

SCRUTINY | Ronnie Burkett's Wonderful Joe Is Provocative, Entertaining

By [Paula Citron](#) on October 17, 2024

TO Live / Wonderful Joe, created and performed by Ronnie Burkett, Jane Mallett Theatre, closes Oct. 23. Tickets [here](#).

Ronnie Burkett has built up a devoted following because his adult puppet shows have their pulse squarely on the human condition. I find that every Burkett production that I have ever seen has reflected life back to me.

To be sure, you don't bring the kiddies to see Burkett. These are adult puppet shows that feature deep, and at times, disturbing themes, not to mention decidedly blue language. Burkett's shows veer to the dark side, and his latest production, Wonderful Joe, is no exception.

The Story

Joe Pickle, an elderly gay man, lives in a five-storey walk-up with his ancient dog Mister. On the day he finds out that the tenants have been evicted to make room for a condo tower, rather than falling into despair like some of his neighbours, the ever optimistic Joe decides to go on a grand adventure with Mister.

Burkett's stories may ramble, or take weird turns, or include bizarre characters and incidents, or ironic humour, or even surprising scenes of the supernatural, nonetheless, they are there because Burkett has something to say. His shows are rich in themes and ideas, and that is Burkett's main point of departure.

The opening is literally ripped out of today's headlines, with affordable housing being replaced by runaway development. It is where we meet some of the tenants, as well as neighbourhood shop owners, not to mention CEO Linda, in her pink track suit, who owns the company that is responsible for the evictions.

Each of the tenants represents someone on the fringes of society, like Owen, a young man clearly on the spectrum, or the feisty older woman Margaret who is refusing to leave to protect her precious library.

As Joe progresses on his journey, he encounters the amorous gay butcher who offers him a home in the suburbs, or social services Terry who will pull strings to find Joe a new place to live. To each, he gives a polite refusal.

From this point on, the storyline takes a decided turn to the macabre. We meet the Trash Alley Players, led by the foul-mouth Minnie, who put on plays in an alley, and each of the three monologues spouted by the actors has something to say about the difficulties of life on the edge.

And so it goes, as we hear the tale of a man who lost his job, which led to losing his home and living in his car, until his car got towed. Or we see Mother Nature, the withered performer at a gay nightclub, The Boulevard of Broken Queens, sing her sorrowful song. Or the sex workers and rent boys that Joe encounters, who relate their sad tales. Nonetheless, Joe remains ever optimistic, managing to find light amid the darkness.

The Production

As usual, Burkett's long-time collaborator, composer John Alcorn, has provided the dedicated score, in this case, easy listening jazz inspired by the Swingle Singers, the hit a cappella group from the 60s and 70s.

For Mother Nature's all-important song, which encapsulates what Wonderful Joe is all about, Alcorn, as he explains in his program note, reached back for inspiration to the great chanteuses of the 30s, 40s and 50s, like Judy Garland and Edith Piaf.

Of course, there are the magnificent puppets to whom Burkett gives voice. He not only creates the look of the puppets, he also designs the character-specific costumes that are a realistic marvel. Nonetheless, nearly 20 people are listed in the program who have contributed to the production of Wonderful Joe, from those who build and clothe the puppets, to those who construct the site specific set for Burkett's needs. It does, indeed, take a village.

Final Thoughts

If I have one complaint, it's that the Jane Mallett Theatre is on a steep grade and the puppets are small. Thus for at least half a house or more, the puppet detailing is lost. That portion of the audience gets only voice and puppet movement.

Nonetheless, there is no denying that Burkett is a master puppeteer who has struck out in his own unique direction, and like any gifted storyteller, his productions are as provocative as they are entertaining.