "It's the Shroud of Turnip Corners", "*a special comes up on Ronnie's face [—] the "shroud" image*" (86). Throughout the production, Burkett plays Jesus standing from the bridge with a spotlight on his face while he visits the three puppet leads—Edna, Eden and Esmé. United by a shared sense of trauma and loss, each of these characters faces a crisis of faith, and Burkett-as-Jesus arrives "need[ing] to talk" (113).

Edna's crisis of faith manifests in the very first conversation she has with Jesus. Gazing upon the face of the one who took her man and her dog (138), she shoos him away, saying, "It's too late" and "You're wasting your time" (86-7). When Jesus appears to Eden, Eden dismisses him, too, mirroring his mother: "You're wasting your time. Go away" (113). Realizing he will not get through to either using coercion or razzle-dazzle, Burkett-as-Jesus concedes, saying, "I need a more personal approach" (115). He then "*sits on the centrestage catwalk, feet dangling*

into EDEN's playing area" (118) and begins to sing "Midnight in Monte Carlo," a number famously performed by Esmé Massengill in the fictional film of the same name.

All I remember  
Is midnight and moonlight  
You're but a ghost in the mist  
[...]  
I'm *kissed* at midnight  
With the heavens aglow  
I was *kissed* at midnight in Monte Carlo (119 [emphasis mine])

The lyrics collide Jesus and Eden's personal histories. Jesus was betrayed by a close friend—Judas Iscariot—by way of a kiss,<sup>2</sup> and Eden feels similarly betrayed by his father, "the only man [he] ever loved" (118). The song also likens Jesus to Eden, as Eden performs other musical numbers like this one made famous by Esmé as part of his Karaoke Memory Lane act. Furthermore, the "personal approach" of sitting with his feet dangling into the puppet playing space represents a bridging of the physical and psychic split between Jesus and Eden's worlds. Later in the play, the two worlds of myth and reality converge as the vampire Esmé attacks Eden, strips him of his clothes and chains him to a cross—a gruesome reimagining of the crucifixion.<sup>3</sup> Quite literally, Eden becomes Esmé's blood sacrifice and a gross subversion of the Christ figure. As if foreshadowing the incident, Burkett-as-Jesus says earlier in the play, "See Eden, we aren't that different" (119).

The choice to have Burkett play Jesus here is a deliberate one because it sidesteps the stereotypical and iconographic "Sunday school Jesus," which might be too-easily signaled in a sculpted marionette figure (Tracey 69). Additionally, Burkett brings his own humanity to bear in his characterization. "I am very real," (*Quartet* 113) he tells Eden, to which Eden remarks, "Man,

<sup>2</sup> The kiss was a coded (queer) gesture signaling to the Roman authorities that Jesus was the man to be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, an act that prompted his trial and subsequent crucifixion. See Matthew 26:47-50.

<sup>3</sup> Alisa Solomon in her review of the New York production likens Esmé to the Antichrist.

you don't even look like you [...] I'm just used to the beard and long hair, okay? That looked good. Real good. I used to have such a crush on you. You were so hot. Well, him [...] But this aging club-boy thing doesn't really work on someone your age" (114). While the allegorical connection between puppeteer and god is stressed through this means of representation, Eden's comic line reveals the way in which Burkett is an "aging club-boy" himself (Tracey 69), a "Techno Jesus" (*Quartet* 86). Furthermore, Eden's question, "Hey Mum, did you ever think that maybe Jesus was gay?" (111) resonates more strongly given Burkett's own homosexuality. Cleveland helpfully explicates; "Burkett, in the role of Jesus, does not rely on the conventional significations of queerness, but rather 'queers' the symbology of iconic Christianity by presenting a contemporary Christ figure whose difference from his human compatriots is not discernible through visual cues, but by his own openly gay status" (*Weirdsville* 108). Therefore, Burkett's Jesus—a subversion of the traditional concept of homo-normative virility—challenges the audience's conception of puppeteer as god by signaling the actor-puppeteer's "otherness."

At the same time that Burkett foregrounds both Jesus' humanity and "otherness", he demonstrates the character's power to move freely between the human and puppet world. The scale of Burkett's body contrasted against his puppets works to particular effect in the final confrontational scene between Jesus and Esmé. The stage directions describe how "*Ronnie jumps off the side tower [and] enters the acting area stage right*" (140). Thinking Esmé killed Eden, he screams, "Why have you done this? He was mine!" and picks up her controls; however, instead of interacting with a stationary long-strung marionette on the deck, as he had done previously with Edna as Stanley, Burkett performs with a short-strung Esmé puppet in a very active manner. Although he is noticeably larger than Esmé, the showdown of the two mythic figures seems equally balanced because of the physical proximity between puppet and puppeteer; Burkett is no

longer the looming god-figure. As the broil intensifies, Esmé begins to seductively climb on top of Burkett, who lies on the stage floor, and his neck becomes the target of her fury. This sequence demands virtuosic dexterity from Burkett as his own body acts as a puppet stage at the same time it is host for Jesus. As the “*seduction becomes more intimate*” (141), the audience believes for a moment that the puppet has control over its performer, but, in an unexpected act of defiance, Burkett-as-Jesus picks up a small cross prop and “*violently thrusts it into [ESMÉ]*” (142).

This is the first and only time in his published plays that Burkett stages the murder of a puppet by a human. Compared to other characters in *10 Days on Earth* and *Happy* that die by simply walking offstage or by dangling lifelessly by their strings (as in the case of Carla’s suicide by hanging), this death is violent and abrupt. It demonstrates the puppeteer’s ultimate omnipotence over his creation. But the puppeteer’s defeat of the puppet also seems, to me, the failure of that omnipotence. In other words, Burkett’s ability to “kill” reveals a level of control that we do not expect or want to see. Esmé’s murder represents the phenomenological and semiotic ruin of the puppet, which has been so integral to our appreciation of the performance so far. Moreover, the shouted text, shrill musical sting and bright red light used in the staging of the murder in production created a jarring effect, but it did not have a particular Artaudian function since it was distancing rather than engaging. Others have mentioned the moment felt bizarre and out of place—essentially Brechtian Alienation, but not in a critically productive sense either. To further complicate things, Burkett “*holds the cross in front of him [...] stares into the audience*” and says, “Fine I’m back” (142). As the “*‘Techno Jesus’ sound and light show begins*”, Burkett thrusts the cross upwards (142). It would then seem that killing Esmé releases Burkett-as-Jesus into a resurrected state, giving him more power than he previously possessed. But throughout the



play he has already demonstrated his omnipotence by his ability to step in and out of character and cross between human and puppet worlds. The moment thus seems confusing and unnecessary as the emotional apex of the character's through-line.

With the play's myriad religious images and motifs, many critics have accused *Street* of being confused, too preachy and overreaching in its thematic and dramatic scope,<sup>4</sup> and I tend to agree. What I think works against Burkett is the larger slippage that results from the over-signification of his body. Simply stated, the confluence of the three characters which share his body as the site of their expression muddles the aim of his critique. Is God, in effect, the rapist? Is the F/father also the murderer? Is it Stanley or really Jesus that betrays Edna by giving her AIDS, a type of vampiric betrayal in itself? Furthermore, by nature of his own sexuality, Burkett queers the three characters. Thus, the queer/ed subject as rapist, murderer and betrayer further complicates the play's reception. Is *Street* then an attack on homophobia, Christianity, or the absent F/father? Certainly it is the first. Perhaps all three. Where Burkett finds success in *Street*, however, is not in his attack of the institutions of family and church but in his Artaudian attack on the audience's senses. While Esmé's murder may not have elicited the type of audience reaction Burkett intended, other moments throughout the play where his presence interrupts the puppet realm create phenomenological frissons that "revive our understanding" (Artaud) of the human condition and render us empathetic to the plight of his characters. It is this effect which makes *Street* a compelling example of how the illusion of puppet theatre and the destruction of that illusion connects audience to performer in ways perhaps stronger than those of orthodox theatre.

---

<sup>4</sup> For one, see Alisa Solomon's review and Martin Morrow's review, "Homophobia to jellied salad."

Burkett also plays a human character alongside his puppets in the last play of *The Memory Dress Trilogy*, *Happy*, although the effect is much different than in *Street of Blood*. Instead of staging power relations by emphasizing differences in scale, Burkett draws upon significations between the dead and the living that puppets inherently represent. *Happy* is replete with examples of discordant signification, notably of living things standing in for those that are nonliving and vice versa. Burkett-as-Drew is perhaps the most complex of these examples. Drew is initially represented by a marionette, but once he dies and crosses over into the netherworld he is played by Burkett.

