

Puppet show with an Edge

Interview by Rosa Jackson

Few people take puppets as seriously as Calgary's Ronny Burckett, who has brought his own marionette show, *Fool's Edge*, to the Kaasa Theatre as part of the Workshop West season.

This is not to say that Burckett has any delusions about his costars' abilities. "I'm not one of those puppeteers who thinks the puppets are 'little people'," he laughs. "That's doll's play, and I'm not interested in doll's play."

Despite his realistic attitude, Burckett has strong feelings about the value of puppet theatre, bravely asserting that it is "a superior form of theatre to other forms". He has been a puppeteer for 13 years, but for the past two years marionettes have fascinated him. *Fool's Edge* is Burckett's first major production in this form, featuring nine of his personal creations.

"Actors have physical limitations, but with puppets you can dream up characters and build them to look whatever way they should", he says.

The marionettes, designed by Burckett, have hand carved bodies and molded heads and weigh about 10 to 20 pounds. "It's a great aerobic workout", he says. During the show's run in Calgary, he lost 12 pounds, and he expects to lose 12 more here!

Although Burckett acknowledges that "audiences don't like to see the mechanics of show things work", he does not feel that his evident presence on stage as he operates the marionettes is a drawback. "I like the aesthetics of it," he says. "For the first 10 or 15 minutes of the show the people are getting

another voice admonishing him for his irresponsibility. Things become clearer when he picks up the puppets in *Fantasio*, and you realize that it is this character speaking.

As the plot progresses, the complex relationships among the characters and the slapstick humour become so engrossing that Burckett only occasionally seems to intrude on the marionettes' small world. It becomes easier for the audience to accept the fact that the characters' mouths don't move when they talk, and that for long periods they hang on the sides of the set, waiting to join in the action.

An absorbing pace is maintained by Burckett, who puts his energy into the puppets' movements and runs frantically back and forth across the stage to introduce new characters into the scene. Although only two can interact at a time, due to Burckett's limited number of hands, it often seems that the stage is in a frenzy of activity.

Burckett also demonstrates impressive vocal ability, giving each of the characters a distinctive voice, and having them occasionally

used to a lot of things, but then hopefully they get drawn in by the plot and forget I'm there."

Tackling such an unusual form of theatre presents challenges to Burckett as well as to his audience. "I thought the hardest part would be to get the 'legitimate theatre' to take my work seriously", he says, "but that was the easiest part".

Burckett has done a great deal of children's puppet theatre, but feels that puppets are not only for children, and "don't necessarily have to be funny". In order to interest an audience in a previously unseen style, he believes that he must "infiltrate them or even shock them". Hence the adult, "raunchy" subject matter of *Fool's Edge*, which he terms "a piece of fluff".

One of Burckett's eventual goals is to "educate an audience" with his work. True to this aim, he has written and produced a video about AIDS for junior and senior high school students. "I'm an AIDS volunteer—I work as an emotional support counsellor", he says. "I went to AIDS Calgary and they approved this video. I created a puppet for the AIDS virus called 'Deadly', which was shot like Max Headroom against a computer-generated background. And to add some reality there were 14 people with AIDS in the video."

For the future, Burckett has no plans to change his line of work, only "to have more control over what I do". He claims that his greatest difficulty has been "staying committed to this crazy notion that if [puppets] should be in a real theatre." And, he adds, "It's hard to sacrifice my ego and have all the attention focussed around my feet."



Ronnie Burckett with one of his creations

Photo: Alex Miller

One actor, nine roles

Fool's Edge
Workshop West
Run ends February 14

review by Rosa Jackson

Fool's Edge is an unusual adventure in theatre: a playful romp in the Commedia dell'Arte style of Renaissance Italy, which consists of stock characters

who become involved in melodramatic love affairs and comical situations. Ronny Burckett, the sole performer in the show, manages to manipulate and provide the voices for nine marionettes.

At first, the scene might strike you as strange. A man dressed in frilly Renaissance garb runs onto the stage in a panic, yelling "I'm late!", and from his mouth comes

Studio Theatre tackles Ibsen's Peer Gynt

Peer Gynt
Studio Theatre
Run ends February 14

review by Trevor Buckle

Studio Theatre is now presenting a vibrant, impressive, and ultimately disturbing production of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. It is full of incredible contrasts, from the hilarious to the frightening. I think that it is a tribute to Ibsen himself that this play is still fresh, relevant and controversial one hundred and twenty one years after it was written. Also, it is a tribute to Studio Theatre: first, for even attempting a project as massive and intimidating as this; second, for doing it so well. The cast, consisting of fifteen acting students and seven non-acting students, does a fine job under the expert guidance of director David William.

