

Puppet State

There was a time in this country, and not so long ago either, when “puppet” was a dirty word. Sure, there was the kiddie entertainment ghetto, where slack-mouthed, rubber-headed Muppet descendants called the shots, in funny voices, and live puppets were the poor hick relations of their flashy on-screen American cousins. But marionette strings had gone limp; the string-pullers were busy wagging latex finger puppets in the malls of the land.

Gradually, in the course of the eighties and into the nineties, something started to change. Puppets began to darken stage doors, hanging around green rooms in real theatres, getting gigs as actors in real plays on real stages. Kids had always been suckers for puppets; now adults started feeling the vibe. What was happening, it turned out, was an exciting new chapter in the history of live theatre. And the epicentre of the new puppet radicalism was Alberta. Calgary, in particular. A city of prosperous oil execs, head offices and Tory bagmen, or so you’d think, turned out to be a renegade puppet stronghold. These days, Calgary has puppets of every size, shape, colour and multicultural persuasion; puppeteers of every aesthetic stripe; whole puppet companies devoted to the original, the offbeat.

Calgary has three major puppet companies, plus a passel of independent artists, playwrights, directors

and craftspeople constantly reconfiguring and regrouping themselves for puppet projects. This past winter, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop played the Six Stages Festival in Toronto, a prestigious alternative theatre event, where their show

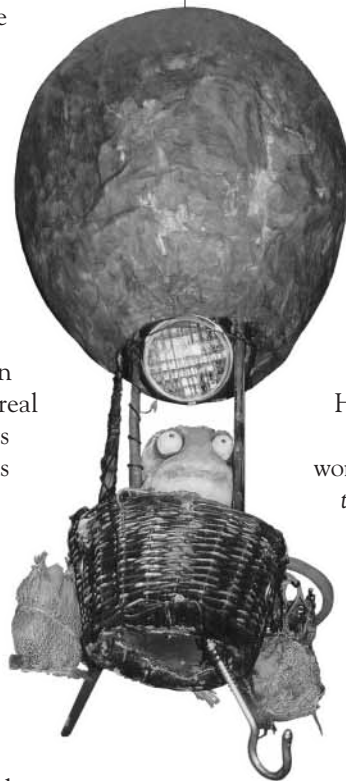
The Unlikely Birth of Istvan sold out every performance and organizers added an extra. The Green Fools have been touring *The Blackbird Puppet Project*, the first show in their projected bird trilogy, to high-profile international festivals in the States and South America. W.P. Puppet Theatre has three original one-person, multicharacter shows in its current repertoire.

No one’s calling it playing with dolls any more. Puppets are hip, and Calgary is Hipness Central. Who knew?

Well, people who had been watching the work of a true original, a maverick *marionnettiste* from Medicine Hat—that’s who knew.

They watched Ronnie Burkett almost single-handedly change the fortunes, the profile, the aspirations of puppets and puppeteers in this country, and gain an international following in the process. Those people knew that Ronnie Burkett claimed for puppets something they hadn’t had in Canada: a rightful home in the theatre.

He’s now moved to Toronto, but for 20 years, from his studio in a converted Buddhist temple in Calgary’s Ramsay district, Burkett designed, sculpted, dressed and strung the most exquisitely crafted marionettes the country had ever seen. He upped the string count per marionette from the



