

REVIEW

Ronnie Burkett's Wonderful Joe is a dark and moving puppet extravaganza

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The life of the titular character of Ronnie Burkett's new puppet extravaganza, Wonderful Joe, seems to be anything but wonderful. An elderly gay man who spent much of his early life on the streets turning tricks until an act of kindness gave him a job in a barbershop, Joe Pickle has spent his life floating through moments of abandonment and affection, a push and pull of attraction and repulsion that shapes his days. The final insult arrives when he finds out that his building has been sold to corporate developers who are kicking everyone on his beloved Eileen Street out of their homes. In one month, Joe must leave his fifth-floor walkup for good.

Yet Joe, despite everything, is an optimist who always looks on the bright side of life. With his shaggy heap of a dog, Mister, by his side, he decides to set out on one more grand adventure to end a life well spent. As a barber who once catered to a grateful, ostracized butch lesbian clientele, he's intimately aware that sometimes cutting things away can reveal one's true self. He believes in the philosophy of kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken things with gold to make them more beautiful than before. These small acts of healing fly in the face of a seemingly uncaring universe determined to wipe out Joe's community like the indifferent meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs.

Having earned a wealth of awards, from the Order of Canada to the Siminovitch Prize, Burkett is a skilled artist working in miniature, both in terms of the physical size of his achingly expressive marionettes and in the way he carefully, delicately unearths fleeting moments of their lives. His depth of care in creating realistic puppets is matched by that of the unique backstories and identities animating them through rich, detailed monologues and mannerisms. Even bit characters such as Joe's television-obsessed, touch-averse neighbour are instantly recognizable in their short scenes.

Giving each character a distinct voice and conversing with himself at a furious pace, Burkett nimbly manipulates his creations from above, effectively ad-libbing if something doesn't go entirely to plan. His elaborate set, crafted by Shopdogs of Montreal, impresses from the start, the multi-level platform filling centre stage with several playing areas that adjust quickly from graffitied street to trash-filled alleyway to urban park. Puppets not in use hang limply from the sides of the contraption, as if in stasis.

In contrast, always moving forward like a relentlessly unspooling film strip, Wonderful Joe consists of a series of dreamlike vignettes. More than just Joe's story, this is the story of an entire neighbourhood being uprooted by fierce corporate greed and a desire for increasingly sanitized, isolated personal spaces, inevitably at odds with Eileen Street's rough-and-tumble but community-minded residents.

The set, crafted by Shopdogs of Montreal, is impressive, featuring several playing areas that adjust quickly from graffitied street to trash-filled alleyway to urban park.

These residents share lyrical tales of "when the meteor dropped" – earth-shattering moments that change lives forever, whether it's the death of an old enemy that never knew your name, a layoff that spells instant financial disaster or a child-welfare system that refuses to return sex workers' children and leaves them suddenly adrift. These meteoric moments can come for anyone. Even a businessman, who arrives solely to demonstrate that he is not like these ragged, jagged misfits, quickly reveals that his existence is just as precarious as theirs. Scratch the surface, and we're all made of the same wood.

The drifting, stream-of-conscious nature of the experience is at once meditative – you have to simply be open to whatever happens next in Burkett’s beautiful brain – and also challenging in its lack of cohesion. Because Joe is such a fascinating person, it’s frustrating when he becomes a secondary or even absent character in his own story.

Two protracted scenes feature him in only a tangential sense. In one, as its only human audience member, he watches Trash Can Theatre’s alleyway protest play; in another, an off-the-clock Santa, Jesus, the Tooth Fairy and Mother Nature populate a sort of cosmic club. Comprising most of the show’s middle third, both sections are entertaining but feel unmoored from Joe’s adventure – even if Mother Nature’s burlesque number, straight from a Weimar-era cabaret, is a delightfully clever pastiche by John Alcorn.

Like Burkett’s spiralling work, Joe never looks back, and the characters in his life each have a single, fleeting moment, then disappear. This means the show’s climax is meaningful but unsettled, more a moment of divine, meteoric chance than the tying together of threads, but perhaps a master of marionettes is justifiably wary of getting his threads tangled.

Fred Rogers, another legendary puppeteer, once famously said, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” These well-meaning helpers populate the streets of Joe’s wonderful world, whether they be the young community organizer recording Joe’s story for the Gay Archives, the profane and paranoid old woman who still makes an effort to change the world with guerrilla theatre, the delicatessen owner who offers Joe a room in the suburbs, or Joe himself, conversing with a runaway child while sitting on a park bench and looking to the stars.

Wonderful Joe is a melancholy work with plenty of dark content – puppets aside, it’s not for kids – but the stars poke through, like the golden filaments of kintsugi that can repair a broken dish or broken heart.