

# Review: Irresistible Little Dickens strings us along with yuletide mischief

Puppet master Ronnie Burkett's hysterically funny and often very naughty retelling of A Christmas Carol is at Centaur Theatre through Dec. 21.

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

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Ronnie Burkett recasts the story of Scrooge with filthy friends Esmé Massengill, Schnitzel and Edna Rural. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Don't leave me dangling: will Scrooge (a.k.a. Esmé Massengill) prove there's more than a wooden heart beating inside her? Will Tiny Tim (a.k.a. Schnitzel) convince her that a puppet is for life, and not just for Christmas? Will the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future manage to pull enough strings to get Esmé/Scrooge to change her ways?

All is revealed in [Little Dickens](#)

([https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-have-yourself-a-filthy-little-christmas-with-little-dickens?](https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-have-yourself-a-filthy-little-christmas-with-little-dickens?preview_id=1640928&preview_nonce=216ea87334&thumbnail_id=1643645)

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Ronnie Burkett's hysterically funny and often very naughty version of A Christmas Carol, which is playing at Centaur Theatre and has been extended through Dec. 21.

If you caught Burkett's puppet cabaret [The Daisy Theatre](#)

(<https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre/ronnie-burkett-goes-back-to-his-puppetry-roots-in-the-daisy-theatre>), at the Centaur last year, you'll already

be familiar with many of the beautifully hand-crafted characters recruited to enact Charles Dickens's seasonal morality tale.

Hogging the limelight is the aforementioned Esmé, a foul-mouthed, washed-up diva. (Think Richard E. Grant's Withnail crossed with Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond.) And of course, there's Schnitzel, the adorable marionette moppet who yearns to be not a real boy, but a flying fairy.

In this retelling, Esmé's Scrooge is a fading actress wallowing in spiteful self-pity, a tart tyrant who viciously berates her mild-mannered backstage assistant, Bob Cratchit. She's visited by several well-meaning relatives, including a tofurkey-chowing millennial and two crusty old thespians looking for some arts funding.

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STORY CONTINUES BELOW

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To reveal more would be to spoil the fun, though more in terms of Burkett's wild, cheeky digressions than of the story itself — which has, after all, been over-familiarized to death by countless movie and stage adaptations. Indeed, as Burkett says in a delightfully self-deprecating intro, he could wrap this whole thing up in 40 minutes if the audience insisted on glumly sitting there with folded arms. (Scrooge is miserable, Scrooge is visited by ghosts, Scrooge is redeemed, and we're done.)

Thankfully, the audience was vociferously receptive to Burkett's "really stupid idea," as he calls it in that intro. And so he served up a near-two-hour, no-intermission feast of waspish one-liners, improvised horseplay, seasonal singalongs, and cabaret renditions of standards chosen by his longtime musical collaborator John Alcorn.

The risqué '60s ditty *Santa Claus Got Stuck in My Chimney* is a delicious opener, while the closing number is a bold choice of a mood-changer that had many a bottom lip going like those attached to Burkett's fingers.

When he's not pulling strings, Burkett is pulling "volunteers" out of the audience — nothing too gruelling, but his mischievous twinkle clearly had them expecting worse. As an internationally renowned, multi-award-winning puppetry artist (last spring he was made an officer of the Order of Canada),



Ronnie Burkett's meticulous attention to detail gives his characters a rich stock of quirky personality traits.  
*PIERRE OBENDRAUF /  
 MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Burkett could no doubt have recruited a full-time onstage assistant to hand him the control bars and make the odd scenery change. But his frantic huffing and puffing as he races in and out of the puppet booth to keep all the many moving parts going adds to the frenetic sense of anything-goes hilarity.

Yet as consistently funny and gloriously silly as the show is, Burkett's meticulous attention to detail shouldn't be overlooked. A tiny shrug here, a head-waggle there and, in the case of a lecherous old janitor, the compulsive stroking of a broom handle: Burkett's beloved characters reveal, from the smallest as well as the most expansive gestures, a rich stock of quirky personality traits.

Some Centaur regulars will perhaps miss the Grinch-like fun of Urban Tales (<https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/theatre/review-immigrants-tell-their-urban-tales-at-centaur-theatre>), which ended its decade-long run last year. Little Dickens, though, is no last-minute, hastily wrapped replacement gift. It's one that would be worthy of the birthday boy who sandals His way across the stage in one of the many relishable moments in this irresistible show. Don't miss it.

## AT A GLANCE

*Little Dickens* continues through Dec. 21 at Centaur Theatre, 453 St-François-Xavier St. Tickets: \$44 to \$56; students \$18 to \$30; seniors \$40 to \$46. Call 514-288-3161 or visit [centaurtheatre.com](http://centaurtheatre.com) (<https://centaurtheatre.com/shows/little-dickens/>).

## RELATED

Interview: Ronnie Burkett has a filthy little Christmas in Little Dickens ([https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-have-yourself-a-filthy-little-christmas-with-little-dickens?preview\\_id=1640928&preview\\_nonce=216ea87334&\\_thumbnail\\_id=1643645](https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/local-arts/theatre-have-yourself-a-filthy-little-christmas-with-little-dickens?preview_id=1640928&preview_nonce=216ea87334&_thumbnail_id=1643645))