The audience first meets marionette Drew as he goads his girlfriend, Carla, busy writing a poem, to stop working and to have sex. After some persuasion, Carla gives in and climbs atop him. As she begins to slowly rock back and forth, “*DREW sighs, and is lifeless*” (161). Although death by sex is a tragicomic accident indeed, Carla remains deeply serious about the ordeal. Grief-stricken, she tries desperately to cling to the memory of her boyfriend. Unlike the other dead marionette characters of the play who take material form because their loved ones continue to remember them, and who even remain visible when “dead” offstage, Drew disappears altogether. He is “*placed in a cloth bag and laid in one of the cabinet drawers. His grave*” (162).

Puppetry scholar John Bell outlines the connections between material objects and the world of the dead in his concise article “Death and Performing Objects.” Given the sacredness of bones and human remains, he lays out that relics of this nature provide “the point of contact between mundane existence and the divine world” (Geary, qtd. in Bell 18). As object and human simulacrum, the marionette functions similarly; it acts as both “a boundary between life and death, and as a gateway for play on either side of that boundary” (18). However, the puppet’s “power can only be accessed by the simulation of life through the return of motion to the relic,

through dance, procession, or in combination with other objects” (18). Strangely, Drew does not return to life in *Happy* as a puppet; he is not animated by Burkett whatsoever and remains in the “grave” of the cabinet drawer. Instead, Burkett himself performs the role of the “dead” puppet: a gross inversion of the term “living object.”

Burkett-as-Drew attempts to converse with Carla from the afterlife, and these scenes are played out on the sides of the central, revolving cabinet—a liminoid space between the colourful reality at the front of the cabinet and the muted world of the Gray Cabaret, at back. While Burkett “*sits on the edge of the cabinet*” (*Quartet* 164), his body transmutes into the relic of Drew. Although the physical puppet body remains hidden, Burkett reanimates Drew in such a way that the audience perceives it to be his soul brought-to-life—a soul that has feelings.

Burkett-as-Drew remarks,

[...] I figured out why it’s been so easy for me, y’know, crossing over. It’s Carla [...] It’s like she prepared everything, without even knowing it [...] I mean, it’s not like she packed my fucking bags or anything, but she loaded me up, y’know? She loved me. I always thought she was such a goof because she loved me so much. But she felt what I’m feeling right now, long before I did. (201)

The signification of the dead as a living, *feeling* body is made more complex as Drew converses with Carla who is left sitting on a marionette-sized chair “still-in-repose” (201). While Burkett vivifies the character vocally, her body remains lifeless while dead Drew gains anima of the most convincing kind via Burkett’s own body. In a play that centers on death and dying and the ways in which we cope in the aftermath, it is fitting that Burkett explores such themes with puppets. Juxtaposing his own lived presence against the provisional life the audience imagines his puppets to have invites a consideration of “trajectory of [our own] existence: from inanimate matter, through life, back to inanimate matter” (Bell 19). And by standing in for that which is dead,

Burkett subverts the subject/object dichotomy and challenges the audience to reconsider what it really means to be alive.

***Performing the Personal: Burkett as Puppet***

While Burkett stands in as the dead Drew in *Happy*, he performs as other living characters in *Tinka's New Dress* in a much more histrionic, puppet-like way. The notion of “Burkett as puppet” holds, on a rudimentary level, because his body can oftentimes be read as a site of signification secondary to those of his puppets. As a human actor, Burkett can obviously perform moves that the puppet cannot, so he frequently helps to communicate what the puppet lacks—an emotional state. In the *Tinka* performance archive I viewed, when Carl playfully questioned the enterprise of Morag’s seedy cabaret with the line, “You call this success?” (15), Burkett placed his own free hand on his hip in a sassy manner. By providing the puppet with supplementary gesticulations, he helped to physicalize and clarify Carl’s dramatic subtext. Other representative moments of Burkett’s puppet-like qualities surface during the play’s scene transitions. While Burkett retired the marionettes of Mrs. Van Craig and Stephan from a previous scene, he left the marionettes of Tinka and Carl hanging lifelessly on gallows onstage. Then he launched into Tinka’s opening line, “Carl, did you really have to be so rude?” (13) but did not grab hold of Tinka’s controls. Instead, he stood alone on the stage and performed her role by gesturing in her place, tapping his foot and impatiently throwing his hands on his hips. Burkett’s performance as Tinka amplified her presence and strength of character as well as the accusatory intention of her line. That the marionette and Burkett shared sites of the puppet’s abstracted signs of life also signified how Tinka’s speech and, thus, ideals united with Burkett’s.

While there are times Burkett's entire body stands in for one of his puppets', sometimes a portion of his body or appendage can be read as a puppet as well. Tillis helpfully explains that "the actor may be called a puppet when the actor presents him or herself in such a way that the audience perceives him or her, not only as alive, but also, in whole *or in part*, as an object" (*Aesthetics* 20 [emphasis mine]). This is exactly the process by which Burkett wearing the headrigs in *Provenance* constructed the puppets' bodies by animating his torso and arms as their own. Another similar moment occurred in *Tinka*. After Tinka receives the gift of Mrs. Van Craig's old wedding gown, she picks it up and "*moves with the music and dances with the dress, showing it to the rest of The Populace. The action indicates a make-believe party, and TINKA curtsys [sic] and flirts with the male figures*" (*Quartet* 45). When Tinka picked up the dress in the performance, it was really Burkett who did it for her, bringing it close to her body, allowing her to cradle it. Yet Burkett's hand was more than just a means for Tinka to hold the small prop. As she began to dance, his hand, still holding the dress, transformed into her dance partner, moving with her in tandem as she swept about the stage. His gentle caress elevated the nondescript quality of the scene on the page to one of almost effable endearment in production. While his one hand remained her locomotive source, his other became her puppet equal, signifying the symbiosis of performer and performing object. Gross poetically and eruditely describes visible hands in the puppet theatre as "absorbing for being so devoted to the expressive object, so attentive and full of touch, organized by the motions of an ancient practice, thoroughfares for energy to pass *into* the object" and responsive "to the very impulses that [they lend] to the puppet" (55, 56). Burkett's hand was likewise responsible for and responsive to Tinka's impulses. The small, fragile puppet in the care of his hand beautifully illustrated the character's hopeful desire for freedom and for being cared for despite the dismal reality of her

internment. Further, the act of witnessing a puppet so small and fragile sharing a moment with something so equally small and gentle but knowing it belongs to something, someone, wholly larger, more imposing and possibly threatening, is, for me, one of the many wonders of puppet theatre.

Moving from a literal view of Burkett as puppet, *Tinka's New Dress* offers substantial evidence to consider Burkett as a metaphorical puppet, too. For one, Burkett conflates his identity with that of his protagonist's, Carl. Carl, a gay puppeteer like Burkett, aspires to use his art to combat and critique the oppressive ruling regime known as The Common Good. His art takes the form of an improvised puppet show termed The Daisy Theatre<sup>5</sup> and features the antics of two clown-like, Carnavalesque figures—Franz, the lecherous and abusive leader of the two, representative of the political right; and Schnitzel, a young, naïve dreamer, representative of the non-conformist political left.<sup>6</sup> When marionette Carl performs this show for the audience at Morag's shanty nightclub, the Penis Flytrap, it is really Burkett who assumes his character and operates the marionette characters of Franz and Schnitzel. A visual connection between Carl and Burkett is established on many levels. As one scene transitions to the other—from the interior of the nightclub to the very Franz and Schnitzel stage itself—and the stage picture focalizes to the puppet play-within-a-puppet play, Burkett removes his black jacket to reveal a white shirt and suspenders underneath, mirroring the costume in miniature worn by marionette Carl. Carl's facial sculpt also bears a strong likeness to Burkett—a deliberate design choice (School of

---

<sup>5</sup> Carl's Daisy Theatre is inspired by the real-life "Daisies"—politically charged puppet plays illegally produced in Czechoslovakia during the Nazi occupation (Baird 171). Living in Calgary in the early 1990's, "and witnessing the cuts to arts funding, particularly affecting projects that might be considered politically or culturally offensive by the right-wing conservative government there, Burkett realized that the danger of doing 'subversive' art [...] was still a relevant topic" (Cleveland, *Weirdsville* 27). In response, he staged his own immensely popular version of the Daisies, which would later inform the improvisational sequences of *Tinka*.

<sup>6</sup> Franz and Schnitzel are direct descendants of Czech puppeteer Josef Skupa's Spejbl and Hrvínek, an immensely popular puppet duo conceived in the 1920s. Skupa was a major proponent of politicized wartime puppet theatre (Baird 171) and is a great inspiration to Burkett.

