

## Puppet master: 'Wonderful Joe' dives into a queer downtown scene of marionettes

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"Wonderful Joe," the latest show by Canadian puppeteer Ronnie Burkett, played at The Studio at Bing this past weekend. Co-commissioned by Stanford Live, UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance and TO Live, "Wonderful Joe" follows an old man named Joe Pickle and his stuffed dog Mister as they embark on one last grand adventure together.

Burkett is one of Canada's foremost theater artists, and is celebrated for his often-provocative puppet shows targeted toward adult audiences. This show was no exception; faces in the crowd were primarily on the older end, and jokes covered subjects ranging from gentrification to punk subculture to [sixty-dollar Bibles](#).

At the beginning of the show, Joe and Mister are evicted from the apartment that they've lived in for years. The building will be torn down and rebuilt into a condominium. Joe realizes that he can't keep living on his beloved Eileen Street, which is rapidly gentrifying, so he and Mister decide to complete one last grand tour around the neighborhood.

As we meet the many denizens of Eileen Street, Joe's universe slowly comes alive before our eyes. The marionettes are gorgeously designed, and Burkett moves them in expressive yet subtle ways. A drag performer named Mother Nature wears a boa made out of trash bags and dances in sinuous, sensual movements. An old lady named Minnie Shingles shuffles across the stage and slightly stoops her wizened neck, and in these subtle movements Burkett is able to fully capture her age.

The show, completely voiced by Burkett, is full of the bawdy and irreverent humor of a queer downtown scene. Joe regales a resident of Eileen Street with the tale of how he became the neighborhood's most famous lesbian barber. At a gay bar, we meet Santa Claus, Jesus and the Tooth Fairy, the latter of whom complains about the new generation's affinity for bank transfer payments instead of dollar bills in exchange for their teeth.

In an alley, we meet the End of Days Trash Alley Players' Troupe and listen to a dominatrix named Baby, outfitted in a dress made out of dry cleaner bags, describe how she puts food on the table each night by sitting on men's faces and farting.

Amidst all this humor, the show is filled with lots of heart. At the end of the play, after having paid a visit to many of his good friends and old haunts on Eileen Street, Joe settles down with Mister at the park bench where he's always stargazed. Already waiting there is a young student named Serengeti Levin-Woo, or Getti, an aspiring goth who has been disciplined at school for her subversive makeup tastes.

As Joe and Getti talk, Joe reflects on his own youth, one filled with many twists and turns. He spent his early childhood in the circus and his teenage years hustling on the streets, and through it all, Mister comforted and protected him from threat and attack. As Joe comforts Getti, he guides her towards a life of authenticity, of staying true to herself despite what her parents or school might say.

Joe realizes that, with his life soon coming to a close, he wants to pass Mister, his stuffed dog, on to Getti.

Ultimately, “Wonderful Joe” is a moving reflection on mortality and the challenges of living a full and authentic life, brought to life through wonderfully animated marionettes. As we wander with Joe down Eileen Street, encountering all the eccentric characters of the neighborhood, we can see in Joe a life fully lived, rich with experiences and familiar friends.

The notion of Joe’s eventual passing feels bittersweet, and yet the final image of the show — Getti soaring over the moon with Mister on a playground cow — is as whimsical and joyous as every scene that has preceded it. Life goes on, and even in mortality there is a great heart of charm.

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