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**There's magic in those high-strung puppets: Little Dickens, the Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes at Theatre Network**

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As Bah Humbug!s encircle the globe at this time of year, know this: There is nothing in the world like Ronnie Burkett's riotous adults-only *Little Dickens*, in which the high-strung marionette artistes of the Daisy Theatre, who know a hit story when they see it, present their own version.

It's wayward, larky, irreverent, playfully raunchy ... the particular genius of the string-puller/ playwright/ designer/ director/ improviser extraordinaire.

The Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes has returned to Theatre Network for the fa-la-la-la season, with a company of 56 Daisy puppets waiting in costume backstage for their cue — and Burkett's own improv expertise if not the story — to single them out. Burkett talks to us from atop the red velvet-curtained puppet theatre planted on the Roxy stage. And his mouthy marionettes talk to each other, sometimes to us, sometimes to audience recruits, in this bawdy, and hilarious, semi-improvised cabaret.

There are dramatic scenes, yes, and also musical interludes, singalongs, cameo appearances by Daisy cast members blithely unrelated to the story. There are improvised asides by Burkett, famously quick on the uptake; there's chat with game audience "volunteers" dazed into complicity by the good-sport clause. The repertoire's classic tale of sin and redemption takes it right on the tinsel. *Little Dickens* is both satirical and spoofy in spirit, about sin, redemption, sentiment, and showbiz.

But, lo and behold, that tale somehow survives, in its own original, and even heart-warming, way. And it's largely through the charm of Burkett's most-loved character, the charismatic little non-binary fairy Schnitzel, who plays Tiny Tim, complete with theatre's most famous prop (after the skull of poor Yorick), the Tiny Tim crutch.

Esmé Massengill as Scrooge in *Little Dickens*, Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes at Theatre Network. Photo supplied.

At the centre of it all, in the starring role as the frozen-hearted Scrooge is Esmé Massengill, the aging, foul-mouthed diva, narcissist, and — as she tells us, unequalled — dramatic actor. Pronouns: "me/myself/I." Esmé takes to the stage in her "authentic biblical showgirl costume." And she is incredulous and much displeased to discover that her show has been cancelled just because it's Christmas Eve. What, no audience?

None of this can happen, of course, before the traditional Daisy Theatre striptease opener. In a feat of Burkett's unsurpassed marionette virtuosity, the well-endowed Dolly Wiggler doffs her sparkly duds to that X-rated Yuletide classic *Santa Claus Got Stuck In My Chimney*. I leave you to imagine the choreography.

Esmé's timid much put-upon manager/agent Bob Cratchit has the temerity to want the night off, and gets an earful. So does her singer-songwriter nephew Indy Frets, who summons the seasonal chutzpah to invite Auntie Esmé to Christmas dinner ("cmon, we're having Tofurkey!"). And, in an inspired scene, the Lunkheads, the elderly brother-and-sister theatrical duo who've been touring school gymnasiums and Legion Halls for seven decades, bravely ask the star for a donation to the Actors Benevolent Fund to support out-of-work thespians. They get a snarly scroogian answer. "Are there no dinner theatres? Are there no touring children's productions?"

Esmé is warned by her old frenemy Rosemary Focaccia, back from Vegas and the dead, of impending visits from three spirits. "Gin, vodka, and brandy," says Esmé, unperturbed. There are surprise ghosts from backstage (my lips are sealed). And so Esmé is led by the Ghost of Christmas Past (you'll laugh out loud to see him) into a review of her own career as she claws (and sleeps) her way to stardom.

You know you're in Edmonton, in a good way, when plump Mrs. Edna Rural, the "silly old biddy in a housedress" from Turnip Corners, AB., shows up onstage to a big, loud, sustained cheer from the crowd. Plot shmot, the Daisy Theatre hangs loose about that. Edna is an audience fave, the character C. Dickens somehow forgot to write (that guy coulda been big). She's there to share holiday recipes, and lead a singalong, assisted on opening night by Kevin, a good-natured volunteer from the audience.

John Alcorn's clever score, elsewhere full of lyrical smoky jazz arrangements of Christmas songs — including a dreamy *What Are You Doing New Year's Eve* sung by a louche lounge singer in a white dinner jacket — makes room for a rudimentary Casio organ track, in an affectionate wink at every church hall Christmas group-sing ever.

There are puppet jokes, of course. No Burkett production comes without them. Some are fleeting: there's a lunatic brilliance to the Daisy Theatre duo of paunchy ventriloquist Meyer Lemon and his big-mouth dummy Little Woody Linden. Some linger, cheeky about the larger theme of Dickens' tale of ghostly intervention. Can mankind change? The answer is Sure. Esmé as Scrooge demonstrates by changing ... into her fabulous "redemption gown" on Christmas morning.

The marionettes themselves are exquisitely designed and sculpted by Burkett, and dressed by Kim Crossley, in impossibly miniaturized detail. The tiny beaded headdress of Esmé's 20s biblical showgirl outfit, Edna's Naturalizers, the perfect red uniform of the star of the wacky bellhop films, the red leather boots of matinee idol Dicky Long....

Esmé Massengill and Schnitzel in *Little Dickens*, Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes at Theatre Network. Photo supplied.

And, as you'll know if you've ever seen a Burkett production, the diminutive actors move onstage with breathtaking virtuosity. To see Esmé fling herself onto her own personal casting couch, limbs akimbo, is to watch a master at work. The diva is an expert at shoulder acting, and every shrug and gesture, down to her fingertips, is expressive.

There's magic in it. And there's magic, too, in the sense that marionettes only live, come to life, by imaginative bonding with the audience. That's what little Schnitzel is all about, paying tribute to the way puppets might travel in the dark in crates, but find their family in the light with us, the audience.

Be prepared to be tickled.