Puppetry). The resemblance of puppeteer to puppet draws our attention to the deconstruction of the creator/created binary, revealing that Burkett and Carl are essentially the same. Burkett's "own politics, his own sexual orientation, his own construction as an artefact of theatre [is] revealed as he transforms his doll into himself and himself into a doll" (Reid, qtd. in Tracey 43).

Moreover, as evidenced by the play's performance history, the satirical content of Carl's Daisy Theatre takes on Burkett's own social and political concerns. A note before the play indicates these scenes "are improvised at each performance [...] around social and political happenings of the (present) day. Sometimes [they] are silly, bawdy, or just comic, other times they carry significant satirical bite" (*Quartet* 3). In the archival recording I viewed, the latter was certainly true. In a bit of improvisation, Burkett-as Carl-as Schnitzel lambasted actor Keanu Reeves who, at the time, was about to play the title role in the Manitoba Theatre Centre's 1995 main stage production of *Hamlet*. Following Reeves breakout performance in *Speed* that summer, *Hamlet* was an instant sell-out, attracting a worldwide audience.<sup>7</sup> *Tinka's New Dress*, on the other hand, stationed at the sister stage of MTC—the smaller Warehouse Theatre—was less well attended, and Burkett complained that Reeves was stealing his patrons. Not only that, he joked that Reeves would be a "bad Hamlet." In contrast, Burkett pinpoints the allure of his art being "that the audience knows that I built everything. They know I give a shit, and I think that's rare. I'm not just hired to do this—I need to do this" (Astle 115). It seems then that the thrust of his attack against Reeves centers on the idea of performing for profit versus performing to "enlighten and enrich [the] audience" (*Quartet* 51), of equating the artist's "career" with commercial success. More tellingly, that a Hollywood movie star playing Hamlet—a "bad" form of art—would detract from a show about the artist's need to create "good," combative art

---

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Morrow's article "Reeves a Sellout in Winnipeg."

enlivens and personalizes the political debate in *Tinka*. Carl's dramatic foil, Fipsi—his peer, now turned “State Artist”—epitomizes this concern in a discussion with Tinka.

**FIPSI**            [...] My work is officially sanctioned by The Common Good, I've been given a fabulous home, a new atelier, a staff, my name is positively everywhere, and, have you heard? Next week, I begin a tour of the entire country. Fully funded.

**TINKA**            Yes, but are you well, Fipsi?

**FIPSI**            Tinka, I'm a success. How could I not be well?

(51)

Burkett takes on puppet-like qualities not only because he physically resembles his protagonist and performs in his stead but because his renegade point of view explicitly inform Carl's. The artist's struggle to say something of lasting importance and to affect change speaks equally to Carl's objective in the play proper as it does to Burkett's own theatrical philosophy. In other words, Burkett-as-Carl, as both manipulator and manipulated, highlights the artist's need to assert artistic power to shape an alternative political and social reality and the difficulty in doing so.

The layering of alternative realities and the conflation of the central character's story with Burkett's take on deeper resonance in *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*. This play, the sixth published in the canon, is perhaps the most conventional of the bunch. Burkett, after all, plays the lead character, Billy Twinkle; however, the way in which the seemingly simple, autobiographical story belies the complex dramatic structure at its heart deserves special attention. The crux of the play is Twinkle's crisis of self which manifests as a suicide attempt after he is fired from his job as cruise ship puppeteer for “shushing” a loud-mouthed audience member during a marionette performance. “I'm invisible,” he says, “Middle-aged and not even at a crossroads. I'd kill for a crossroads right about now” (13). As an ironic answer to his wish, he



receives a surprise visit from a ghost of his past—his mentor, Sid Diamond (a version of Burkett’s own mentor, Martin Stevens, in glove puppet form). Sid coerces Billy to reconsider death (and life) by re-enacting his past as a series of puppet vignettes. The play, “glitzy and gaudy [...] comic in its satirical depiction of an empty world and an anti-hero too conscious of its emptiness” (Francis 105), does nonetheless offer glimmering hope as Billy eventually rediscovers his *raison d’être* by rekindling his love for others and for puppets. Many reviewers have picked up on the similarities between Billy’s and Burkett’s story—his own upbringing as a young puppet-crazed boy and his professional trajectory as a successful puppeteer—but Burkett assured me in our interview that *Twinkle* is not entirely autobiographical; however, it can still be read as such because of the complex theatre of memory at its centre (Bachmann 212). Burkett may not be the autobiographical subject, but fictional Billy Twinkle is, and the way in which Burkett-as-Billy not only revisits pivotal moments of his fictional past but also re-stages them at Sid’s demand constitutes an autobiographical performance.

The play begins with a voiceover announcing the cruise ship’s evening entertainment—Billy’s Stars in Miniature act—and Burkett-as-Billy dressed in a “showbiz fabulous” costume begins to perform a Vegas-style cabaret routine with short strung marionettes (*Billy* 7). Ironically, Billy is not “invisible” at all, as he so laments. His open manipulation foregrounds unequivocally the visible presence of the puppeteer. Billy dazzles the audience—the “real” audience, and the surrogate cruise ship audience—with a virtuosic striptease featuring the bombshell, Rusty Knockers. The less-impressive but cuter second act features Bumblebear, a “tired-looking, snaggle-toothed old bear wearing a tutu and roller skates” (10).<sup>8</sup> Fascinatingly, there is little to no oscillation between the perception of Burkett as manipulator and actor

---

<sup>8</sup> The connection between these variety show marionettes to others in Burkett’s oeuvre, like Madame Rodrigue in *Tinka* and the roller-skating Plato in *Provenance*, in particular, seems deliberately autobiographical.

because the two roles are one and the same. Burkett is perpetually in role-play; however, Burkett-as-Billy turns role-play on its head by not only performing with variety act marionettes but marionette characters of his own memories, including younger versions of himself at various ages. As Sid “starts to pull a rope-and-pulley curtain rig”, he reveals “a beautiful marionette theatre proscenium” (21). Turning, Billy “notices all the marionettes hanging US behind the marionette theatre,” prompting Sid’s instructive jest: “wiggle the wood” (21). The only prerequisite, as Sid explains, is to “remember,” after which “*BILLY walks a marionette from backstage into the playing area below. It is BILLY, age eleven*” (21). Here, the metatheatrics are not only visible but clearly multiplied. First, the theatre audience of Billy’s Stars in Miniature now doubles as the voyeuristic audience of his remembered past. We also see the set design, which is made to resemble the “front-on view of a cruise ship” including a “stylized painted-ocean floor” (1), but we are reminded by Sid, as discussed in Chapter 1, that it is no more than a constructed set on a theatre stage. Furthermore, with the reveal of the marionette theatre, the audience becomes aware of the multiplied *mise-en-scène*, where a smaller puppet-sized stage platform sits atop the larger cruise ship stage deck. As the play progresses, we find out that the metatheatrics in *Twinkle* are not only doubly multiplied but, astonishingly, triply multiplied. Burkett presents us with a third layer of reality as the regular marionettes of Billy’s theatre of memory begin to manipulate smaller, 3:8 scale marionettes of their own. For instance, marionette Billy performs for marionette Sid a “word perfect” excerpt from Shakespeare’s *A Taming of the Shrew*; however, his version is a parody—*The Taming of the Moo*—and its players are anthropomorphic mini-marionettes, Petrooster and Cowtrina (58). What Burkett stages, essentially, is a puppet play-within-a-puppet play-within-a-puppet play, a complex layering of three distinct theatrical realms—that of Billy and hand puppet Sid on the bridge, above; Billy’s

memories brought to life via marionette characters, below; and those characters' miniature marionette performances, even further below that. A fourth layer comes into focus if one counts the paying audience sitting in the theatre as part of this metatheatric layering. The theatrical equivalent to Russian nesting dolls, the vertical diminution in scale from human to puppet to mini-puppet renders the audience hyperaware of the artificiality of each layer of performance, so much so that the lines between layers begin to blur, creating ambiguity all around. Gross writes of this process, unique to puppet theatre:

We see things at once smaller and larger than themselves, in continuous oscillation of perspective, with no clear sense of what is microcosm and macrocosm. The small and the large give birth to each other. (47)

Herein lies the strategy of Burkett's metatheatre: it collapses the small and the large to open up a space, quite literally, "to investigate some of the questions posed only metaphorically elsewhere" (Dolan, qtd. in Bachmann 214). *What is real? What is simply performance?* By creating ontological ambiguity, the fiction of the innermost theatrical layer bleeds to the outermost, destabilizing the notion of what is "real" and "authentic" altogether. By destabilizing our current reality, all performative aspects of the play can be read, potentially, as equally real and authentic. Therefore, the type of fictive puppet performance in which Billy participates has the transformative power to shape his present reality. Burkett's metatheatre, in other words, allows "fictional acts to have profound and almost magical actual-world effects" (Stephenson 108).

