



# Strings of Passion

by Janet Collins

Back home in Toronto for a few days, Ronnie Burkett is squeezing in some family time before heading out West for the next leg of his latest show, *Penny Plain*. "I get to text and phone John (his partner, jazz singer, John Alcorn) when I'm on the road, but it's not like I get to talk to Robbie and Daisy (the couple's beloved terriers) and I miss them like anything!" Burkett says. Well if Ronnie is thinking it—that means there could be a texting terrier or two in a future production of his Theatre of Marionettes.

For those of you who might not know (a Ford brother perhaps?), Alberta born Ronnie Burkett is a critically acclaimed, internationally known master puppeteer. His puppets aren't furry, ping-pong eyed creations for the juice-box set, although he says he's done his share of that and appreciates the genre. His puppets are beautifully sculpted works of art, vehicles for his storytelling to adult audiences, which brings us to *Penny Plain*.

"It's a bleak little play and certainly in Edmonton and Calgary I'd say, critically, it's got the best reviews I've had in years," Burkett says as if completely surprised. The play is set in the drawing room of Penny Plain's rooming house where she sits out the last 3 days of the world while news reports float in the air and a cast of assorted characters zip in and out with their own dispatches.

"There's nothing more dreary than an eco show," Burkett admits. "I'm sorry, I'm actively trying to reduce my own carbon footprint. You know, I don't eat factory farmed or thinking, emotional animals anymore and I don't own a car which is almost reason enough for them to take my Alberta birth certificate away." Burkett, a long time fan of Dr. David Suzuki, says the inspiration for *Penny Plain* came from Suzuki's answer to an interview question. "They asked Dr. Suzuki, 'With all of these things going on with the planet, will the world survive?' And his response was: 'Well the world will survive—we may not.' I'm paraphrasing him but that's the gist of it. And in that moment I just realized our arrogance towards this garden if you will, and how we think the end of the world means the end of the world, when in fact there's 7 billion of us and we just don't get that *we're* the problem."

But all is not lost. In true Burkett fashion, you can't go to the dark place without a lot of laughter. "There's moments of laughter in the show, moments of complete, ridiculous laughter—which is my way of dealing with bleak, I think," Burkett says, then adds, "I mean, I make a lot of crap up in this play, it's a fantasy, it's not real, but there's enough that hits close to home that I think discusses our times and I'm a firm believer that art should be a witness or a mirror. The only thing worse than preaching on stage is having huge, opera-sized, lofty ideas you can't control. But really, the theatre for me is a place of feeling and discussion and thought and not a place for a soap box, so I had to invent a story that was actually entertaining—go figure!"

When asked about where he gets the ideas for his characters he says, "My answer to that always gets a laugh but it's completely true: I ride public transit. They're on display for me all the time. Jubilee's mother, Queenie, she was outside of the Starbucks in my neighbourhood one day and started yelling at me. I had a little discussion with 'crazy yelling lady' and I came home and went—okay thank you muse, and started writing her down. And Jubilee really is me on public transit. I used to daydream so beautifully on public transit, but you

can't daydream anymore because you have to listen to people performing one half of a conversation all the time. One day I just had had it with a streetcar full of young, nattering girls talking very indiscreetly about their boring little lives and thought—argh! I'm just going to follow them home and end them, but a) that's really misogynistic and b) that's really going to get me in trouble and I'll go to jail. So I thought I'll just have to invent a character. She's one of those great monsters and I learned years ago you can't soften the blow with characters like that, you have to let them be themselves." He adds, "Ah, Jubilee is my great vent. I think if I didn't have Jubilee my head might explode. That I get to go on stage and do her every night has made me quite calm and (long pause) normal."

Burkett himself is a case study in the unlikely. He had no career path for becoming a puppeteer, let alone a world famous one, but he credits his parents and his daydreaming for helping him find his way. Popular lore has it that one fateful day his 7-year-old self randomly pulled out the "P" volume of the family's



set of *World Book Encyclopaedias* and cracked it open to the pages on puppetry purely by happenstance. "I just knew that this craft, this art form would satisfy my desire to make things and make voices and act and design sets—kind of said it all just looking at those two pages."

