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'DAISY THEATRE' NEVER GROWS OLD

Kelsey Klassen — Westender



Marionette Esme Massengill, one of the stars of 'The Daisy Theatre', on now until Dec. 20 at the Cultch. — Alejandro Santiago photo

After two sold-out runs, puppeteering rock star Ronnie Burkett returns to Vancouver with *The Daisy Theatre* (<https://thecultch.com/events/the-daisy-theatre/>) and his troupe of more than 40 hand-built marionettes.

Inspired by the underground Czech puppet shows of the 1940s, *The Daisy Theatre* is Burkett at his quick-witted best. Hailed as one of the “geniuses of the world” by the *Village Voice* and as one of the world’s greatest theatre artists by *The Guardian*, the veteran performer skewers through current events, audience participation and his favourite characters to create a new show every night.

“It’s odd to have something that returns,” muses Burkett, speaking by phone from Toronto, “but it’s the kind of thing that can.”

And the reviews agree: each year *The Daisy Theatre* is deemed a must-see sensation, complete with a see-it-

twice discount for those who know they'll need more.

On this, *The Daisy's* third pass through the Cultch, you'll see scenes with favourites like waning star Esme Massengill, beloved yet bullied fairy child Schnitzel, and chanteuse Jolie Jolie alongside fresh new acts like Mrs. Clara Dribbles, a society matron who shows up sick and drunk to her own party, and an aging Dutch transvestite who, Burkett says, has been a part of *The Daisy Theatre* for a while, but is just now getting time in the spotlight. Burkett has also been fleshing out Walk-On Jesus into a full stand-up routine.

In fact, the show, which ranges in length from 90 to 120 minutes depending on which puppets make the cut, has more than doubled in characters since it first premiered in Toronto three years ago. But, Burkett explains, it was never actually meant to grow into the international darling it has become.

"It was originally a commission for the [Luminato Festival](https://luminatofestival.com) (<https://luminatofestival.com>) and it seemed like a fun sort of festival thing to do," says the glib 58-year-old of the production which took him a year to build. "I'd actually said to my agent, 'Don't sell this one; this is a one-off.' But the response was pretty immediate."

In the new year, the lithe performer reveals he is going to begin work on a new scripted concept, entitled the equally flowery *Forget Me Not*, which will see the entire audience on stage with him for the manipulating. Before he starts that, though, he says he plans to build three more acts for *The Daisy*.

Fascinated by puppetry since the age of seven, Burkett began creating his own shows and touring around his home province of Alberta at the age of 14. After bushwacking his way through industry woods in the late '70s and early '80s – touring schools, and doing award-winning work in television and commercials – Burkett shifted his focus and broke open the field of puppetry in Canada with his deconstructing style and adult subject matter. He found international acclaim in 1994 with *Tinka's New Dress* and the *Memory Dress* trilogy and, in 2009, he received the prestigious Siminovitch Prize in Theatre for design.

With its lighthearted humour, however, *The Daisy Theatre* was a departure for the man who saw a place for puppets within dark, distinctly serious subjects such as the Holocaust, AIDS, and grief.

"My goal, for many years, was to legitimize puppets and get them into real theatres for adult audiences," Burkett explains. "And so I did that, quite successfully, all over the world," he laughs. "But then I was also thinking, I don't know if that's ultimately right. Because puppets are best when they're subversive and dangerous and dirty – not scatological, but a bit rough around the edges."

In growing *The Daisy Theatre*, Burkett says he ignited a passion he didn't realize he had earlier in his career.

"I think when I was a younger performer, in some ways, I did battle with the audience because I needed them to be the same every night so I could do the same show. Which is really boring to me now," Burkett admits. "With something like this I've got to listen to the audience and read them throughout the whole show, and that's what makes me want to go to work every night – the pure excitement of seeing who is showing up."

• *The Daisy Theatre is on now until Dec. 20 at the Historic Theatre at the Cultch (1895 Venables). Tickets from \$20; [TheCultch.ca](https://thecultch.com/events/the-daisy-theatre/) (<https://thecultch.com/events/the-daisy-theatre/>)*