As present-day Billy manipulates younger puppet Billys, it is important to note that the act of re-staging his memories radically destabilizes the notion of remembrance altogether. In her study of contemporary Canadian autobiographical performances, Jennifer Stephenson helpfully elucidates that it is impossible for the autobiographical self (Billy) to reconstruct an authentic past that is perpetually marked by present performance conditions, especially when the subjects

of that performance are puppets (109). More interesting to this study is the question of how Billy uses puppets to produce a more fully realized version of self. How is Billy even able to move forward in life when the worst of his problems is not even “liking puppets anymore” (*Billy* 12)? The answers to these questions lie in Burkett’s transformative metatheatrics. When Billy accepts Sid’s invitation to “wiggle the wood” and steps inside the literalized theatre of his memory, he undergoes an ontological shift (Stephenson 114). Billy’s journey is a liminoid one, transporting him somewhere between life and death, and transforming him into a puppet of his past.

There are many elements that prompt a consideration of Burkett as puppet in this show. Firstly, the persona of Billy Twinkle cohabits the body of Burkett and the Billy marionettes. The transmutability of the character across performance mediums and the double “double vision” of seeing Burkett-as-Billy, above, perform versions of his younger self, below, suggest a blurring of the sites of signification. For instance, as the Billy marionette physically displays the signs of anger and frustration towards Sid during their heated argument concerning the nature of puppetry, we read emotions of anger and frustration on Burkett’s face. Conversely, as Burkett physically lifts his hand to pluck one of the marionette’s strings, we are meant to see Billy’s hand move as well. Furthermore, the Billy marionette head sculptures bear an uncanny resemblance to Burkett himself. They are not blatant replicas of Burkett’s own face, like Carl’s in *Tinka*, but their features strongly signify the features of their human actor-manipulator above.<sup>9</sup> The subtitle *Requiem for a Golden Boy* also suggests that the play is a memorial for a dead figure. Billy is dead, in a sense, because crossing the theatrical limen from cruise ship to marionette theatre implicates his transition to performing object, like one of the manipulated figures of his Stars in Miniature act (114). While we encounter many iterations of Billy at various ages throughout the

---

<sup>9</sup> For one, see the image of Burkett posing with one of his younger Billy marionettes on the last page of the playscript.

play, “the Billy on the cruise ship (although embodied by Burkett) is simply the most recent incarnation” (115). Even before the shift to the theatre of memory, Billy reveals the hollowness he feels inside—his innate puppet-ness. Speaking as Bumblebear, he says, “I’m tired of being a bear in a tutu who dances in a floating cage for stupid people to poke at” (*Billy* 12). Quite simply, Billy equates his identity with one of his lifeless creations.

Ironically, Billy’s inability to feel, to empathize and to “live” are the same qualities he ascribes to his puppets, including Bumblebear. Throughout the show, he displays his varied technical skill in the form of other cabaret shorts, like the singing Bidy Bantam Brewster who appears to actually drink from a straw and the crude Sid caricature named Bunny whose penis-like balloon “*jutting out from his droopy underwear*” (78) blows up. As Burkett-as-Billy inflates the balloon via a rubber tube, “*BUNNY starts to float*” and is “*lifted off the ground*” (78). “Up, up, and away!” he says; however, when the balloon’s pressure is released, Bunny spins “*round and round*” and “*lands on the ground with a gentle thud*” (80). While characters like Happy and Pity enact their desires to “fly” in impressive moments of theatrical transcendence elsewhere in Burkett’s oeuvre, Bunny fails here. His act literally deflates, highlighting the material limitations of the marionette versus its potential for the fantastic and sublime. Even as the puppetry in each of Billy’s variety acts is impressive and hilarious, it never truly feels “alive” to the audience. For Billy, puppetry is a form of entertainment; puppets are his tools, and cleverly crafted tools work wonders at manipulating the audience. This is a major transgression according to Sid. After Billy’s *The Taming of the Moo*, Sid chastises him saying, “Tell me, was it your intention to have the Bard roll over in his grave so you could fuck him up the ass?” (58). As a long-time performer of puppet Shakespeare, the impassioned Sid argues for puppets as “reinventions of self” and the

transcendental nature of high art versus the debased “barnyard” showbiz Billy encourages. In a self-reflexive rant, Sid further charges,

You’re visible simply for the sake of being seen, pretty boy! Your focus is nowhere near the puppets at all; standing above them, mugging and posturing like a powdered vaudevillian playing God. We don’t need you to be God. We don’t want you to be God. There’s already a God on stage, and it’s not you. It’s the goddamn puppet! (59)

Sid sides with the orthodox marionettists of the early to mid twentieth century, like Martin and Olga Stevens who toured their marionette versions of classic, canonical stories such as Joan of Arc, Cleopatra and The Nativity around the United States. Sid’s views not only collide with the Stevens’ but with Edward Gordon Craig’s, too: the puppet is god, a sacred “living object” and the artist’s job is to “create something that breathes, that truly lives inside [the] audience long after the puppet stops twitching” (59). In short, Sid subscribes to idea of the puppet theatre as sacred; however, Billy rebuts, “They’re not alive, Sid. They’re puppets [...] Jiggle jiggle” (59). As a visual complement to this sting, his mini marionettes “*droop lifelessly in [his] hands*” (58). If Sid’s theatre is sacred, Billy’s is obviously profane.

In this scene, Burkett effectively dramatizes the philosophical and theoretical concerns of the puppet, as previously discussed in Chapter 1. To what degree does it “live” and who is responsible for its “life” are questions central to this project. But at *Billy Twinkle*’s core lies another ontological preoccupation. Sid Diamond’s first ghostly utterance, “To be or not to be,” frames the entire play as a discussion of ontology, with what is real and what constitutes “being.” By appropriating the Bard’s text, Burkett equates Billy’s moral dilemma with Hamlet’s. Although Billy does not end up taking his own life, his journey likewise becomes a search for the truth, for his authentic self. The first thing Sid nudges him to “remember” is his childhood, of being “a *real live boy* who dreamed of being a puppeteer” (21 [emphasis mine]). In addition to

the *Hamlet* reference, this allusion to Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* also holds strong thematic resonance. Harold B. Segal in his book *Pinocchio's Progeny* explains, "[T]he writing of *Pinocchio* argues well for an undeniable nostalgia for the carefree, mischievous [sic], rebellious past of childhood" (Segal 42). Certainly, Sid desires to reacquaint adult Billy with his childhood, to rekindle his passion and reason for wanting to become a puppeteer in the first place, but Billy also needs to "relearn the innate magic of puppets, to be able to see them as living beings, so that he can be seen and live" (Stephenson 122). In this sense, Billy is a Pinocchio figure but in reverse: he is a "real live" human adult who must remember himself as a "real live" puppet boy in order to gain a new perspective of his past and truly "live" in the present.

As Billy negotiates a new perspective of his life, he creates it afresh for the characters he operates in real-time and for both he and Sid as its spectators. The act of recreating new memories thus allows Billy to learn from his mistakes and to right the wrongs of his past, ultimately setting him and Sid free. A pivotal moment in this process occurs when Billy and Sid meet years later at a puppet festival following their separation. Holding a mini Juliet marionette in his hand, Sid announces that he will be performing one of Shakespeare's most famous scenes, which triggers another argument about Billy and Sid's differences in artistic philosophy. Billy mocks Sid for continuing to perform characters that are out of his age range and against his type. Predicting the travesty that Sid will stage in front of peers, he tells him, "You'll die out there" (*Billy* 67). In a tragicomic reveal, glove puppet Sid speaks of his onstage heart attack while performing as Juliet, to which Burkett-as-Billy sardonically retorts, "I'd like to see it" (69). Sid replies, "I bet you would," and what follows is one of the most richly semiotic and technically complex moments of Burkett's performance history.

