

t h e a t e r

Gay strings attached

Master puppeteer Ronnie Burkett tells how he brought his wild cast of gay characters to life amid a turbulent year of his own **By Michael Giltz**

Canadian artist Ronnie Burkett is trying to answer that age-old question: Was he born a puppeteer, or was it because of the environment he grew up in? "It certainly wasn't the way I was raised," he says, laughing. "I would be a doctor or a lawyer, some white-collar guy. I opened the World Book Encyclopedia when I was 7, it fell open to puppets, and I said, 'That's what I'll do.' It really was that easy."

Now 43, Burkett is in New York, chatting before an evening performance of *Street of Blood*. Playing at the New York Theatre Workshop, it's a featured show in the prestigious Henson International Festival of Puppet Theatre.

Street of Blood tells the sweet and sometimes campy story of Esme, an aging Hollywood star-turned-vampire; Eden, a gay terrorist who blows up bars to rile his community; and Edna, Eden's mom and a self-proclaimed "silly old biddy in a Sears housedress." *The New York Times* said Burkett's technical skills in bringing to life 14 characters—including the Turnip Corners Ladies Orchestra, Ute Häagen-Dazs and Jesus—



So long, Punch and Judy

Burkett believes he's the first to include gay characters in a text-based puppet show. A prime example: Eden Urbane, who's not just gay but also a terrorist

simply "astonishes."

The show feels so personal that—despite its fantastic elements—audiences assume it's very autobiographical. Burkett is happy to leave the question of what's real and what isn't to their imagination, but as he does make clear, "I will say that I've never been beaten bloody by my father while wearing a wedding dress."

You could call *Street of Blood* Burkett's "current" show, but he always has so many works scheduled for performance around the world that this seems misleading. *Street of Blood*, for example, is part of a trilogy that includes *Tinka's New Dress* and *Happy* (with *Happy* scheduled to play throughout Canada from November to April and in London next summer). Also in preparation are a European performance of the trilogy; a new work tentatively titled *The Madonna of Nutter*

Gulch; and a one-man show without puppets called *The Likes of Me*.

All of these shows have in common gay characters, something Burkett thinks was new when he first introduced some in 1986, the year he ►



Young Eden (above, right) gets into wedding-dress drag; Mrs. Edna Rural (left), Eden's mother, with her dog, Dolly

founded his own company. "To be honest with you, I'd never seen anyone put a character who was gay in a text-based puppet show," says Burkett. "I'm not saying it hasn't been done, but I never saw it. Chances are, it *wasn't* done." He pauses, thinking. "It just seemed natural. They don't always have to be happy characters or successful characters because I do know that there's a pretty emotionally stable big homo [pulling the strings] right above them."

His self-confidence is hard-won: Burkett was born and raised in the Canadian province of Alberta, in a town of 25,000 where people who were different paid a price. "I was told I was a fag before I even knew what that was about," says Burkett. "It started *early*. It was a dirty thing people were hostile about. Then you figure out what it is and that you actually are that, and it just becomes harder. [But] puppetry really helped me because I *knew* I was getting out."

Burkett's also getting out of Alberta: he's moving from Calgary to Toronto. "A ten-year relationship has just dissolved this year, and a new one has begun, hence the move," explains Burkett. "It's been a hell of a year." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.



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