

Little Dickens and Snow White: Holiday shows provide new spins on 19th-century tales (for adults and for kids)

J. KELLY NESTRUCK

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 28, 2022

The only thing that everyone on the internet agrees on, once a year anyway, is that the best film adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is 1992's *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.

There's just something about vaudevillian puppets and the Victorian tale of a rich miser's redemption that mesh together perfectly

Well, the same, it turns out, goes for vaudevillian marionettes – even the rather dirty-minded ones of Siminovitch Prize winner Ronnie Burkett's Theatre of Marionettes.

Indeed, *Little Dickens (Critic's Pick)*, created, performed and designed by Burkett now on at Canadian Stage, may be my favourite stage riff on the story of Scrooge.

It is semi-improvised, so results may vary, but on opening night Burkett told a version of the classic Christmas story that cast faded stage diva Esmé Massengill, one of the foot-tall members of Burkett's inanimate Daisy Theatre ensemble, as the small-s scrooge at its centre.

Esmé sports a 1920s “authentic Egyptian” showgirl costume to start the show – which, she insists to her stubby manager Cratchitt, must go on despite it being Christmas Eve.

Eventually, she agrees to be charitable and let everyone take off a day from performing the hit musical *All Hands on Dick* – this is an adult puppet show, if I haven't already mentioned – only to be approached by a couple of other marionettes who have the nerve to be out soliciting donations for the Actors Benevolent Society on a day the thespians are refusing to work.

Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett pulls the strings in *Little Dickens*, at the Berkeley Street Theatre in Toronto. DAHLIA KATZ/SUPPLIED

“Are there no dinner theatres?” the diva responds – to the pleas that stage actors have had it tough the last few years.

That reworked line from Dickens got me on board and then I was completely won over after Esmé was haunted by the ghost of her late double-act partner, Rosemary Foccacia. Warned that she will be visited by three spirits that night, she responds: “Of course: gin, vodka and tequila.”

Burkett, visibly moved to be back pulling the strings of his intricately designed co-stars on opening night, hangs out above the proceedings and occasionally interacts with the audience in a polished, casual and mildly lascivious fashion. *Little Dickens* is frequently

interrupted by carol sing-alongs and completely extraneous scenes involving favourite marionettes who don't quite fit into the plot (like homemaker Edna Rural from Turnip Corner, Alberta).

Rather surprisingly, Burkett even manages to wring a moment or two of genuine emotion out of the evening as well. The best thing I can say about Little Dickens, in the end, is that it ran half an hour over its 90-minute running time on the night I saw it and I didn't mind in the least.

Amanda Cordner and Ken Hall in Snow White, Young People's Theatre, to Jan. 7. DAHLIA KATZ/YPT

While Burkett's show is careful to note that it is for ages 16 and up, Young People's Theatre's Snow White – the other holiday show to open last week in Toronto's St. Lawrence Market area – is recommended for ages 6 to 106.

This production, directed by Aurora Browne (CBC's Baroness Von Sketch Show), is a two-actor version of the famous fairy tale – and it is double cast to be as pandemic-proof as possible.

I saw Amanda Cordner (CBC's Sort Of) as Snow White and Ken Hall as "4," one of the seven little men she finds shelter with in the woods. (The alternate cast features JD Leslie and YPT artistic director Herbie Barnes in those parts.)

Snow White speaks to the audience at the top of the show and lets them know that she and 4 will be working together to tell the real story about what happened to them. This led me to expect a feminist updating where, say, her stepmother isn't vain and evil any more, but is rather the mother who stepped up, as the meme goes.

Instead, however, this Snow White struck me as a throwback to classic Brothers Grimm fairy tale tone – which is to say: A bit gruesome. The cruelty of death is present right from the start as Snow White's biological mother passes away when she is just a few days old. And when the evil stepmother jealously dispatches the beautiful tween Snow White to the woods with a huntsman, he has been instructed to not only kill her – but to bring back her "liver and lungs." There are more grisly bits after that – so you'll have to gauge for yourself whether your own 6- to 106-year-old is up for it. (These are recounted rather than shown due to the storytelling style of the script.)

As Snow White, Cordner is a charming and grounded narrator; Hall is quite funny as the reluctant storyteller 4, but his performance is hard to follow when he is eventually tasked with pretending to be his other six friends too.

The script is one penned by a Britain-based playwright named Greg Banks, who works a lot with the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis – which perhaps explains why the language is so nebulous and non-specific. Its chief virtue is thrift – which one understands is a function of the neo-Dickensian times we're living in.