

Review: Ronnie Burkett's Little Dickens a reminder of the power of live performance

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The connection between puppeteer and marionette is indeed intriguing; plumbing that relationship is perhaps the stuff of novels rather than 700 words in a newspaper. Still, one wonders how the artist Ronnie Burkett infuses inanimate objects with so much life. Is every emotion, every thought, expressed by those bits of wood and string merely a reflection of the craftsman? Or is a third being created when living and not-living performers share the stage?

One thing is certain. Watching Ronnie Burkett delicately manipulate the strings as he looms over the miniature proscenium in Little Dickens — the Christmas show now on at Theatre Network — is a reminder of the mysterious power of live performance. I don't know how puppets can make us laugh and cry. But they do.

Running until Dec. 22 at The Roxy, Little Dickens is Burkett's riff on A Christmas Carol. It stars members of The Daisy Theatre — his ensemble of dozens of characters that return over and over again to Burkett shows — as the key figures in the Dickens classic. Esmé Massengill, a fading diva whose saggy breasts and echoes of odours past link to another era, stands in for Scrooge. Her besuited and balding manager plays the Cratchit character with suitable sufferance. There's even a hippie-esque nephew — Indy Frets — complete with guitar who, like Fred in the original, has the temerity to invite his relative for tofurkey on Christmas Day.

But no one can soothe the snarky beast whose show has been cancelled because it's Christmas. When a theatrical duo known as the Lunkheads appear to solicit funds for poverty-stricken actors who can't find work, Esmé is enraged.

"Are there no dinner theatres? No touring children's productions? Do the malls not need elves?" she says edgily.

Still, when the three spirits of Christmas show up (Esmé was hoping for vodka, gin and brandy, but what can you do?) the self-involved puppet (whose pronouns are me, myself and I) is forced to reflect on Christmases past and yet to come. At the end of the show, Daisy Theatre's most winning character, the tiny, jug-eared Schnitzel, emerges in red-and-white striped pyjamas as Tiny Tim. Hearts melt, yes, even the wooden ones.

Little Dickens is fueled by Burkett's own charisma; the man is clearly having a good time in this loosely scripted production that relies heavily on the double entendré, along with a number of playfully corny references bolstered by a string of profanities. (It's not a show for the under-16s.) The audience on the night I attended could not have been happier with the performance, hooting and clapping and singing throughout the two-hour, one-act production. A warning to those sitting in the first few rows — you may be called upon to participate, as was my fate (first time ever, loved it). I was relieved to be tasked with wearing a Santa hat while winding up a music-box band, rather than having to remove my shirt or manipulate a skeleton arm like some other volunteers.

But playful hi-jinx layered upon the beloved Christmas tale with its timeless message of redemption is just scaffolding in Little Dickens. We're really here to marvel at the puppets designed and crafted by Burkett and the intricate costumes by Kim Crossley (shoes and accessories by Camellia Koo and Robin Fisher). Each audience member will have a favourite puppet; mine was the elderly charmer, Mrs. Edna Rural (from Turnip Corner, Alberta) who is dressed as a brightly lit singing Christmas tree, right down to her shoes by Naturalizer. Every moment of the show holds a minor miracle of craftsmanship. In my role as winder-upper of The Max Blümchen Orchestrale, I got to see, up close, the tiny perfection of the pit band, so detailed and yet so sturdy.

The night wouldn't be complete without some Christmas tunes (musical arrangements by John Alcorn). There's a slick-lounge-singer version of What Are You Doing New Year's Eve (Burkett can sing, but just) and an enthusiastic audience sing-along conducted by Mrs. Edna Rural and her off-stage friend the organist.

It was all tremendous good fun, and perhaps your only chance this season to trill fa-la-la-la-laaa-la -la-la-la. Don't miss out.