

REVIEW: Wonderful Joe stays true to its name, a wonder-filled show from a master puppeteer

Ronnie Burkett's latest is tear-jerkingly beautiful, but not exactly subtle with a blunt dose of morality delivered by very human-like characters

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Wonderful Joe, the latest work from marionette master Ronnie Burkett, premiered at the Roxy Theatre Thursday night and runs through April 21.

Ronnie Burkett's latest work is a beautiful and intensely human show from the master of marionettes. Wonderful Joe inspired smiles throughout the audience for its world premiere Thursday night at the Roxy Theatre, where it will run through April 21.

What Burkett can accomplish with a cast of wooden puppets dangling on strings is incredible, a man and his community buffeted by change out of their control and their very human reactions.

Joe and his hapless, ageing dog Mister have received unfortunate news; their home will be torn down to make way for condos. They have two months before they become the most recent victims of gentrification.

It's not just their building, but the entire block that's being brought down and replaced by amenities for modern living and the high-priced living spaces that accompany them.

Where will he go and what will he do for a living space? Ever the optimist, Joe tells friends not to worry. This calls for a grand adventure, though the specifics of that adventure remain vague even as he wanders the street where he meets old friends, a cavalcade of characters all mourning the imminent loss of their community.

The show is animated by Burkett's incredible puppetry skills, a one-man show with a hundred different individuals hiding inside. But the most amazing part is the lifelike qualities of the puppets, his ability to move and manipulate them and bring them to life onstage.

An old woman cranes her neck to look up to taller puppets, a larger character clomps and stomps from one place to another, and a slim man shuffles nervously across the stage, each showing as much characterization through their movement as through the voices Burkett gives them.

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While Mister the dog spends a good portion of the show resting his old bones, what Burkett can accomplish with the canine marionette is pure magic. He slides quietly across the stage and shakes realistically, drawing gasps and laughs from the audience.

That Burkett is able to pull off such a show is a small miracle. The expert puppeteer was without his principal actors — the marionettes — until just a few days before opening night, delayed in transit due to a shipping snafu.

Opening night was the first show, the first time the entire thing came together in front of an audience. But what a show it was, a true masterclass from an artist at the top of his craft.

While the story is tear-jerkingly beautiful, it's not exactly subtle. This is a morality play that wields a cudgel rather than a scalpel. Characters rail against the unfairness built into society, of "regular" jobs with low pay considered superior to sex work that is able to put food on the table, of discrimination that targets some groups while allowing others to swim in riches.

But is that a problem? Maybe we need a straightforward slap upside the head, confronting harsh realities and acknowledging the unfairness we allow to flourish in our society. It could take the musings of a wooden protagonist to realize the fault in our actions.

Burkett is allowed the blunt morality because of how he treats his characters, fantastical but still very human. From Joe's delightful landlord to the homeless players performing in an alley and the gay bar hosting Santa Claus, Mother Nature and the Tooth Fairy, each has a little fun and is given just enough breathing room to shine.

Wonderful Joe is, true to its name, wonderful. It's pure magic from a veteran puppeteer bringing to life some fantastical characters to tell an important story.