

Arts & Entertainment

No schools, malls or limits for Burkett

interview by Teresa Pires

Heralded as Canada's "bad boy of puppetry", Ronnie Burkett has decided "to break all the set rules". His latest production, *Virtue Falls*, opened yesterday at the Nexus Theatre. It is definitely not a pleasant children's show, but, then again, Burkett is not a typical children's puppeteer. Yet, Burkett's early career wasn't as bawdy as his latest offering. He has been performing for 15 years and says it all began one day when he was seven: "I picked up the World Book Encyclopedia and it opened up to puppeteering". From that moment on, he knew where his future lay, and accordingly, he proceeded to learn everything there was to learn about the art of puppeteering. He started by working with old puppets and by learning the techniques that he would develop over the years. After high school, he attended Brigham Young, a theatre school in Utah, for two years: "I got what I needed as a puppeteer," says Burkett, "and left".

Since then, the Medicine Hat native has performed all over the world. His foreign travels include visits to Russia, Israel, England, Switzerland, and a brief stint at the North Pole. "I've mainly gone to conferences or to perform for the Armed Forces." In 1976, Burkett's career took him south to New York, where he stayed until 1979. He concentrated mainly on doing commercials and working for other puppeteers but manages to devote half of

his time to the Theatre of Marionettes.

It was during these years that Burkett became a celebrated puppeteer, winning an Emmy for his contribution to *Cinderella*, a PBS production, which mixed Cinderella

and animals. "It was successful," affirms Burkett, "because we were all young and thought it would work. Looking back at it now, it was a good attempt". Not only did he star in and co-write the production but

he also designed and built the puppets.

Building and designing new puppets is something that Burkett does for every new show. In *Virtue Falls*, the show was commissioned by a theatre in Calgary and Burkett recalls, "from conception to the opening day it took us five weeks while it usually takes that long to just build the marionettes".

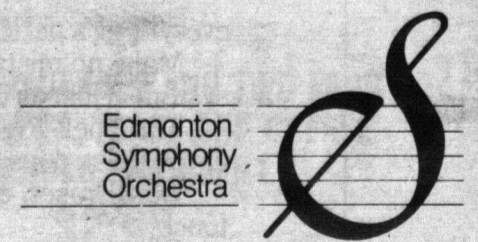
Yet, after all his success in children's theatre, why would Burkett leave that behind to do theatre of marionettes? "I wanted to go into legitimate theatre," Burkett explains, "I like little children one on one but not en masse and most children's performers are nothing but babysitters". For those that don't know exactly what theatre of marionettes is, Burkett explains: "It is puppeteering for adults in a theatre rather than in schools or shopping malls".

While Burkett has now achieved a reputation of being the "bad boy", his success in children's work still follows him. "Last year while I was doing a show at Workshop West, somebody called the vice squad because they thought I was doing kiddie porn".

Having established why Burkett prefers doing theatre of marionettes, the next logical question is why puppeteering? "Other drama is too limiting; puppeteering allows me to conceive, build, and perform a variety of things," Burkett explains. Of course, he has done various types of acting in the past including a play at the Fringe, *Queen of the Love Camps*, in which he played no other than the Queen. "I basically told the director 'If you had any balls, you'd let me play the woman'." Burkett got the role.

Dr. Brauss played the piece beautifully, living up to his reputation as "a poet of the piano". With its brilliant, sparkling cadenzas and stately slower movement, the Concerto requires the touch of a sensitive pianist, and all expectations were satisfied in Dr. Brauss' performance. Brauss, an esteemed U of A music professor with several recordings to his name, displayed the talent for which he is internationally known, that of a master pianist.

