

Review: WONDERFUL JOE

by LYNN on OCTOBER 8, 2024 in THE PASSIONATE PLAYGOER

***Using hand puppets and marionettes creator/performer Ronnie Burkett focuses his perception, wit and anger on a world gone mad. He touches on gender issues, pronouns, friendship, loyalty, optimism, climate change and love, generally through the eyes of Joe—who is wonderful. As is the show.***

The show focuses on Joe, an elderly gay man who lives in a fifth-floor walk-up. He is told by his kindly landlord that the site is being re-developed, gentrified and Joe and the others in his building are being evicted. They have a month to vacate the premises. While the others lament and fret over the terrible situation of losing their home, Joe looks on this positively. He and his beloved dog Mister will go into the world on one last adventure.

It's obvious instantly that Joe is special. He knows his neighbours by name and they know him. He knows their stories and histories and they try to protect each other. Joe is kind, compassionate, optimistic in spite of a hard life, and open-hearted.

Ronnie Burkett tells each story through puppetry, and in the case of ***Wonderful Joe*** he starts with hand puppets and then segues into using marionettes. The puppets are always a marvel of creativity, wit, impish-devilishness, and vivid imagination. The cast of characters is rich in various personalities, attitudes, diversity and surprises. We meet such characters as Sketch (who is a comedian), Yitz (the butcher), Jesus (needs no introduction), Mother Nature (ditto) and Hirshey to name a few. Each has a story and a wisdom attached. Each story will unbalance ones assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, prejudices and biases, leaving one startled and if lucky, changed.

Spoiler-alert, I will use Hirshey as one example of the wonder of Ronnie Burkett's creative ability and heart because Hirshey is important as are they all. Hirshey is a tall, lanky, character with short blond hair (at least from my seat it looked blond), sinewy, muscular, deep voice. Hirshey is introduced but then Hirshey clarifies the name and says: "It's Her-She." Pause. Exhale. Her-She says that the one question they always get is "What are you?" Her-She would prefer that the question be "How are you?" As it's explained, Her-She is a neighbour, a part of a community, and one can add a part of society, a friend, a parent's child.

Ronnie Burkett even references Kintsugi, which means "join with gold" in Japanese. Burkett is referencing the ancient Japanese art of repairing broken objects (usually pottery) using gold lacquer to stick the pieces together, making the mending obvious and beautiful.

Ronnie Burkett is concerned about the sad, angry, beautiful world we live in. Nothing escapes his perceptive ire, but he handles it all with compassion and an open heart. That is especially true towards these characters who populate his play. Each of these characters is broken in some way or another but they are fixed/healed/put back together with the gold that is ***Wonderful Joe***.

Ronnie Burkett is a treasure. ***Wonderful Joe*** is a gift.