Alberta—home of the new puppet radicalism

by Liz Nicholls

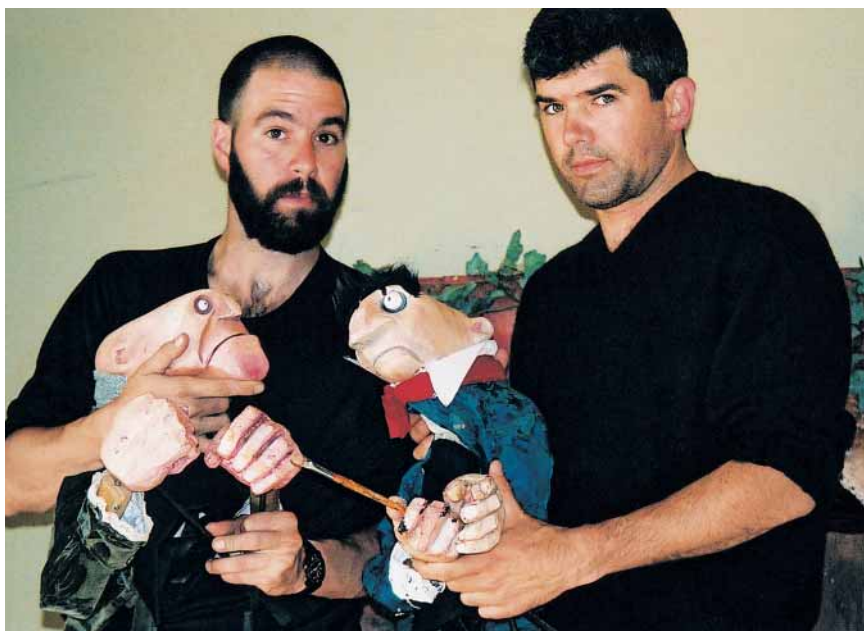


KAITY MENDES



Wendy Passmore, the founder and artistic director of the W.P. Puppet Theatre Society.

The Old Trouts have built puppets for Disney's *Honey*, *I Shrank The Kids*, a 40-foot puppet machine for Big Rock Brewery, and created a version of *Beowulf*.



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Ronnie Burkett and some of his marionettes from *Happy*.

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—Ronnie Burkett

traditional nine to 14 and devised a ball-and-socket hip and a flexible new neck joint that gave his marionettes a subtler, more nuanced physical vocabulary than earlier puppets. Then he set them in motion, giving them the individual, virtuoso body language they’d never had and great roles in their own intricate, large-cast, full-length plays.

These marionettes shared the stage, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes downright belligerently, with their virtuoso *marionnettiste* in increasingly complex, witty and philosophically meaningful relationships. In *Awful Manors*, an outrageous 17-character, 43-marionette gothic murder-mystery-romance-musical, Burkett cast himself as the butler, an out-sized gofer at the puppets’ beck and call. In *The Punch Club*, “Professor Burkett” entered, roaring, at the top of the show, and became Neville Newton, a veteran classical thespian who had been playing Mr. Punch for 40 seasons. Neville and his fellow actors (all marionettes) were touring a faded Punch and Judy show, in which they appeared as hand puppets. By the time of Burkett’s ground-breaking *Tinka’s New Dress*, a tale of two puppeteers in an oppressive regime called The Common Good, marionettes were staging their own puppet shows, one as an officially sanctioned state artist and the other as the impresario of a subversive cabaret. From the start (*Fool’s Edge*, an insanely hyperactive *commedia* musical that had audiences gaping) Burkett has addressed the question of who is pulling the strings. It became a political question in *Tinka* and a metaphysical one in *Street of Blood*, where the puppeteer, playing Jesus, is hauled on the carpet by beleaguered prairie matron Mrs. Edna Rural and physically attacked by aging vampiric showgirl Esmé Massengill.

Burkett’s wayward originality—his obstinacy in finding his own way as an artist and creating a “theatre puppetry,”

no matter how exacting or labour intensive, rule defying or just plain against the grain—has something to do with prairie individualism and, as the *marionnettiste* has always maintained, something to do with the artistic environment in Calgary. “If I’d moved to Toronto at 20, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing,” declares Burkett, currently at work on a new show, *Provenance*, which will premiere at Edmonton’s Theatre Network in November. “I’ve said it for years.... The thing about Calgary is the freedom. There isn’t a community out there telling you ‘we do it *this* way not *that* way.’ Plus, of course, it’s possible to get studio space in Calgary. That’s noticeably different than here in Toronto.” Burkett sighs. “Prop puppetry: there’s so much ‘puppets as decoration’ here at the moment. Theatre has co-opted puppets. Ever since the fucking *Lion King*, everyone wants to be Julie Taymor. People aren’t making real puppet theatre in Canada—except in Calgary. There are lots of hobbyist puppet clubs [in Toronto] but I just can’t think of a company here like the Trouts, who do original work where the puppeteers are a visible, active part of the show.”

In Burkett’s view, a big part of what has made Calgary “such a vital and exciting place for new artist-created work, like puppet theatre,” is the active presence of the city’s experimental One Yellow Rabbit theatre and their annual High Performance Rodeo, a showcase for the latest, coolest performer-generated work across the country and beyond. They’ve presented, either during their regular seasons or at the Rodeo, nearly every Fools and Trouts venture (including the Fools’ first show *The Agony and the Egg*), and much of Burkett’s work, too, including his most recent, *Happy*, which they shared with Alberta Theatre Projects.

