



Theater Review:

WONDERFUL JOE (Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes at The Nimoy

by CHRISTOPHER LLOYD BRATTEN on MAY 15, 2024

RONNIE BURKETT HAS THE WORLD ON A STRING

You haven't lived until you've seen Santa as a beer-bellied, Silverlake bear puppet twerking in a nightclub with Jesus and the Tooth Fairy. *Wonderful Joe*, presented by **Ronnie Burkett**, OC, and his **Theatre of Marionettes** this past weekend at **The Nimoy** in Westwood, was an experience I didn't know I was missing in my life.

Burkett is an award-winning, Canadian puppeteer, and his mastery of the medium was evident in *Wonderful Joe*. Puppetry is at least 4,000 years old, possibly pre-dating actors in theater. This production breathed new life into this ancient art form with contemporary themes and impressive design. *Wonderful Joe* is, on its surface, about an old man and his dog who get evicted from their apartment in a run-down urban neighborhood, prompting Joe (the old man) and Mister (the dog) to set out on a "great adventure", which amounts to basically a trip around the block. Along the way, they meet a motley crew of local denizens, each with a wild story to tell.

Joe was abandoned by his family as a young teenager. He stumbled his way, through prostitution, into being a barber to lesbians at a time when homophobia was in the water and no one was willing to give a dyke a new do—no one except for Joe, that is. Over the years, he befriended every L, G, B, T, and Q the city had to offer. Now in his twilight years, he and Mister are cast out on their own yet again. But Joe has an unflappable spirit and a borough of misfit queers who keep things lively. Through the eyes of the various other characters, and with incredible wit and humor, we learn how the world has treated such outcasts, how they've formed their own community, and how they've chosen to not just survive but thrive despite being ostracized.

Wonderful Joe is undeniably message theater, which in less deft hands can come off as brow-beating. Burkett, though, manages to weave it so finely into a comedic and compelling narrative that it goes down without a hiccup. And it's a timely message, a

sequel to the gay liberation movement of the 60s, 70s, and 80s that we're all living through today.

Puppets aren't a huge presence in the current entertainment zeitgeist. If anything, they tend to be associated with children and horror movies. *Wonderful Joe* proves that not only can this 4,000-year-old art form still entertain today, but that it can also tackle the depth and breadth of adult theater. It might be challenging for the technology-addled brains of modern society, but the full house at UCLA and the accolade-filled career of Burkett demonstrate that a puppet show might just be the thing we all need.