The plot of *Peer Gynt* is too convoluted to summarize briefly. It suffices to say that it is an epic examining one man's life in youth, middle age, and old age. The audience follows Peer Gynt as he travels to two continents, up and down hilltops, into palaces filled with libidinous trolls who look like nightmares from a GLAD garbage bag factory, into a desert and a lunatic asylum, and through a shipwreck. During these adventures, we also see the examination of the play's basic theme: be true to yourself.

The performances themselves are quite

uniformly well done. However, there are some standouts. Andrew Dolha, as young Peer Gynt, gives a gripping and charming performance which is really very moving in some parts. Kevin Hare, as middle-aged Peer, is hilarious, pitiful, and lecherous. However, I feel that he might be pushing the buoyancy a little too far. There should be a believable progression between the three portrayals of Peer, and this particular portrayal is a little too drastically different from the first and third ones. However, Hare does produce some fine moments.

Shaun Johnston is great as the elderly Peer, evoking a real pathos for Peer as he finally comes to terms with himself and his life. He is a very commanding figure on stage, but he seems a little too vital and energetic for an old man.

Margaret Gobie, as Peer's mother Aase, is funny, cranky, touching, and extremely believable. Karen Cogan, as Peer's betrothed Solveig, produces some haunting moments with her beautiful voice. Neil Graham, as the Troll King, manages to be pathetic, frightening, and humorous all at the same time. John Hudson is so funny as the crazy Beggriffenfeldt, warden of the asylum. Finally, Glenn Wallis, as the devil, is creepy with his slimy smile and understated menace.

I love the set designed by Lee Livingston. It is an oversized jungle gym that the actors climb and scurry over with the agility of

monkeys (actually they are even dressed as monkeys in one scene). It revolves between scenes, and always seems to look new when seen from a different angle. It is very abstract, but also extremely versatile.

David Lovett's costumes, unlike the set, are definite copies of clothing from the late nineteenth century. They help to root the play in time. There is also an interesting contrast between the Norwegian characters in their neutral earth tones, and the vibrant reds and golds of the gum-chewing Arabian dancing girls. Also, the costumes for the trolls are extremely inventive.

The lighting, as directed by Brian Currah, is also effective. He uses stark colors in the Norwegian scenes, and rich reds, oranges, and yellows in the African scenes. Also, the lighting during the shipwreck scene, and the scene in which Peer is seduced by the Hordgirls is very creative.

I should mention that this production does not use the *Peer Gynt* Suite, the musical arrangement composed by Edward Grieg. Instead, music is supplied by George Aramowitz. It ranges from abstract to sensual, depending on the situation. Music is not used excessively in this play, but it is used most effectively in places. I think the best example of this is the shipwreck scene in which the music helps to create the mood of danger and confusion.

I have to warn you that although *Peer Gynt*

break into song. The lyrics of these songs refer to topics such as impotency and homosexual lust, in keeping with the rather risqué script by Blake, Brigala, who punctuates his speech with "likes" and "ehs", and a girl, Columba, who has a fake Puerto Rican accent. This proves to be an advantage, however, making the play accessible to those who are not interested in seeing a history piece.

The Commedia dell'Arte style is adhered to only loosely. Modern touches are added, such as a character, Brigala, who punctuates his speech with "likes" and "ehs", and a girl, Columba, who has a fake Puerto Rican accent. This proves to be an advantage, however, making the play accessible to those who are not interested in seeing a history piece.

The marionettes themselves are beautifully crafted, and the lopsided set seems somehow appropriate to the humour of the play. The director, Allen MacInnis, effectively shifts the focus from Burckett's face to the marionettes. Despite his flashy appearance, Burckett unobtrusively brings his puppets to life.

is a great production. It is also very demanding and challenging. For one thing, it is three and one-half hours long, with two intermissions. Also, many people were angered by some parts of it, and I noticed a few people walking out during the production. Many mixed opinions were expressed during the intermissions. But I do know one thing: no one was bored. This is an engaging, energetic, racy, and often humorous production and I thoroughly recommend it to everyone.



Adventures of Peer Gynt Photo: Keith Zukowski