

(Toronto ON)

# Pulling Strings: Ronnie Burkett's Wonderful Joe

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Ronnie Burkett, the internationally acclaimed Canadian puppeteer and recent recipient of the Governor General's Lifetime Achievement Award, brings his latest production *Wonderful Joe* to Toronto's St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts.

This poignant and wickedly funny show, running until Oct. 24, spotlights Burkett's unparalleled skill in marionette theatre, weaving a tale that is both deeply human and fantastically imaginative.

The story centres on Joe Pickle, an elderly gay man facing eviction from his long-time apartment on Eileen Street – a thinly veiled nod to Toronto's gentrification woes. Rejecting well-meaning offers of assistance, Joe embarks on one final adventure with his faithful companion, a raggedy stuffed dog named Mister. Burkett's genius lies in his ability to breathe life into a cast of fringe-dwelling characters, each meticulously crafted and voiced by the puppeteer himself.

From Minnie Shingles, the foulmouthed director of the End of Days Trash Alley Players' Troupe, to Her-She, a trans sex worker operating out of a car on cinder blocks, the denizens of Eileen Street are raw, unbridled, and utterly captivating. The production reaches its zenith in a raucous disco-cum-cabaret scene featuring an unholy trinity of Santa Claus, Jesus Christ, and the Tooth Fairy (aka Glen). This vaudevillian spectacle culminates with the appearance of Mother Nature, a haggard figure trailing a boa of garbage bags, delivering a cabaret-style lament on the world's destruction.

Yet, amidst the gritty humour and social commentary, **Wonderful Joe** offers a tender exploration of community, dignity, and the enduring power of imagination. The unlikely bond formed between Joe and a young runaway named Serengeti Levin-Woo (Getti) provides a touching denouement, symbolizing hope and the passing of wisdom from one generation to the next.

Burkett's visible presence on stage, manipulating the marionettes and voicing the rapid-fire dialogue, far from being a distraction, serves to heighten the theatrical experience. It's a testament to his artistry that audiences find themselves captivated by the wooden performers, willingly suspending disbelief as these puppets pull us into their world of satire, parody, and social critique.

**Wonderful Joe** is a masterful blend of adult themes and childhood whimsy, a flight of fancy grounded in pressing social issues. It's a celebration of life on society's margins and a reminder of the magic that can be found in the most unlikely places. Burkett once again proves himself a virtuoso of his craft, creating a theatrical experience that is at once thought-provoking, heartwarming, and utterly unforgettable.