*BILLY reaches to the hanging puppets behind him and brings one out into the playing area below. It is a marionette of Juliet. She is identical to the one in the seated SID's hand on stage, although this Juliet is larger and in the same scale as the SID marionette.*

**SID**           Where the hell did you get that?

**BILLY**        She was back there. Look Sid, she's got that old paddle control you made me use when I was a kid.

**SID**           That control's a piece of shit.

**BILLY**        Then why'd you make me use it?

**SID**           I couldn't have you getting ahead of me too fast.

**BILLY**        Jesus, Sid! Fine, you hold it.

*BILLY gives the control to SID and places the hanging strap over the handpuppet's hand.*

**SID**           Billy, I can't do this.

**BILLY**        Why not?

**SID**           Hmmm, let's see. Oh yes, I'm a fucking handpuppet, you asshole, that's why! Grab the leg strings. And keep your mouth shut. Remember, this is my scene. (69)

The glove puppet Sid plays out Juliet's final dying monologue, but he receives help from Billy (and Burkett) in more ways than one. Even though Sid tells Billy to keep his mouth shut, Burkett-as-Billy obviously speaks for the character. Burkett's hand also gives life to the glove puppet Sid who, in turn, manipulates the Juliet marionette as Billy helps pull the leg and arm strings, all the while a lifeless Sid marionette seated on the stage below stands in as Juliet's scene partner, the dead Romeo. The transference of anima and voice over three performing subjects and three separate bodies—Burkett-as-Billy, Sid and Juliet—confounds the attempt to determine who is really speaking and doing the manipulating in this scene. If not Sid or Billy, we can read it as both, as the joint performance fuses their aesthetic styles. While Sid holds Juliet and speaks the text, providing the puppet with breath and vocal energy (the signs of speech), it is Billy who



provides the puppet's locomotive powers and gesticulation (the signs of movement). Their collaborative effort thus creates a puppet fully alive. Whether the actual audience perceives Juliet as convincingly alive is another question; however, the moment is significant because it physically marries both Sid and Billy's differing philosophical positions concerning the puppet—that of emotional truth and virtuosic technique. It is a reconciliation of the sacred and profane. As the two characters perform in tandem, Billy is finally able to grasp hold of the intangible quality of Sid's performances, his ability to project life into his puppets and to remain unobtrusive as a performer. Additionally, Billy regains a portion of what he is missing—a newfound trust in the puppet. Sid's close to the scene—"See Billy? That's the way to do it" (70)—not only can be read as a reference to the proper way to die (as Sid has been denied the power to cross fully over into the light) but the proper way to perform and live (Stephenson 125).

Billy's reconciliation with Sid (and with the Bard) comes full circle at the play's conclusion. As a eulogy for Sid, he recites Prospero's final soliloquy from *The Tempest*. Not only does the final passage allow Billy to suitably immortalize his mentor, the conflation of Prospero and Billy reinforces the protagonist's desire to be released from the "island" of the cruise ship and into a type of renaissance. As Billy's performance engenders the inner-transformation needed to set both him and Sid free, the last line of the text, directed toward the horizon, "Land ho!" signifies the movement towards resolution and self-stability. Fittingly, Burkett-as-Billy-as-Prospero summarizes what Segal describes as the thrust of Pinocchio's arc: his "transformation from a puppet into a real boy emblemizes the passage of youth into adulthood and the readiness to accept the responsibility of social integration. [...] 'How funny I was when I was a puppet! And how glad I am that I've become a proper boy!'" (Collodi, qtd. in Segal 42).

In the theatre of memory, Billy undergoes a Christ-like, liminoid transformation. He is stripped of his human-like (god-like) qualities and becomes less than human (puppet-like) in order to be rendered as human once more—a subject truly “alive.” Only through his transmogrification in the lower ontological realm of the non-living object can he rediscover his love of puppetry and thus be raised to life again. The complex metatheatrics of *Billy Twinkle* challenge our conception of what is real and authentic, but Burkett shows us that authenticity can be found in the power of performance. This idea strongly links the play to Artaud’s vision for the theatre. The form of Burkett’s metatheatre, which simultaneously collapses and reconfigures reality, stages Artaud’s desire for “the unprecedented eruption of a world” (qtd. in Fortier 70). The “reality” of the puppet theatre in *Billy*, in particular, with its multiple figures and dizzying opalization effect or “double vision,” seems most appropriate for realizing Artaud’s “Double” theatre, “not of this direct, everyday reality of which it is gradually being reduced to a mere inert replica—as empty as it is sugarcoated—but of another archetypal and dangerous reality, a reality [...] *not human but inhuman* (Artaud [emphasis mine]). Further, the central figure of Artaud’s Theatre could be viewed as one of Sid’s and Billy’s puppets: “a fabricated Being, made of wood and cloth, entirely invented, corresponding to nothing, yet disquieting by nature, capable of reintroducing on the stage a little breath of that great metaphysical fear which is at the root of all ancient theater” (Artaud). In short, *Billy Twinkle* is an example par excellence of Artaud’s belief in the theatre’s semiological and phenomenological power in the face of Jacques Derrida’s claim that any attempts to substantiate this belief prove impossible.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See Derrida’s two essays, “La Parole soufflée” and “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*.

***Returning to the Roots: Burkett as Manipulator***

While *Billy Twinkle* celebrates the puppet illuminated by brazen metatheatrics, Burkett's last published play under consideration here, *Penny Plain*, marks a one-eighty from this aesthetic. The production represents an ardent reconciliation with the more traditional form of marionette theatre Burkett so eagerly rebelled against early on in his career. In *Penny Plain*, Burkett manipulates his characters entirely from the shadowy bridges above the playing space, using mostly long-strung marionettes—the longest he has ever used—in an attempt to “get out of the way” (Crisolago). When he does use short-strung marionettes it is not to spotlight the relationship between puppet/puppeteer but to delineate vertical space and to demarcate rooms within the set, a “suggestion of a [boarding] house” (*Penny* iii). Even though Burkett has helped popularize the near ubiquitous practice of actor-puppeteers performing alongside their puppets in contemporary puppet theatre, he now sees this style as problematic. The problem is not the open manipulation itself but that the puppet has increasingly taken a back seat to the human actor. He laments, “These days, you can't swing a cat [onstage] without hitting a puppeteer's face” (Olijnyk). In response, the dramaturgy, design and staging of *Penny Plain* represent a deliberate choice to reclaim the power of the puppet actor. Burkett expands: “My primary focus on this [...] show is the overall visual design of character, marionette and setting married with a text that trusts the puppet. The puppet is king, god, and every good thing in this one” (René). Furthering the idea of puppet—not puppeteer—as god, Burkett remarked in our interview that in creating the puppets for this show he discovered his Über-marionette. While the comment was delivered half-jokingly, it reveals how Burkett, after many decades of performing with and constructing string puppets, believes to have created his best figures, in terms of both design and functionality. Burkett's philosophy collides not only with Craig's given his desire to restore the

puppet's divine status in *Penny Plain* but also in his belief that his streamlined puppet would be the perfect instrument for acting.

With the puppet at its centre, *Penny Plain* is seemingly the least metatheatrical of Burkett's oeuvre.<sup>11</sup> Save for one scene played out with hand puppets on the bridge, the staging does not bring attention to Burkett as god-like puppeteer nor does it highlight performance as illusion. One would think that Burkett being so far removed from the playing space would foster a deeper, uninterrupted communion between puppet and audience, one that demands perhaps the strongest emotional investment out of any of his plays. Strangely, I felt the opposite to be true. While I enjoyed the production, I neither empathized with the majority of the characters nor was I moved. Rather than being drawn in by the puppets' mimetic power, I found myself trying to decode their gestures and movements in Brechtian-like detachment. I contend that, despite Burkett's attempt to let the puppet hold the story, the dominance of the puppet accentuated its inherent, inert materiality and, thus, incapacity of conveying human life. But perhaps this quality can be considered the puppet's strength in this play, for *Penny Plain*'s major concern is with life and death, with what it means to be human, and our moral obligation to others and the world around us. It makes sense that the "living object" as performing subject, disconnected from the lived presence of its human operator, would more tellingly illuminate this dichotomy of life/death. Further, while Burkett remains unobtrusive in the narrative, the text itself serves to highlight the dual nature of the puppet. By confronting the audience with numerous self-reflexive moments instead, which drew attention to the puppet's artificiality, Burkett allowed for the same critical detachment that the presence of his body alongside his puppets inspired in earlier productions.

---

<sup>11</sup> *10 Days on Earth* is closer to it, in that neither the text nor the staging explicitly draws attention to Burkett as god-like puppeteer or the two interwoven fictive realities.

