

Theatre review: Wonderful Joe's eccentric puppet characters fight the forces of gentrification

With a more melancholy undercurrent behind the biting laughs, Ronnie Burkett's latest show gives voice to the marginalized and the misunderstood

BY JANET SMITH

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THE BEAUTY OF puppetmaster Ronnie Burkett's *Wonderful Joe* playing a block away from Commercial Drive is that it feels like it speaks so directly to gentrification and marginalization on Vancouver's East Side.

Those are things that are happening across the world, including Toronto, where Burkett lives and actually found the main inspiration for the characters. The richly conjured marionette characters—the displaced elderly woman, the European butcher headed to the suburbs, the trans sex worker, the pink-tracksuit-wearing real-estate agent, the Indigenous woman fighting to get her kids back—all feel specific to a time in Canada where long-term residents and businesses are being pushed out of their 'hoods. Replacing them are upwardly mobile young professionals and artisanal coffee shops.

For a puppet show, *Wonderful Joe* starts in a fairly realistic place: the titular old man, a longtime member of the gay community, is getting evicted from his building. With Burkett visibly working the strings from a platform above the stage, Joe shares the news with his colourful neighbours—an old woman who frets about how she'll move her 300 jars of sourdough starter, the on-the-spectrum kid who prefers a no-contact handshake to a hug—and then decides he'll head out onto the streets on a last adventure with his mangey mutt Mister.

As usual for Burkett, the plot wanders into riotously eclectic tangents from there. Among the vignettes on the graffiti-splattered streets: a rendez-vous with the butcher he once had an affair with; an interaction with the real-estate agent who offers to help him get into a subsidized suite in the new building (one Joe admits will likely not be ready in his lifespan); and a foray into a warped alley cabaret run by a foulmouthed senior. All of the characters he comes into contact with are grappling with a place that's turning its back on them; that no longer feels like home.

Before you know it—and this is Burkett's unique gift—you've entered an entirely different, surreal plane from where you started. Soon you're in a gay bar with an off-season Santa and Jesus Christ, who are shooting the shit with a burly Tooth Fairy named Glen. Also making the scene is Mother Nature, a decrepit, emaciated crone with a black boa that looks like it's just been pulled out of an oil spill, dancing what can only be described as an apocalyptic vaudeville number.

By the end, Burkett has somehow transported us into a fairy-tale realm where magic can happen and where we can transcend trauma and the gritty realities of a landscape-shifting rental crisis.

The key to suspending our belief is his detailed characters—intricately crafted marionettes and hand puppets that are definitely best appreciated from seats that are close to the Historic Theatre stage. Likable Joe, with his ruddied face, worn-out cardigan, and sneakers, shuffles around with a permanent wrinkly grin—this despite the history of hardship that he slowly divulges through the course of the play. Others clomp their feet, nervously wave their hands, and wiggle their elongated legs: Burkett gives each their own meticulously wrought physical language and distinctive voice and vernacular.

Wonderful Joe is every bit as chaotically wayward, bawdy, and profanity-laced as past Burkett outings, though it has a decidedly more melancholy undercurrent than the laugh-out-loud *Little Willy*, his 2023 show [here](#).

One of the singular wonders of watching a Burkett production remains witnessing the artist at work, entering rapid-fire banter with himself and whipping out puppets who sway from rafters around the set—as if waiting for him to breathe offbeat life into them. They're his band of outcasts, and the trick is that he makes you empathize with them—even when they swear like drunken pirates. They're “wonderful” weirdos who are threatened with extinction in an urban landscape bent on bulldozing, erasing, and homogenizing.