



## Wonderful Joe

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Wonderful Joe. Wonderful Ronnie Burkett who describes this new show as, “a love letter to imagination, hope, and the art of filling broken hearts with gold.”

Here’s the thing about Burkett: he **loves** his characters – even the most foul-mouthed – even though they’re just made of wood, plaster, cloth and string. Puppets though they are, they become real for us when Burkett gives them voice. Perhaps more than ever before, his compassion for the down-and-out, the disenfranchised, the divergent and the lost, fills the Historic Theatre at the Cultch. His unconditional acceptance is palpable. That’s what’s always been going on with Ronnie Burkett but in Wonderful Joe, even more so. And it couldn’t come at a better time.

Wonderful Joe is more fully scripted than, say, his Daisy Theatre; no audience participation, few adlibs. And it’s darker which is not to say there’s no laughter. There’s lots of that – although some of it comes with a dose of rue. When Hershe, the lanky character in clunky, shiny gold boots, suggests the question should not be, “What are you?” but “How are you?”, are we totally innocent? “What’s in your panties?” is the thinly-veiled question, Hershe tells us, before exiting with the hope that some gold dust from those shoes gets left behind.

As always, Burkett is fully visible, moving up and down the scaffolding, using a 'balcony' with half-sized puppets and also the 'stage' for most of the action. The puppets hang, fully visible, in the 'wings', waiting their turn. (I sometimes wonder if they whisper to each other in the dark. "How do you think the show's going so far?" or "Don't you hate all this hanging around?")

Wonderful Joe, a retired barber (and that's another whole story), and his scruffy-looking dog Mister, have just been evicted from their Eileen Street apartment, as have all the residents. Gentrification. Upscaling. The subsequent demolition of a lively neighbourhood that has been a refuge for many who don't fit in. On the chopping block is his old barbershop, the butcher shop and Mr. Hoggmeyer's bakery. And where will Margaret, with her three hundred sourdough starters, go? And what about the neighbourhood with all its colourful characters?

But Joe looks on the bright side and embarks with Mister on a grand adventure – although, frankly, he doesn't get much further than *The Last Dinosaurs*, a piece of street theatre starring some of the Eileen Street characters including a sex trade worker who wants her kids back and Mother Nature, a bald, gaunt, green-streaked, aging diva with droopy tits, who claims she has been "fucked" by everyone. A David Suzuki moment coming from the mouth of a puppet.

Joe's own story is revealed and it's enough to bring you to tears or rage or both in equal proportions. And Mister's story, too. That's where I choked up.

Do not be dissuaded by Wonderful Joe's darkness. Do not be dissuaded by the Tooth Fairy who, in a gay bar with a beer-bellied Santa Claus and a scarlet-robed Jesus Christ, calls Santa a "mother-fucker" who only works one day of the year. There is hope.

Hope comes in the form of Geti (short for Serengeti), the kid who feels she doesn't fit it, who feels broken. Joe tells her about kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold, making the broken piece even more beautiful than before. Joe's compassion for all things deemed 'broken', makes him wonderful. Makes Burkett wonderful, too.

While south of the border, diversity, equity and inclusion are being eroded or abolished by executive orders flying thick and fast, Ronnie Burkett and his amazing puppets celebrate those hard-won DEI goals here in Canada and here on the Cultch stage. And that's pure kintsugi, pure gold.