Michael Green, the curator of the Rodeo, first met Burkett at the Edmonton Fringe Festival. Green recalls the early eighties, when One Yellow Rabbit was establishing its



Jennie Esdale and Dean Bareham of the Green Fools with puppets from *The Blackbird Puppet Project*, in which human performers and puppets cohabit the stage.

alternative credentials with off-centre concepts like a circus version of the life of Dr. Norman Bethune (*Juggler on a Drum*) and Burkett was doing suitcase puppet shows for kids. “We discovered that Ronnie had weird, adult versions of his suitcase shows that he did in nightclubs,” says Green—early sightings of what would become Burkett’s late-night Daisy Cabarets at One Yellow Rabbit’s Secret Theatre, where he improvised topical satires in which grotesque (and thoroughly recognizable) puppet versions of Ralph Klein or Jean Chrétien might chat with a flirtatious bovine or showgirl Esmé Massengill.

Burkett has been dreaming puppetry since he flipped to the entry for puppets in a *World Book Encyclopedia* when he was seven. The precocious prairie kid corresponded with the old masters in the States and Europe, moved to New York at 19, got a job in Greenwich Village with Bil Baird’s puppet

theatre (the only professional Equity company of its kind in the U.S.), and built puppets for Jim Henson. Poised for major commercial success, he up and came back to Calgary to create puppets that would come alive in their own theatre, not just help out as props or décor.

What he proved in the process—and the knowledge was instructive for the Old Trouts, the Green Fools and others—was that he could live in Calgary *and* win an Obie Award in New York and a Samuel Beckett Award in Dublin. He showed it was possible to be a hot ticket at the Barbican in London and “then come back to Ramsay and hunker down in your studio, be left alone, and work some more.” In fact, before Burkett moved East (for personal, not professional, reasons), you didn’t need a car, much less a plane ticket, to visit Canada’s three most interesting puppet companies. The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of

Marionettes, the Green Fools, and the Old Trout Puppet Workshop had studios within blocks of each other in Ramsay.

The Green Fools' spectacular combination of masks, stilt-walking, large-scale characters and hand-and-rod puppets seems to constitute a very different artistic sensibility from Burkett's, but the 11-year-old company counts him as one of their biggest influences. Along with the traditional Punch and Judy shows and the Japanese art of *bunraku* (in which puppets are moved by teams operating rods), "Ronnie was always an inspiration," says Dean Bareham, a founding Fool along with Christine Cook (joined more recently by Jennie Esdale). "Puppets as actors in an adult theatre: we'd always been very impressed with his work.... And then we found our own niche." At first it was giant characters, grotesques on stilts, conceived on a scale for outdoor spectacles and festivals. "And we still do that," says Bareham, noting such *al fresco* extravaganzas as *The Great Western Bricks and Earth Circus*, with its grand-sized "reverse marionettes," manipulated from below (one performer does the feet; one performer keeps the body erect). But the group also pared down to smaller-scale theatrical enterprises, shows like *The Blackbird Puppet Project*, in which human performers and puppets cohabit the stage within the narrative framework—and within the same feathered family, with bird and human siblings. "Diversification," says Bareham, "has kept us alive."

From the start, Bareham and Cook, both graduates of the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California, were attracted by "the magical quality of masks and puppetry," as Bareham puts it. "They instantly place us in a whole imaginary world. After five minutes you've forgotten all about the puppeteer."

By 1995, the Fools were collaborating with future Old Trouts Judd Palmer, Steve Kenderes and David Lane in *The Death Of Benvenuto Cellini*, a wildly hyperkinetic, fantastical "puppet show for adults" that was inspired by a 16th century anti-hero of impeccable heterodoxy: Benvenuto Cellini, a goldsmith/sculptor/swordsman/raconteur/con man/egomaniac. It amazed Fringe Festival audiences with its swirling, surreal combination of four hooded musicians, hand puppets, marionettes, masks and stilts. The show had sword fights, flying machines, visions of evil, and a cruise down the River Styx. Death and Lucifer figured in the dramatis personae, along with popes, muses, wardens, patrons. It was a bizarre theatrical journey through an epic-scale ego, and it conjured a renaissance world of brilliance and dangerous shadows.

