

WONDERFUL JOE IS WONDERFUL

BY [COLIN THOMAS](#) | FEB 8, 2025

Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett's *Wonderful Joe* makes about as much sense as a painting by Marc Chagall — by which I mean it makes *so much* associative, intuitive, emotional sense. And it's beautiful to look at as it swirls around its themes of loneliness and inclusion, cruelty, resilience — and invention.

The set-up is straightforward: an old guy named Joe is informed by his friend and landlord Sunny that he's being evicted. Everybody in Joe's building — everybody on Joe's block of Eileen Street — is getting tossed out of their homes to make way for shiny new condos. Sound familiar? (Screw you, Vancouver mayor Ken Sim. *No thanks* to the Broadway Plan.) Joe figures he doesn't have long to live, so he decides to go on one last grand adventure with his ancient pooch Mister.

From there, the shape of the storytelling is loose to say the least, although the action all takes place over the course of one day. We meet some folks on the street, including a kind, civically engaged young lesbian named Terry, and a batty, foul-mouthed old actress named Minnie. Then Minnie declares, "It's showtime!" and we're suddenly in the lane with The Trash Alley Players, who present a trio of monologues collectively titled *The Last Dinosaurs*. There's a gay bar with the *most* surprising habitués ... But you get the idea and I won't give much more away because discovery is a huge part of the joy in *Wonderful Joe*. Burkett, who's the writer and sole performer — although it would feel odd to call this a solo show — just keeps layering surprise on surprise on surprise.

I will tell you that it's very funny. Wait for the story about how Joe became a ladies' barber. It's moving: you haven't lived until you've seen two hand puppets hug — and mean it.

And it's ridiculously skilled. For almost the entire show, Burkett manipulates marionettes and his mastery is unmatched. The first time we meet Mister, he floats across the stage in that odd way that all marionettes walk, then he stops and shakes his shaggy head. The realism is astonishing. After her show's over, Minnie kicks a bag of trash off the platform she's standing on. Technically, that cannot be easy to pull off. And the head focus in the conversations could be a class for actors.

In the gay bar, Mother Nature sings a song. She's so gaunt her mid-section is just bones and wire. As the emcee says when he introduces her, "God knows, we've all fucked her." Twice during her number, Mother Nature turns upstage and leans her forehead into the wall. It's heartbreaking. Yes, *Wonderful Joe* can get tough. When he was 15, Joe was turning tricks to survive. One of the monologues in Minnie's show is an Indigenous parent trying to get their kids back from social services.

This is where invention and resilience come in. Partly they're there implicitly, wrapped around the ample queer content and its flavours of defiance and chosen community. It's there in the creativity of the show itself. And it's there in *Wonderful Joe*'s central concrete image, which you will discover. It's so moving. And it's the culmination of the reasons that I was standing, applauding, and crying at the end of the show — just like so many others.

As I write this, there are a few precious tickets left. Grab 'em.