"The great thing about my parents is that they never exactly said yes," Burkett recalls, "but they absolutely *never* said no, which is great parenting." As a child Burkett performed shows for \$50 a pop thanks to his Dad and the family car. Looking back on it with great

affection he realizes what a labour of love it was. His Dad would take time off work, load up the car and drive all over northern Alberta, sometimes even staying overnight in a motel. "But I'd get that \$50 cheque and just clutch it in my hand until I could get home to the bank. What I didn't realize was that my dad was actually subsidizing me. I never offered to pay for gas or anything. I was all about profit margin," he laughs. His parents also weren't fazed when at age 14 he asked to go solo to a puppet festival in East Lansing, Michigan.

But the list of unlikely doesn't stop there—he met the masters of puppetry on that trip, among them, Bill Baird whose *Lonely Goat Herder* puppetry appears in the *Sound of Music*. He formed long standing relationships with that group of men he refers to as his "Old Boys."

And now, one of his all time favourite puppets sits proudly on his bookcase as a result of yet another long term relationship. As a child Burkett was an ardent fan of *Hi Diddle Day*, a puppet show shown on CBC once a week out of Ottawa. "I still know that puppeteer, I wrote her a fan letter when I was 10 and 44 years later we're still dear friends. The main character was Mrs. Gertrude Diddle—the campiest, gayest puppet that has *ever* been on T.V. Like an old tranny, really. And a couple of summers ago a box arrived at my studio and it was the original Mrs. Diddle.



She sits on my bookshelf—she's the patron saint of us all. I'm sure there are other middle aged gay boys who loved Gertrude Diddle as much as I did, I just haven't found them yet."

Burkett describes himself as a shy person and has been prone to stage fright. He says he can snap himself out of it pre-performance by recalling his brief time at Brigham Young University. "When I was in college I did a stint as a nude life model for the Art Department and the first time I did it I thought, 'Oh my God this is going to be so embarrassing!' But as soon as I disrobed it struck me—they are not looking at me like I thought they would—I was like a bowl of fruit. Nobody was lusting after me. *They should!* 'Cause you never know what you have when you're that age: that thin young boy! On stage they are not there to watch me, they are there to engage in a story with these characters. That really helps me."

Story is paramount to Burkett. A master of puppetry, he's built his own puppets for years and even developed his own signature joint techniques to get them to convey the story exactly as he's envisioned it. He's also built and designed sets, but his favourite pursuit has been writing. "I only started writing plays because there were no plays available for puppets. So like most puppeteers you build the puppets and then you need to give them something to do. The writing of the script has not only become my favourite part of the process, but the most important part. It's my witnessing in a way, which is not to say I don't love building the puppets, but I love building the puppets because I know what they are going to do in the context of this [story]."

"They are the middleman between me and the audience," he says, describing his characters. "There's me above them, and the



audience in front of them and the puppet is the little iconic vessel that we are going to fill from both sides. They are going to fill that thing with the belief that they are alive and I'm going to fill it with my technical stuff to make them think they are alive."

Although Burkett credits daydreaming with giving him a career, he's incredibly serious about his craft. "You'll talk to people who say the theatre is magical and it's a cathedral," he says. "Well not really. It's a service industry when you break it down. I'm like a waiter or chef, people go out at night and plop their money down and I wiggle my bum and entertain them, but when all the elements collide beautifully, then *that's the magic*. And I try to tell people its magic based on technique and repetition and practice—it's not left to chance or a plastic Jesus in the sky. I don't think a lot of young puppeteers get that, without technique, all you're doing is hoping for luck."

Burkett is adamant that he has the best job in the theatre, he gets to write, build his own characters, pick their wardrobe and design the sets, albeit he does have some help at this stage of the game. He revels in being able to crisscross every theatrical discipline. He can't believe his luck. "Whatever happened with that 7-year-old and those 2 pages, I think that was the most amazing thing. I don't run into a lot of people who've known what they wanted to do their whole life." And this year is another milestone for the master puppeteer. "So here we are at the 25th year of Theatre of Marionettes but I've had 40 years as a working puppeteer. That's ridiculous because I'm fabulously young still! When I was 14 my mentor said to me, 'If you want this, you better be prepared to be on the road for 40 years,' and at the time, yes, I put up my hand and said I solemnly vow and all that stuff and here it is 40 years later and *please*—I've got another 25 in me!"

Mark the date: Ronnie will be performing *Penny Plain* at Toronto's Factory Theatre January 20 through February 26, 2012.

Janet Collins is a freelance writer who lives in Toronto with a bossy little pug who is learning to text "cookie pls" and already knows a few things about pulling strings.