

The gift of belief: unmissable *Wonderful Joe*, The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes at Theatre Network

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By Liz Nicholls, [12thnight.ca](#)

Something wonderful, and wonder-filled, happened last night at Theatre Network.

We found ourselves on Eileen Street, in a miniature urban neighbourhood on the wrong side of the tracks. Where the homeless are home, and the misfits and the oddballs of every age, colour, ethnicity, gender, point of origin, struggle to survive and dream on the margins, and quite literally hang out. And we were on “a grand adventure” there in the company of an old man and his old dog, who’d just been evicted that very morning from their apartment.

The characters come to life first as hand puppets atop a theatre of magical transformations, where Sonny, the friendly South Asian building manager (in a tiny perfect puffer vest and ball cap), imparts the bad news about the tear-down of the building. And then they take over the stage below as marionettes, which is to say people, in a ‘hood teeming with raucous life.

With *Wonderful Joe*, the latest from the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, the master puppeteer/ playwright/ designer/ actor returns to Edmonton — and to Network, where we’ve seen seven of Burkett’s productions since 1990. And after nearly a decade in which he’s created wildly entertaining hit cabarets, Burkett and a cast of diminutive cohorts come this time with a real *play*, a funny, thoughtful, and deeply poignant one, that cuts to the heart of a multicultural city like the one we live in.

It’s a beauty of a piece, in its generosity of spirit and affection for the urban demimonde, imaginative in conception and creation, and impeccable in design and craftsmanship. Burkett’s formidable marionette technique is always, and precisely, in the service of the characters.

The movement of the puppets onstage is uncannily expressive. Wait till you see old Joe’s stooped shuffle, his bent knees, his quizzical inclines of head, the way he leans into conversations when he’s curious. In an oeuvre that includes *Happy* with its pensioner hero, and the blind title character of *Penny Plain* in a boarding house at the end of the world, Burkett has always had a particular affection (and an unsparing eye) for the way old age hangs on the human frame, bending it, pulling flesh down. The tentative arthritic walk of the ancient canine Mister is a little choreographic symphony in itself, not to mention the way he shakes out his tangled fur.

This magic is materially assisted by costumes created by Kim Crossley, who evidently thinks nothing of making to-scale roll-up jeans, or an age-worn tweed sports jacket for Joe, or a “white girl” plastic prom dress custom-made by an Indigenous dominatrix for herself. And then there are Camellia Coo’s heartbreaking miniature Crocs and Blundstones, or the little Fluevog-style pumps on a gender-fluid trans performer.

The eyes through which we experience the denizens of Eileen Street in *Wonderful Joe* belong to the old fellow of the title, with his special ability to see the human gold in a harsh and tarnished world. It’s not as if Joe asks for much for himself. He doesn’t mind sleeping on the floor with Mister, who’s too creaky to get up on the bed. “We take turns being the pillow.” Are you OK? Joe’s friends ask him. “No, I’m wonderful,” he invariably says.

This goes well beyond the pathos of “making the best of things,” as more banal advice would have it. Joe’s is an active capacity for wonder, a personal optic that transforms belief into reality and gives dimensions to the fantastical. That this transformation also speaks to the magical art of breathing life into exquisitely detailed, fully committed actors on strings pulled from above, gives the whole experience of *Wonderful Joe* an extra frisson of delight. Kudos to John Alcorn’s captivating and lyrical score, worldly but transporting, infiltrated by veins of humour.

In shadow at the top of theatre is the virtuoso string puller, God so to speak, who’s human-sized, flat-out busy (there are 17 marionettes and six hand puppets in the show), and amazingly easy to forget all about after a minute or two. If Burkett puts down the strings, the characters have time to do nothing, to be still and daydream, as Joe says of himself. Not running, or meditating, or plotting, “just thinking of things.” And when the characters are just hanging out offstage (literally, from hooks in the theatre framework fashioned by Burkett), they’re lighted, by designer Kevin Humphrey, with an atmospheric kind of urban shadow and glow that feels like a city, with a populated vibe.

Joe’s fellow evict-ees, of every age and station on the spectrum of eccentricity, are all grappling with residual post-pandemic loneliness. We meet a breezy chatterbox teenager with a *Fraggle Rock* obsession. And you’ll love Margaret, elderly and dotty, who’s spent the pandemic cultivating sourdough starter. Joe and Mister are out in a ‘hood with downmarket entertainment options. They run into Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and Jesus, all of them very funny, in a gay bar, in their respective off-seasons. Burkett’s theatre is always audacious in its juxtaposition of puckish or riotous comedy and darker more tragic tones (sometimes within the same throw-away line). The Tooth Fairy, for example, a hilariously mouthy muscle-bound tough in a tutu, with a disdain for entitled bourgeois kids who leave a note with bank e-transfer info, is the purveyor of anonymous kindnesses too.

Minnie Shingles, the truculent “directrice” of a troupe of homeless actors, is an inspired creation. The through-line for the latest from The Trash Alley Players, a collective, is the apocalypse (“And then the meteor hit. . .”). Devoted to the Canadian theatre as she is, Minnie don’t take no shit from divas. “You’re an actor; you sleep with what you’re given,” she says sternly to a member of the company.

The most startling performance, a headline act at the Boulevard of Broken Queens Show Bar, is Mother Nature, old, bald, skinny, nakedly vulnerable. Her song *Look At Me Now*, a Weill-esque Alcorn number, is a bristling confrontation with despair. “The air gets thicker, and here’s the kicker. . .”

Perhaps the most memorable scene, equally comic and heartwarming, happens late in the play, with Joe and a sulky, skeptical teenage girl, Getty (Serengeti Levin-Woo), together on a park bench. Can the magical gift of transcendent belief be given to others? Joe has a go at it. And it’s a question for all of us who live together in the world.

What a thrill it is to see a Burkett *play* — and see that world, in all its beauty and heartbreak, its cruelty and its absurdity, imagined up close and created in miniature, with real dramatic force, by one of the country’s great originals. Don’t miss your chance.