The rest of the evening was brought off in typical ESO style. Lully's Ballet Suite, arranged by Felix Mottl, and Schumann's Symphony No. 1 in B flat major, the "Spring" symphony, comprised the remainder of the program. The Ballet Suite was a different, exhilarating piece, filled with energy, most noticeably in the fourth movement. The strident, majestic themes in this movement brought in a powerful ending to the Suite. Closing the evening was Robert Schumann's Spring Symphony, written just after the composer's marriage to his Clara. This is a truly intricate work, erratic and widely varied, and it was well handled by the orchestra. Extremely worthy of mention was the conducting; guest conductor Paul Capolongo, music director of the Orchestre Symphonique du Rhin in



Mulhouse, France, piloted both of the final two works without scores. Such an effort is a bold one in the case of a symphony as convoluted as the Schumann: the conductor must possess an intimate knowledge of the entire work, having nothing to refer to if memory fails. Quite obviously, Capolongo's memory did not fail, and both the Lully and the Schumann work were very well done.

In spite of its poor beginnings, Friday's performance came around and ended up being a quality one; business as usual for the ESO.

Melodrama in mall makes rowdy romp

Virtue Falls
Nexus Theatre; McCauley Plaza
through October 19

review by Teresa Pires

"Like caviar on a triscuit" is the best description of Ronnie Burkett's latest production, *Virtue Falls*. Set in Waldorf World Shopping Mall, Burkett and his marionettes combine to produce a Neo-Victorian melodramatic operetta with spicy, off-beat humour.

Burkett incorporates all the essential features of a typical, Canadian melodrama; a virtuous heroine, a brave mountie, and a villainous landlord, but throws in a few twists of his own, including a drunken grandmother and a dog poorly disguised as a lamb. The story is completed by the necessary "heroine tied to the train tracks" scene and the result is an energetic romp tearing apart a conventional, overly sentimental theme.

So don't expect an hour of children's entertainment because *Virtue Falls* is anything but that. Burkett loads the story with suggestive, bawdy jokes which occasionally surprise the viewer. Thus, it is not strange to hear the innocent heroine, Polly Pureheart, praise her hero, Dick Swell, in song repeatedly exclaiming, "I want Dick!"

As a one-man show, Burkett has to be versatile; he handles all six marionettes himself and does everything from all the singing to the staging. He is never off the stage and is always visible but rather than distracting the audience from the play, he uses his strong, physical presence to add to the action on stage.

Not only does Burkett do all the acting but he also designed the set, made the marionettes, and wrote the play himself. "I take a style of theatre perceived as dated and do it again." He was helped by



Ronnie Burkett manipulates his marionettes: The "bad boy of puppetry" presents his one-man, multi-puppet show at the Nexus theatre through next Wednesday.

Guest conductor sparks ESO

Edmonton Symphony Orchestra
Jubilee Auditorium
Friday, October 7

review by Pat Hughes

The usually solid Edmonton Symphony Orchestra did not seem quite itself on Friday, in the early stages conveying the impression of a group breaking in its rookies. But even after such a shaky start, the ESO, like the true professionals they have proven them-

Edward Connell, who wrote all the lyrics to the saucy songs, and Brenda Anderson, the director, who graduated from the U of A's MFA Directing program.

Although Burkett sometimes tries to take too much mileage from some of his jokes, his twisted sense of humour creates an hour of light, amusing adult entertainment. In the words of Mrs. Waldorf Astoria, the Mistress of Ceremonies in the play, "talent shall reign supreme" and Burkett's vitality and energy are more than enough to make *Virtue Falls* a successful production.

selves to be, pulled together and put on a quality show.

The third concert of the Magnificent Masters Series began, quite literally, on a sour note. The first work on the program was Ottorino Respighi's Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 3, a brief, delightful, four movement endeavour. Sadly, however, the orchestra was not playing to its potential; the delicate nature of the strings-only Suite made every missed note all the more noticeable, and there were several. While it is true that the piece calls for many open-string notes, difficult to play well, the ESO simply did not equal the level of skill they have shown in the past. Perhaps the orchestra struggled a bit getting used to guest conductor Paul Capolongo; at any rate, the Respighi was a rather sloppy beginning to the evening.

From the second work on, however, the ESO improved markedly, turning what could have become a disaster into the product of a skilled orchestra, something ESO audiences are more used to. The second work was Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9, highlighting piano soloist Dr. Helmut Brauss, featured performer of the evening.

Ian Williams