The opening scene of the show was perhaps its most revealing. Burkett elegantly walked a short-strung Geppetto marionette along the upper bridge, from stage right to stage left, and, as discussed in the first chapter, the movement was uncannily life-like. Though Burkett was entirely visible, he remained surprisingly neutral.<sup>12</sup> This Geppetto is an elderly version of the famed puppeteer from Collodi's story. His small frail hand grasps the control bar of a miniature marionette—a dancer, clothed in translucent red silk with a porcelain mask as a face. When Geppetto reaches his final position in the bridge tower, he “*makes her dance slowly*” (*Penny* 6); however, in a shocking reveal we discover that the marionette is a trick marionette. Geppetto (Burkett) pulls a few strings and the dancer sheds her mask and red gown, revealing her true nature as a skeleton, “*altogether garish and comical and disturbing like the Mexican Day of the Dead figures*” (6). Contrary to the youthfulness of the red-cloaked dancer, this figure is dead, devoid of life, but Geppetto animates it wildly. He begins to haphazardly shake the marionette with childish glee while performing numerous comical “takes” to the audience. Despite the gusto of his performance, “Geppetto is a bad puppeteer” (Burkett, Personal Interview), and the once graceful dance is now clearly made evident as false manipulation. On a simple level, Geppetto's manipulation of his puppet makes us think of Burkett's manipulation of Geppetto. His performance draws our attention to the play as constructed and how Burkett will manipulate objects—even crudely jiggle them—in order to tell a story. Moreover, the sequence replicates in microcosm the play's entire apocalyptic narrative, from life to death. The trick puppet's transformation reveals the fickle, provisional quality of the puppet's life, and of our own. The turn from graceful to jerky dancing parallels the volatility of human nature and the way in which the characters in *Penny Plain* likewise turn from civility to barbarity. For instance, while the Karloffs and the Tittys are said to have eaten the dog characters of Kitten Kapoodle and Hickory

---

<sup>12</sup> Burkett's entirely black costume contributed to the notion of his semiotic invisibility.

Sanchez in order to survive, anthropomorphic Geoffrey returns to Penny at the end of the play hungry for human flesh. He says, “I’m not a gentleman, Miss Plain [...] I’ll kill you [...] And eat you” (*Penny* 105-6). This last scene fulfills Geppetto’s almost prophetic performance, terrifyingly staging a turn from what was once natural to the unnatural.

The skeletal image of Geppetto’s dancer also reinforces the idea of puppet as material relic, providing a link between the living world and the world of the dead. As covered in Chapter 1, “the simulation of life through the return of motion to the relic” inherent to puppetry makes available to the living body the power of the dead (Bell 18). Geppetto as “living” puppet body thereby gains agency by reanimating the bones of the dancer, and his performance, as a result, takes on a symbolic quality: it is a vaudevillian intercession to Death. By fluidizing the boundary between the living and nonliving, the puppet Geppetto accesses a sort of life in death, which Craig describes as “the body in trance” (Craig 85). His marionette in trance signifies a gateway to either world and suggests a transcendence of both is made possible through animated performance. The unification of the dead (puppet) world and the living (human) world is a recurring theme in Burkett’s work (in *Happy* and *Billy Twinkle* especially), but here, in *Penny Plain*, Burkett does not draw attention to it by means of his own body. He does not have to grab our attention by “mugging and posturing like a powdered vaudevillian playing God” (*Billy* 59). The trick puppet does it for him. In fact, the “living object” set against a dramaturgical backdrop of humanity’s ruin communicates far more hauntingly our own “trajectory of existence: “from inanimate matter, through life, back to inanimate matter” (Bell 19).

Equal to its focus on death, *Penny Plain* centers on rebirth. The way in which Geppetto’s inert skeleton gains anima—and a new life—through crude jiggling speaks to the inherent process of transformation and, thus, regeneration. As humanity faces extinction, regeneration

takes many forms throughout the play. First it is visually manifest by the way in which the outside, natural world encroaches on the interior playing space; the industrial, skeletal set gradually transforms into a lush garden—a type of return to the paradisiac Eden. Burkett flips switches and colourful daisies pop up from trap doors beneath the stage floor. He pulls ropes and fabric “*foliage tubes*” (Penny 38) seemingly appear from nowhere, covering the metal pillars. Lastly, “*drops of dense floral braches [appear] on the side bridges and behind the central metal and glass “Tiffany tree”*” (96), representing the cumulative assemblage of plant and steel, of life and nonlife.<sup>13</sup> The play also thematizes renewal through its many relationships between parents and children. Penny adopts the young Tuppence who calls her “Mother” (33). Similarly, the estranged adult Pino(cchio) reunites with his father and progenitor, Geppetto; however, the relationship between the barren Evelyn French and her puppet son, Peekla, is the most fecund in its depiction of regeneration.

Early in the play, Evelyn visits Penny’s boarding house to seek out its resident puppet maker with one earnest request: “I want you to make me a baby. A puppet baby. Like your son. A puppet that becomes a real, live human child” (22). Her desire for a puppet child not only to love but also to love so much “it will make the child real” (22) is the strongest need of any character in the play. Evelyn believes in the process of emotional transference, that she can imbue an object with thoughts and feelings (like the audience does to Burkett’s puppets) to produce a living son of her own, despite admitting that she is too old to have a child herself. Geppetto dismisses her, saying, “Then nature has spoken!” (22) But the unnatural overtakes the

---

<sup>13</sup> We see Burkett openly perform these moves and hear the loud claps of the mechanisms at work, but they are no more alienating than the visible controls of the puppets or how nearly all the characters can be seen hanging offstage when not in use. This is merely the convention of the play.

natural in this case, too, for Geppetto eventually agrees to construct her baby. When he reveals his version of a “puppet that would last forever” (94), Evelyn recoils in horror.

*From behind the leaves, Peekla [...] emerges. He is not a child at all; certainly not a normal, or human, child. His head is green, an upside down detergent bottle, the handle of which forms an odd nose. In the indented space behind this are two large, almost cartoon eyes, probably buttons. His body is a plastic ketchup bottle with the label still intact. And his arms are plastic forks, his legs plastic spoons. [...] Peekla runs in, hops onto PENNY's chair and sits there. (93)*

Despite the garishness of Burkett's description, Peekla's first entrance elicited audible “awws” from the audience both nights I attended the show. His appearance as a grotesque composite of plastic matter is actually quite endearing because of his small size, large doe-like eyes and frantic, pedaling spoon legs. Nonetheless, Evelyn cannot accept him as her son because “[i]t doesn't look like [her...] It's not real” (96). She fears the otherness of Peekla, the fact that he is made of nonliving matter and not wood (like Pinocchio). As the antipode of her request, Peekla represents not “a real live baby” but rather what Gross pinpoints “as the reduction and ruin of human life” (Gross 95), neither wholly object nor subject.

The puppet belongs to a family of things partial, fragmented, and broken, a family of relics, remnants, and skeletons, a world of small pieces gathered to make up an image of a larger world, parts enacting a whole, transforming our sense of the whole. [...] The puppet [...] must always be reanimated, provoked back into life, sometimes by other, more alien sorts of puppet, or by its own further destruction, by putting its life at risk. (95)

Although Peekla maintains a corporeal presence, he is not “real” because his identity as human refuse doubly reduces him to the realm of the nonliving. As Gross posits, bringing him to life would require strange alien force or the puppet's total destruction. These are tasks that Evelyn is unable or unwilling to perform. In the light of Peekla's inherent materiality, Geppetto optimistically, yet hauntingly, concludes, “Oh, he's real. He's more real than you or I. He's the future we made for ourselves” (*Penny* 96). The message here is strongly moralistic and



cautionary, and speaks to the necessary reordering of nature in order to promote survival and regeneration.

Life and death collide again in the final, troubling, regenerative image of the play. Illuminated by a focused spotlight, Evelyn cradles Peekla. Stage directions indicate, “*She rocks it in her arms as the baby begins to cry*” (106). At the same time we hear the baby’s cry in production, Peekla also begins to kick and squirm. We assume that Evelyn’s eventual acceptance and love of the puppet as her own son effectively transform him into a “real” boy. This scene had two very different effects on me at each performance. The scene on the first night was more beautiful and touching. On night two, it seemed more contrived; Peekla’s movement was clearly a result of Burkett’s manipulation and not a process of Evelyn’s spiritual animisation. Surely there is “life” in his movement, but it is mechanical; Peekla more so jerked in Evelyn’s arms, and Evelyn’s rocking similarly turned into joyful shaking, mirroring Geppetto’s skeleton dance. Without question, the image is not as hopeful or uplifting as many other closing images are in Burkett’s oeuvre. It suggests that if life is to continue, it will continue as a sort of half-life. And if Peekla evoked our empathy in the first scene because of his likeness to a scampering, uncoordinated child, he evokes a type of critical detachment here because of his strange, alienating animation.

