

Theatre: Have yourself a filthy little Christmas with Little Dickens

Celebrated Toronto puppeteer Ronnie Burkett brings his naughty adaptation of A Christmas Carol to Montreal's Centaur Theatre, featuring characters from his hit show The Daisy Theatre.

JIM BURKE, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE ([HTTPS://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/THEATREFUNHOUSE](https://montrealgazette.com/author/theatrefunhouse))

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God bless us, everyone! The much-loved Daisy Theatre character Schnitzel is recast as Tiny Tim in Ronnie Burkett's A Christmas Carol adaptation Little Dickens. *RONNIE BURKETT*

It's beginning to feel a bit like Christmas already, what with internationally renowned Toronto puppeteer Ronnie Burkett and his highly strung

chums back in town next week with his touring show *Little Dickens* (at Centaur Theatre from Tuesday to Dec. 15), a comical and ever-so-filthy adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*.

It's a seasonal sequel of sorts to Burkett's wild ride of a puppet cabaret [The Daisy Theatre](https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre/ronnie-burkett-goes-back-to-his-puppetry-roots-in-the-daisy-theatre) (<https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre/ronnie-burkett-goes-back-to-his-puppetry-roots-in-the-daisy-theatre>), which played at the Centaur last year, and which represented a break from his customarily serious, socially conscious shows. (He's back to that darker mood with another recent show, *Forget Me Not*, a dystopian interactive fantasy that he's also currently touring and is hoping to bring to Montreal one day.)

In *Little Dickens*, many of the beloved, beautifully hand-crafted characters from *The Daisy Theatre* — including lovable fairy child Schnitzel, foul-mouthed diva Esmé Massengill and dotty farm widow Edna Rural — fill out the roles in Dickens's classic ghost story, from which Burkett sometimes veers with a spot of improvisation and audience participation. Burkett spoke about the show in a phone conversation with the *Montreal Gazette*.

First off, belated congratulations on being appointed an officer of the Order of Canada. (The honour was announced in June.) Has it changed your life?

Not that much. I don't wear the tiara too often.

Why did you choose to adapt *A Christmas Carol*?

I'm really drawn to stories of redemption, especially the classic stuff, and *A Christmas Carol* is one of those stories. I do like the story of Scrooge's journey through that night, the idea of looking at one's life and coming out on the other end changed. I think that's one of the most beautiful holiday stories. I will say I think it's the stupidest idea I've ever had. I came out of a theatre having done *The Daisy Theatre* and I said to my stage manager that a great title for a puppet version of *A Christmas Carol* would be *Little Dickens*. So I pitched this ridiculous idea to the Cultch in Vancouver to do this improvised version using the *Daisy Theatre* cast, and 12 hours later we had a month-long booking, and after that run (in 2017) we were booked to go back the next year.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

How has the Scrooge story been adapted to the world of the Daisy Theatre?

I've kept the Daisy Theatre format, so we still have little cabaret interludes that happen throughout the show. We've also got Schnitzel, the little fairy, as Tiny Tim, Edna Rural appears as a singing Christmas tree and so on. But the central thing was to cast somebody who needs to be redeemed — some monstrous human being. And luckily, one of the great stars of The Daisy Theatre — our faded, bitter diva Esmé Massengill — is exactly that. So at the beginning, she's in her dressing room and a couple of characters come in asking for money for a benevolent fund for actors. She takes the classic line "Are there no workhouses?" and instead asks: "Is there no dinner theatre? Are there no mall shows?" Then we take Esmé back through her life as a child actress, as a young actress in love, and on to becoming part of the Hollywood system that corrupted her. And one thing I always wanted to do, I made a black-and-white version of young Esmé for her RKO (film studio) years.

You mentioned having many, variously illustrated editions of A Christmas Carol. Have these influenced the look of Little Dickens?

Visually, I'd say it's more Ziegfeld than Dickens. For instance, I had so much fun designing Esmé's (climactic) redemption gown, which is a real

showstopper.

Did you borrow from any of the countless screen adaptations of the story?

Well, I love the Bill Murray version, *Scrooged*. It was on TV in a hotel room that time I was first thinking of doing the show, and I thought, “Well, there you go, there’s a way you can do this. It’s all been changed with different characters, but it’s still the story.” My favourite film version, honest to God — and it’s the one that’s influenced me the most — is *Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol*. It was exactly the tone I wanted for *Little Dickens*.

Without spoiling the surprise, how do you bring improv into the story?

Well, it’s not as kamikaze as *The Daisy Theatre*, because I do have a story to tell. So in this one, when the train leaves the station, it’s going to a destination. With *The Daisy Theatre*, it’s a case of “What track are we going on tonight?” because nothing is written down, so heaven knows what will come out of my mouth.

Your regular collaborator (and life partner), jazz musician John Alcorn, is again responsible for the musical aspects of the show. What does he bring this time?

John knows the American songbook inside out, so I asked him to find seven or eight standards and to arrange them and record them for me. I had really only two firm requests, which was how we begin and how we end. Since *The Daisy Theatre* had always opened with a burlesque number, we have our stripper Dolly Wiggler starting the show with a Christmas striptease. John found a song that had been buried for years. Ella Fitzgerald had recorded it, and when someone had pointed out that it was a very dirty song, she’d had it pulled. It’s a song called *Santa Claus Got Stuck in My Chimney*. As soon as I heard that, I thought, “That’s our strip number!” My favourite Christmas song is *In the Bleak Midwinter*, which is beautiful and sad. You wouldn’t think that would be in a *Daisy Theatre* show, but I said I wanted that as the final song, the final moment in the show. Regardless of how stupid and how dirty the show gets, I wanted it to end there so that we finish it truly in the spirit of why we came together.

Thank you, and break a (little wooden) leg.

Thank you. And God bless us, everyone!