

A View from the Box

(Toronto, ON)

Wonderful Joe

By Janine Marley
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Ronnie Burkett is pulling on our heartstrings, as well as his puppets' strings, with his latest creation Wonderful Joe. Burkett brings his unique blend of comedy and compassion to this awe-inspiring production, taking us on a journey with Joe Pickle and his colourful cast of neighbours. As side-splitting as it is tear-jerking, Wonderful Joe lives up to its name.

Joe Pickle and his faithful dog, Mister, have been living in the same neighbourhood since Joe was a teenager. Having been cast out at a young age, Joe spent his early time in the neighbourhood turning tricks and living on the street. But once he gets a job as a barber, his whole life changed and he became a pillar of the queer community in which he lives. Now with his whole building facing eviction, Joe and Mister decide to go on one last grand adventure around the neighbourhood. Introducing the audience to his quirky and delightful neighbours, along with Santa, Jesus Christ, and Mother Nature, Joe ensures he's said goodbye to everyone before it's time for him to move on. This heartfelt story about community, positivity, love, and belonging, is one of Burkett's best.

Joe is the kind of person we should aspire to be when we grow up. Joe is a true optimist, always able to see the bright side in every situation. And there's a little bit of his inner child which continues to live on in him despite his age, allowing him to still see and believe in the magic of the every day. Through this story, we see how Joe's positivity has touched the lives of so many members of his community, and how his love for everyone is the brightest light on the block. Joe should be an inspiration and a guide for all of us: to share our love for one another as much as we can, no matter the circumstances.

A unique element to Wonderful Joe is that not only is it about a long-standing queer community, but it's a queer community with some queer male elders. Joe talks about surviving the AIDS epidemic, yet we know that so many did not, leaving a gap in queer eldership. But Wonderful Joe has characters of all ages, genders, and expressions who live together – a little utopia (other than the one Joe already lives in in his own mind). Minnie's show not only highlights the struggles faced by their community, but also the fortitude required by these folks to continue on – a common thread between each personal story. Simultaneously inspiring and heartbreaking, Wonderful Joe has hope for the residents of this community, and hope for the continuation of spaces where everyone feels accepted and taken care of.

To watch Ronnie Burkett work is to witness a master of his craft. Moving all about the platform he's created to both house myriad puppets and use as the stage for his performance, there's just as much practice and precision which has gone into the quiet moments as the ones where Burkett is performing. Using a mixture of hand puppets and his beautifully articulated marionettes, Burkett creates a world into which we're able to sink into, at times maybe even forgetting that we're watching puppets perform instead of people. Burkett's improvisations if things go a little sideways are always a joy to hear; they so seamlessly slip into the text as he knows his characters and their mannerisms inside and out. Hearing him produce all of these voices and stories, each one easily distinguishable from the next, Burkett is able to create a universe of characters from just one person; it is truly astonishing to witness.

Wonderful Joe's story of resilience, community, and love is one the world needs right now; if we could all try to be a bit more like Joe, the world would be a lovely place. So the next time you're out and about, say hi to a neighbour, or help someone take in their groceries, or maybe even find a bench where you and your dog can look up at the stars. You never know what adventures life's going to take you on.