The play beginning with Geppetto’s dancer-cum-skeleton and ending with Peekla crying bookends Burkett’s concern with the collapse of the life/death dichotomy. Throughout the play nature is turned on its head. Dogs are made humans, and humans are made dogs; dancers are made plastic, and plastic is made to dance. Geoffrey’s ominous last line, “Miss Plain, are you really so blind? Nature is changing” (106) summarizes the overarching notion of the blurring between human, animal and puppet. While some read the play as darkly optimistic with its

regenerative motifs, the fact that Burkett as creator is missing from the stage picture throughout brings his dramatic trajectory to a profoundly negative end. It punctuates the absence of human life. If life on earth is to continue, as Penny suggests and as Peekla demonstrates, it will be a plastic half-life. With Burkett's desire to get out of the puppets' way in this production, he relinquishes his god-like power, but his puppets never seem to reclaim it. They neither transform into the god-like images Craig saw as having the potential for saving the Theatre nor do they become those "fabricated Beings" that Artaud hoped would connect his audience to the metaphysical. Despite Burkett's claim that he found his Über-marionette, the marionettes in *Penny Plain* remain demigods, reminding us by means of their alienating presence the mechanical side of human life and our own strangeness in the world at large.

## CONCLUSION

In the wake of *Penny Plain*, Burkett does not leave his audience in a hopeless place, and nor does he want to. His latest show, *The Daisy Theatre*, which I saw performed in Edmonton in November of 2013, confirmed this. *The Daisy Theatre* is an updated reimagining of an earlier work that grew into *Tinka's New Dress*. Burkett not only borrows its beloved characters, Franz and Schnitzel, but others such as Edna and Esmé from *Street of Blood* and loosely strings them together, along with a multitude of new characters, in the form of a variety show. In one sense, as a nod to the popular puppet cabarets of some his mentors and contemporaries, this show is his most traditional. The set is configured traditionally for marionettes, too, consisting of a miniaturized stage framed by a proscenium with curtains. And this stage is framed by a larger proscenium with larger curtains, which sits on the larger theatre stage, again drawing our attention to the metatheatrical. Yet the metatheatrics of this show, rather than causing us to reflect on the nature of performance, draw us closer to the performance, bridging the gap between stage and audience in an extreme way.

Burkett began the show with a direct address. He explained to the audience the reasons for bringing back the Daisies (partly because he just wanted to build puppets for the fun of it) and his Movember campaign (towards which he encouraged patrons to donate \$20 in exchange for a picture with their favourite character after the performance), and then framed the play proper before running backstage: "Let's go make a show up. What the hell." If we came to the theatre not knowing what to expect, we certainly knew what to expect now; Burkett would improvise everything on the spot. What is more, this self-reflexive comment with its focus on the collective "us" not only alluded to Burkett's proclivity for childlike play throughout the

production but the ways in which the audience might engage in this play, too. On three occasions Burkett cajoled patrons out of their seats to perform with him onstage. The first was invited to the bridge and instructed to manipulate the cross-dressing Major General Leslie Fuqwar's dead mother—a crudely made marionette with a flimsy cloth body, reminiscent of a ghost. While Burkett operated Fuqwar and sang the homoerotic number, “There are Fairies at the Bottom of My Garden,” the audience member flopped the mother puppet about in an attempt to play the prop piano onstage. The juxtaposition of amateur and skilled manipulation not only provided comic relief but also highlighted just how good Burkett is as a puppeteer. Burkett-as-Fuqwar also offered glib asides regarding the guest puppeteer's lack of skill, how his dead mother was looking slouchy or lifeless, for example, to the delight of the audience. Burkett then called another male audience member up to act as a human set piece for the drunken and wickedly hilarious Esmé. Deeming him as her “eunuch boy,” Esmé instructed the man to lie down on the stage and then proceeded to dance on top of him and stroke his crotch, essentially transforming him into her sexual object. Borrowing Madame Rodrigue's bit from *Tinka*, she also taught the audience how to properly greet a diva through a series of verbal call-outs, gestures, applause and picture-taking on cell phones (which we all did enthusiastically); however, when one audience member started clapping prematurely, Burkett-as-Esmé howled out, “Oh save it, you cheap bitch!” at which point the audience lost it. During Jolie Jolie's wistful musical number, another audience member was called upon to operate the mechanical pit orchestra, located at the front of the miniature marionette stage. As Burkett-as-Jolie Jolie sang, the audience member turned a crank, which animated the small puppet-like automatons playing a variety of instruments. Together, these instances represent Burkett's metatheatrics pushed to their extremes. The spectators of *The Daisy Theatre* were not only witnesses to the absolute destruction of illusion

but active collaborators in the process; yet, this collaboration also implicated them in the creation of meaning and, by effect, the characters' journeys and concerns. This idea would prove intensely emotionally rewarding in the scene with Edna Rural.

In a show where the acts seemed so clearly contrived, so openly manipulative, Edna Rural's monologue had the most profound effect on me. Similar to my experience at *Provenance* over eight years ago, here I was confronted with the sacred and the profane. As Edna sat in her armchair and shared with us about her late husband Stanley, I wept. There was something so beautifully melancholy about the way she could remember him helping her crush a fortune cookie while dining together at their favourite Chinese food restaurant, how their two hands touched, fleetingly, as if for the first time. The confluence of Burkett's acoustic voice, the very human subject matter and his expert puppet manipulation brought Edna alive, despite the fact that all she did was sit in a chair for close to ten minutes, tapping her hand on the arm rest. Although I have attempted to describe how Burkett's puppets have such a magical effect on an audience throughout this thesis, there is something enigmatic about this moment, in particular—one that, to me, refuses any sort of critical explanation.

More so than singularly inspire critical reflection, Burkett desires to profoundly affect an audience. Like the very marionettes he carves, he does so through balance. Combining traditional manipulation and contemporary animation, his puppetry captures what Jurkowski terms “opalization,” the oscillation between character and object, life and non-life. In other words, Burkett achieves a rare balance in the theatre by staging both Artaud's desire for art that makes “itself the equal of life,” (qtd. in Fortier 55) for deep phenomenological immediacy and impact, and Brecht's desire for alienation and dialectical thinking. By foregrounding the puppet as god through virtuosic construction and performance technique, Burkett permits us to perceive his

created figures as living, breathing objects. The puppet realm becomes that of ours but in microcosm; how we see ourselves reflected in their smallest gestures and idiosyncrasies and how we “fill the gap” for what we do not see implicates us in their triumphs and failures.

Furthermore, the many different puppets employed on stage, from marionettes to glove puppets to jointed doll figures to half-human puppets, with their inherent material and theoretical constraints and possibilities, allow Burkett to physically represent three dimensional characters. In *Provenance*, for example, Leda manifests as three of these puppet types, and rather than estrange the audience, the permutations in form evoke our empathy, for we come to understand her as a broken, fragmented human soul.

Conversely, when Burkett undermines the power of his puppets and instead places his body in a position of authority over them, confirming the timeworn idea of puppeteer as god, he forces us to reconsider the nature of the puppet as performing subject. The puppet, no longer a “living object,” transforms into a strange, manipulated, dead thing. Despite the convention of open manipulation, which perpetually enacts Brecht’s alienation technique, these moments, where Burkett’s own body becomes a purposely visible and felt presence, represent true moments of alienation. For example, in *Street of Blood*, Burkett subverts the idea of the all-loving paternal and spiritual father, as the roles of Stanley, Jesus, and Cora Jean’s rapist cohabit his body. In *Billy Twinkle*, Burkett privileges himself as lead actor but then undercuts his ontological status by transforming into a puppet figure of his fictional past; however, more than just a philosophical and theoretical musing on the nature of being, this play gestures towards what Artaud believed to be the transformative power of performance and, in this case, of puppet theatre. *Penny Plain* stages the diametric opposite, instead drawing attention to the ideas of life and death through the puppet’s inherent materiality.

This thesis attempts to cover significant theatrical and theoretical ground relating to Burkett's stage practice over the last 20 years, but I admit there is room for more critical work to be done. I have touched on how Burkett employs Artaudian and Brechtian devices in his plays, but I feel a more thorough, rigorous investigation of these techniques in relation to his Theatre of Marionettes would prove fruitful. Outside of theatre studies, Burkett's plays might also gain particular resonance in the fields of gender and performance studies, queer studies and Canadian cultural studies. For one, I am unaware of any attempt to contextualize Burkett's later works with those of other significant Canadian playwrights of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lastly, with no signs that Burkett plans to stop writing and producing puppet plays anytime soon, there will be plenty of fodder in the years ahead, not only for scholars to consider but for theatre practitioners, puppeteers and audience members alike.

