

A show by one of the world's greatest puppeteers is a moving example of empathy when we need it most.

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Wonderful Joe

By [Glenn Sumi](#) Special to the Star
3.5 stars (out of 4)

"I'm not fond of string-pulling — trust me," says the title character of the new Ronnie Burkett show "Wonderful Joe."

The line gets a big laugh because the man is made of wood, stands about a foot and a half tall, and his strings are being expertly pulled from above by one of the world's most talented puppeteers and marionettists.

Joe Pickle is the latest in a long line of unforgettable Burkett creations — Edna Rural, Penny Plain, Esmé Massengill — who are as complex and real as any flesh-and-blood character. And not only is he wonderfully realized, but despite the injustice and pain he sees everywhere, he's fully open to the wonder around him.

In the opening scene, Joe, an elderly gay man clad in a loose tie, old cardigan, baggy pants and runners, learns that the apartment he's lived in for decades has been sold to developers. He's got one month to find a new home.

Rather than sink into despair, however, he looks at the experience as the beginning of a "grand adventure."

He and his shaggy mutt Mister creakily descend the five flights of stairs to walk around his neighbourhood of Eileen Avenue, a rundown area that is gradually being gentrified.

He meets neighbours, shopkeepers, former lovers. One elderly friend, also being evicted, doesn't know what to do with the 300 sourdough starters she cultivated during the pandemic. The local butcher, who found physical comfort from Joe after his wife died, assumes the two of them will retire together to the suburbs, but Joe politely declines. A local councillor tries to find Joe another place to live, but Joe has other plans.

One of the most memorable characters we meet is Minnie, an eccentric woman wearing a floppy yellow hat who runs the Trash Alley Players, an outdoor theatre space where, in a show-within-a-show, we see more examples of marginalized people trying to get by with dignity and grace.

Later on, Joe visits a gay bar where an off-season Santa and Jesus Christ are joined by an overworked, underappreciated Tooth Fairy on the dance floor.

And so on.

Burkett, who recently received the Lifetime Artistic Achievement Award at the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards, has always been an artist with a big social conscience.

Here he extends his empathy to the elderly, the unhoused, the disenfranchised and the misunderstood. One of the most intriguing characters is a trans performer who's tired of hearing the phrase "What are you?" instead of "How are you?" Another character named Mother Nature sports a body that's emaciated, stained and warped, a ratty boa wrapped around her frame; she sings a seething song (all music is by John Alcorn) about how we've used up her natural resources and destroyed her.

Gradually, the people Joe meets during his adventure allow him to open up about his own life, from his difficult prairie upbringing to his life on the streets and his colourful career cutting hair for lesbians. And that's when the play really takes on emotional depth.

As in every Burkett show, the puppets — both hand-held and marionette — are imbued with life and personality, their faces, posture and clothing telling you who they are and where they've been. Because he's manipulating things from above, it's easy to forget Burkett's acting work, but his performances, as well as the way he lets his characters move, help differentiate each character.

More structured than recent Burkett shows like the walkabout "Forget Me Not" (2019), "Wonderful Joe" still calls out for dramaturgical tweaking. The outdoor theatre sequence and the gay bar scene, for instance, cover similar ground. And a couple of characters, like a nerdy tween apartment dweller who doesn't like to be touched, feel extraneous.

But this show, not recommended for audiences under 16, is one of the most mature and moving works of Burkett's career. At its heart, it's about community, empathy and imagination. All things that help elevate the lives of average Joes everywhere.