

Wonderful Joe Review

Puppet show touches on the immorality of displacement

By Stephen Weir, October 10, 2024

In these turbulent times of 2024, leave it to the puppets to show us how hard life can be for penniless seniors living downtown, as they're displaced from a soon-to-be-demolished rundown apartment building to make way for a high-rent tower. You almost don't notice the strings when "Wonderful Joe," a weary, weathered senior, takes the stage at the Jane Mallet Theatre in downtown Toronto.

With his wrinkled face, stooped back, and clothes likely scavenged from dumpster dives, Joe is the star of a one-act play that will run for the next month in the city. Wonderful Joe is written and performed by longtime puppeteer Ronnie Burkett. The cast of marionettes includes a community butcher, a nasty landlord, Mister the dog, and even Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and Jesus Christ. "The play tells the story of an elderly gay man living in a fifth-floor walk-up in an urban centre," says Burkett, considered one of Canada's top puppeteers.

After successful tours in California and Alberta, Burkett brings his latest work home. The play opens with Joe and his dog, Mister, receiving an eviction notice. Their building— and the entire block—is being torn down to make room for a new condo development. "So, Joe and Mister go on one last grand adventure in their neighbourhood, encountering rough, tough, sentimental, funny, and adorable characters," Burkett explains.

Wonderful Joe is truly a labour of love for Burkett, who designs and builds all the puppets by hand, writes the dialogue, performs the voices, and manipulates the marionettes in real time. While the story is full of humour, it also touches on the melancholy of displacement and mortality, as we learn this is Joe's last day not just in his apartment, but on earth.

At the play's emotional core, it's easy to forget these aren't real-life characters, but puppets whose strings Burkett masterfully pulls.

This is a show for adults only—no children under 16 allowed—and judging by the packed Saturday night crowd, it's resonating with downtown seniors (this writer included).