

Our
Theatre
Voice

(Toronto, ON)

Wonderful Joe' created and performed by Ronnie Burkett

By Joe Szekeres, Our Theatre Voice

A story told with poignant compassion and heart-filled care. 'Wonderful Joe' reminds us of how important it is to show these human qualities to others in this time of giving thanks. Uplifting and emotional."

Ronnie Burkett is truly inspiring. His marionettes are captivating extensions of himself. His use of wit, humour, and a touch of naughty mischief prompts the audience to contemplate, think and ponder—and it's impactful when a compassionate artist achieves just that.

That's Ronnie Burkett. He's ours. And he's Canadian.

The TOLIVE website states that Burkett returns to Toronto after performances of 'Wonderful Joe' in California and Edmonton.

It is the story of Joe, a senior who is down on his luck and lonely. His loyal companion is his very old dog, Mister. Joe's landlord tells him and the tight-knit residents in the apartment building that they face eviction in one month. The working-class neighborhood will undergo gentrification with the construction of modern condominiums. Amid this devastating news, Joe ventures out for one last adventure.

Although the news of eviction brings sadness, Joe chooses not to see it that way. He sees magic in the mundane, beauty amid brutality and life in the lost. Along his journey, Joe meets many people from the neighborhood. He experiences a troupe of homeless players in a cardboard theatre and shows a disinterested teen how to jump over the moon in a playground rocket ship.

Burkett's clever story contains elements of a picaresque quality. Typically, the protagonist in a picaresque tale is a mischievous rogue who, through humorous details, experiences the life of ordinary people. I wouldn't necessarily call Joe a mischievous rogue. However, the fact that he is a gay, middle-aged man, as are his close-knit friends, might lead some to view Joe as unprincipled because of who he is.

I choose not to define Joe with that specific label. His sexual orientation and those of his close friends are of no concern and mean nothing to me. He is a human first and foremost.

Joe walks through his neighbourhood and converses with people such as Mother Nature, Santa Claus, Jesus and the Tooth Fairy. Some of these moments are often hilarious. For example, there is what I thought was both a gentle but point-blank poking fun at the so-called demand of correct 'pronoun' usage. As a practicing Catholic, I didn't find Joe's discussion with Jesus disrespectful or sacrilegious at all. It's funny, and I don't want to spoil what occurs.

Final Thoughts: It's not Burkett's wicked sense of humor that makes 'Wonderful Joe' memorable. Yes, there are moments of welcomed, appreciated laughter. That was the very reason my sister attended the production with me—she wanted to experience it again after seeing 'Little Dickens' last year.

She and I discovered there's more to 'Wonderful Joe.'

Burkett gets his audience to think and to see things from another point of view.

'Wonderful Joe' is a vital reminder to reach out to others in a world that is often cold, cruel, and heartless. As a practicing Catholic myself, this emotionally moving production genuinely reflects six of the Catholic social justice teachings: 'Life and Dignity of the Human Person,' 'Call to Family, Community and Participation,' 'Rights and Responsibilities,' 'Options for the Poor and Vulnerable,' 'Solidarity,' and 'Care for God's Creation.'

(Spoiler alert – it is the last moment of the play where the audience sees the teen jumping over the moon. Joe has reached out to this young person to give hope to him and the others he has met. That is precisely what Catholic Christians are called to do.)

On this holiday of giving thanks, thank you, Ronnie Burkett, for reminding us of the dignity, worth, and value of everyone we meet and see.