



MONTREAL THEATRE HUB

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Review: Larger-than-life heart and humour in adult holiday puppet play ‘Little Dickens’

RONNIE BURKETT RETURNS TO THE CENTAUR WITH A WILD TWIST ON A CHRISTMAS CLASSIC

November 24, 2019 [Camila Fitzgibbon](#)

“Master puppeteer” is no overstatement in defining one of Canada’s greatest entertainers.

Consummate in artistry, wonder of wonders... say what you will – Ronnie Burkett is a national treasure.

From conceptualizing and crafting his own motley crew of marionettes to animating them each in full, eccentric voice on stage, he pulls at all heartstrings with spectacular dexterity and virtuosity to move even the most Scrooge-esque of theatregoers.

After having most recently captivated Montreal audiences in 2018 with sold out performances of *The Daisy Theatre*, the beloved Burkett and his familiar troupe of madcap characters return to the Centaur with another adults-only puppet play, *Little Dickens*. A raucous and raunchy spin on Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, this strip-teasing cabaret act recasts *Daisy* staples Esmé Massengill as Ebenezer and Schnitzel as Tiny Tim to recount the classic holiday story with irreverent humour and acerbic wit.

It’s foul-mouthed, filthy good fun – and yet wonderfully immaculate with its childlike sense of marvel.

Little Dickens thus takes us through diva Esmé Scrooge’s journey of personal redemption as she is visited by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet-To-Come in this semi-scripted, semi-improvised feat of storytelling. It’s a delectable vaudevillian smorgasbord interweaving short scenes with musical interludes sung live by the velvet-voiced Burkett (the original arrangements are by John Alcorn) and saucy vignettes prompting audience participation (“volunteers” are beckoned to the stage and often end up de-shirted.) Magnificent puppets – each as intricately sculpted and adorned as the previous – lurking in the shadows are then one by one brought forth to the proscenium for their bit, and we are always left wanting more.

Alone at the complex controls is the ever-magnetic maestro Burkett – instantly likeable in his warmth, candour, and vulnerability. World-class skill and instinct are here on display: articulate movement, physical subtlety, and clarity of intention. It's extraordinary stagecraft, and the performance is a showcase of exquisite acting range and stamina.

Spectators returning to delight in the *Daisy* debauchery may perhaps find this spinoff less bawdy than its predecessor, but it still fires its transgressive verbal shots, cheeky asides, and risqué innuendos in the best of Burkett-esque flair and fashion. Most jokes find their fairy wings (I haven't laughed this hard at the theatre since, well, my virginal foray into *The Daisy Theatre* last year) and the piece gently lands in a sweet spot between naughty and nice. Once the echoes of gasps and howls have settled, we are cushioned by the fuzzy feeling of having experienced something remarkably magical yet wholly human from these non-living – but certainly not lifeless – wooden beings.

Little Dickens is larger-than-life with its grandiosity of spirit and, for the lack of a more direct or urgent form of expressing genuine recommendation, a “must-see” in Montreal theatre this season.