Palmer, Kenderes and Lane left the Green Fools in 1998 to found the Old Trout Puppet Workshop. Before that amicable parting of the ways, though, Palmer collaborated with the Fools on his original script *The Ice King*, which Michael Green calls "a wildly bizarre and dark telling of the ill-fated Franklin expedition." The stage was a whole ship stuck in ice and, in a debut for an original technique that would be refined by the Trouts in later shows, the puppeteers wore outsized puppets on their heads and

looked out through the puppets' chests.

The Old Trout collective gathered its versatile membership from an unlikely range of sources. Palmer had credits as a sculptor and writer. Rob Hall, the troupe's technician, puppet-maker and stage manager extraordinaire, had a University of Calgary degree in outdoor pursuits. Hall doesn't think of theatre as a radical departure from his training. "Leading adventures is what it's all about, trying to hit the peak, taking people to the top of the mountain, always improvising, being able to push

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through to the end. There are always questions to be answered, people to be taken care of."

The Trouts spent their formative year on a ranch near Calgary, "feeding the pigs, collecting eggs and making puppets in the old bunkhouse," laughs Palmer. "We made the real cowboys roll their eyes, but they were good-natured." In 1999, their inaugural show was ready. After a performance for the bemused cowboys and a neighbouring Hutterite colony, *The Unlikely Birth Of Istvan* made its official debut at the High Performance Rodeo. There was nothing usual about the macabre, wordless X-rated Punch and Judy show about birth that came with a scratchy "facts of life for kids" recording on a gramophone and a "puppet nudity" warning. With its bright cartoon colours and characters with oblong-shaped heads, it's been described as *Sesame Street* meets Samuel Beckett. It featured the signature Trout design, an arrangement whereby the puppeteer wears the puppet like a sort of hat, and the puppeteer's head is the puppet's body, with the pair connected jaw to jaw.

The Trout sensibility isn't narrowcast. They built puppets for Disney's *Honey, I Shrank The Kids*. They took a commission from Big Rock to build a 40-foot puppet machine cum wind-powered cosmological clock for the



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brewery's garden. And they created a version of *Beowulf* that takes place in a giant head, seven-and-a-half feet deep and nine feet wide, with wide eyes and a mouth that opens to form the stage area. Like the convoluted narrative of the medieval poem, the Trouts' adaptation is taxing. As Hall points out: "Having puppets wearing chain mail on your head can get heavy. *Beowulf* is a slower-moving show [than *Istvan*]." With *The Tooth Fairy*, a fantastical, expressionist puppet musical co-created by composer David Rhymer and inspired by the surreal visual artist Bruno Schultz, the Trouts arrived at a puppet theatre that delights kids but has an adult sense of black humour. What does the tooth fairy want with all those tiny bleeding choppers anyhow?

Wendy Passmore's W.P. Puppet Theatre Society, which creates original shows for children, explores the educational potential of puppetry. "Theatre first," she says, "but within a theme—one that tends to be environmental, gently or blatantly, or social." Passmore, who worked with Calgary's Punkerpine Puppets in her pre-W.P. days, designs and builds puppets for colleges, theatres, kids' dance companies and even the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, which added her shadow-puppet projections to its 2001 performance of Ravel's "Mother Goose Suite." In April, W.P. hosted an international puppet conference on multiculturalism and diversity, which included a dozen seminars, performances of a Chinese puppet opera by a New York-based troupe and a puppet exhibit at Calgary City Hall. And Passmore's 12-year-old company recently commissioned a feasibility study with a view to creating a puppetry centre in Calgary for research, training, internships, exhibits, workshops and performance, modelled after the facilities in Atlanta, Georgia, which Passmore calls the continent's "puppet mecca."

Calgary is a destination on the theatre map for its strange and wonderful puppet population, and the scene thrives. W.P. has three shows on the go: *Frogs in a Blue Bucket*, *Sugar Shack Stories*, and *Beaka's Incredible Invention*. The Trouts are already working on their next show, *Lunch*, which premieres at next year's Rodeo. The Green Fools are preparing *Project Whooping Crane*, in which a score by Edmonton composer Dave Clarke replaces a verbal text. Productions are also in the works from up-and-comers. The Red Smarteez, a couple of Calgary visual artists-turned-puppeteers, are creating "puppet film," most recently *Tangly Woods*, which stars an artiste living in a dumpster. As the Trouts' Hall says of the Calgary scene, "We're all experimenting. Puppets are a full-on adventure."

Liz Nicholls has been the theatre critic for the *Edmonton Journal* for 20 years.