As long as Ronnie Burkett stages shows that speak to his audience, he will find those eager and willing to hear and feel what he and his puppets have to say. His theatre is a brilliant testament to power of the puppet and of the puppeteer at its controls, to the harmonization of theatrical distancing and emotional engagement, and the marriage of both the destruction and creation of illusion. As such, it offers adult audiences a rewarding, roller coaster experience unlike any other in the modern (puppet) theatre.

## WORKS CITED

- Artaud, Antonin. "The Theater and Its Double." *IFINSITURCON*. n.p., n.d. Web. 22 July 2014.  
<<http://72.52.202.216/~fenderse/theatre.htm>>.
- Astle, Robert. "Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes." *Theatre Without Borders*. Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2002. 106-22. Print.
- Astles, Cariad. "Puppetry training for contemporary live theatre." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 1.1 (2010): 22-35. Print.
- Bachmann, Michael. "Autobiographical Performance and the Ethics of Memory in Ronnie Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes." *Ethical Debates in Contemporary Theatre and Drama*. Spec. issue of *Contemporary Drama in English* 19 (2012): 211-25. Print.
- Baird, Bil. *The Art of the Puppet*. New York: Bonanza, 1973. Print.
- Bell, John. "Death and Performing Objects." *P-Form: A Journal of Interdisciplinary and Performance Art* 41 (Fall 1996): 16-19. Print.
- Blumenthal, Eileen. *Puppetry: A World History*. New York: Abrams, 2005. Print.
- Burkett, Ronnie. *10 Days on Earth*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006. Print.
- . "Additional Questions For My Thesis." Message to Tim Bandfield. 22 Apr. 2013. Email.
- . *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008. Print.
- . "The Mentored Path." *Canadian Theatre Review* 84 (Fall 1995): 16-21. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.
- . "My Own Private Püterschein." *Puppetry International* 27 (Spring and Summer 2010): 4-6. Print.
- . "Papier Mache Rediscovered." *Proptology*. n.p. n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.



- . *Penny Plain*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012. Print.
- . Personal interview. 18 Apr. 2012.
- . *String Quartet: Four Plays by Ronnie Burkett*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2010. Print.
- Cleveland, Janne. "Getting in the Car to Weirdsville: Taking a Trip with Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes." Diss. Carleton University, 2008. Print.
- . "Mourning Lost "Others" in Ronnie Burkett's *Happy*." *Selves and Subjectivities: Reflections on Canadian Arts and Culture*. Ed. Manijeh Mannani, Veronica Thompson. Edmonton: Au Press, Athabasca University, 2012. 39-67. Print.
- Coad, Luman. "Movement – Puppet Sized." *Canadian Theatre Review* 95 (Summer 1998): 17-20. Print.
- Craig, Edward Gordon. "The Actor and the Über-marionette." *On the Art of the Theatre*. London: Heinemann, 1911. 54-94. Questia. Web. 23 July 2014.
- Crisolago, Mike. "Strings Attached: One-On-One with Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett." *Zoomer Magazine*. ZoomerMedia Limited, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.
- The Daisy Theatre*. Dir. Ronnie Burkett. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Rink-A-Dink Inc./Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. The Citadel Theatre, Edmonton. 16 Nov. 2013. Performance.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 2005. Digital File.
- Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Francis, Penny. *Puppetry: A Reader in Theatre Practice*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Gross, Kenneth. *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.

- Jurkowski, Henryk. *Aspects of Puppet Theatre*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Penny Francis. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Kaplan, John. "Preview: Penny Plain." *Now Magazine* 31.21: n. pag. 19-26 Jan. 2012. Web. 27 May 2014.
- Kerr, Bill. "Phenomen(ologic)al Puppetry: Ronnie Burkett's Marionettes of Cruelty." Unpublished conference paper. University of Manitoba, 2007. Print.
- Kleist, Heinrich von. "On the Marionette Theatre." *TDR* 16.3 (Sept. 1972): 22-26. JSTOR. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.
- Le Boeuf, Patrick. "On the Nature of Edward Gordon Craig's Über-marionette." *New Theatre Quarterly* 26.2 (May 2010): 102-114. Cambridge Journals. Web. 15 Mar 2012.
- Morrow, Martin. "Homophobia to jellied salad, Ronnie Burkett covers it all." *Calgary Herald* 19 Nov. 1998: B12. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.
- . "Reeves a Sellout in Winnipeg: Ex-Canuck Plays Hamlet at Manitoba Theatre Centre." *Calgary Herald* 14 Dec. 1994: n. pag. Web. 15 June 2014.
- <[whoaisnotme.net/articles/1994\\_1214\\_ree.htm](http://whoaisnotme.net/articles/1994_1214_ree.htm)>
- Nicholls, Liz. "World on a String." *Canadian Theatre Review* 95 (Summer 1998): 31-37. Print.
- Nunns, Steven. "Holiday for Strings." *American Theatre* (Sept. 2000): n. pag. Web. 12 July 2014.
- Obraztsov, Sergei. *My Profession*. Trans. Ralph Parker and Valentina Scott. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950. Print.
- Olijnyk, Max. "Six burning questions for Ronnie Burkett." *The Sydney Morning Herald* 4 Aug. 2013: n. pag. Web. 5 June 2014.

Orenstein, Claudia. "Thinking Inside the Box: Meditations on the Miniature." *Theater* 39.3 (2009): 144-155. Print.

Osman, Jena. "The Puppet Theatre Is the Epic Theater." *The Puppet Show*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2008. 19. Print.

*Penny Plain*. Dir. Ronnie Burkett. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Rink-A-Dink Inc./Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. Cinquième Salle, Place-des-arts, Montreal. 17 April 2012. Performance.

*Penny Plain*. Dir. Ronnie Burkett. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Rink-A-Dink Inc./Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. Cinquième Salle, Place-des-arts, Montreal. 18 April 2012. Performance.

*Provenance*. Dir. Ronnie Burkett. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Rink-A-Dink Inc./Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. MTC Warehouse, Winnipeg. 22 Feb 2005. Performance.

René, Mathieu. "Ronnie Burkett: On Inspiration, Skills and Materials." *British UNMIMA's Puppet Notebook* 19 (Summer 2011): n. pag. *Creaturistepapermache*. Créaturiste, 13 Dec. 2011. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.

*Ronnie Burkett: A Line of Balance*. Dir. Margaret Mardirossian, Larry D. Smith. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Film West Associates, 1992. DVD.

Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes (Ronnie Burkett). Comment posted on Timeline Photo "Over the past three weeks, Angela Talbot and I sculpted 33 new character heads for an upcoming Theatre of Marionettes project..." Facebook. 27 Nov. 2012, 11:22 pm. Web. 29 Nov. 2012.

Rouse, John. *Brecht and the West German Theatre: The Practice and Politics of Interpretation*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1989. Print.

- School of Puppetry. "Episode #3: Ronnie Burkett (Theatre of Marionettes)." *School of Puppetry podcast*. School of Puppetry, 2013. iTunes. 12 July 2014.
- Segal, Harold B. *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Shuttleworth, Ian. Rev. of *Provenance*, by Ronnie Burkett. *Financial Times* 4 May 2004: n. pag. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.
- Solomon, Alisa. "I'm Your Puppet." *Village Voice* 12 Sept. 2000: n. pag. Web. 3 Apr. 2012.
- Stephenson, Jennifer. "The Autobiographical Body as a Site of Utopian Performativity: *Billy Twinkle*." *Performing Autobiography: Contemporary Canadian Drama*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 103-30. Print.
- Tillis, Steve. "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production." *TDR* 43.3 (Autumn 1999): 182-95. JSTOR. Web. 27 Sept. 2010.
- . *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992. Print.
- Tinka's New Dress*. Dir. Ronnie Burkett. Perf. Ronnie Burkett. Rink-A-Dink Inc./Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes. MTC Warehouse, Winnipeg. 8 Dec 1994. Archival DVD recording.
- Tracey, Dawn Ashley. "Animating Adult Audiences: The Puppet Theatre of Ronnie Burkett." MA thesis. University of Alberta, 2007. Print.
- Wasserman, Jerry. Rev. of *Penny Plain*, by Ronnie Burkett. *VancouverPlays* vol. 89 (Nov 2011): n. pag. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

Williams, Margaret. "Including the Audience: The Idea of 'the Puppet' and the Real Spectator."

*Australasian Drama Studies* 51 (Oct 2007): 119-132. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.