

# VANCOUVERPLAYS

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## THEATRE IN THE LOWER MAINLAND

### THEATRE REVIEW

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How many times can I say, “Ronnie Burkett is a genius”?

A regular at The Cultch, Toronto’s Burkett stages nearly all his new creations here. His latest, *Little Willy*, a hilarious semi-improvised riff on Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*, is getting its premiere. In many ways *Little Willy* is a Burkett revue/anthology piece/pastiche, bringing back many of our favourite puppet characters from his previous plays, including stripper Dolly Wiggler, diva Esme Massengill, elderly Alberta widow Edna Rural, and the adorable ambiguously gendered non-binary little fairy, Schnitzel.

As always, Burkett has designed these amazing marionettes and manipulates them in full view of the audience while voicing all the characters in the script he has written. While dueling for the role of Juliet, his puppet women sing songs (music and witty lyrics by John Alcorn) and exchange bawdy remarks as Burkett wows us with his rapid-fire artistic multitasking.

Compared to some of his previous plays, *Little Willy* hasn’t really much plot, other than who will get to play Juliet. But it’s howlingly funny, with a few extended moments of quiet brilliant depth in a long monologue by Mrs. Rural and a tender epilogue from Schnitzel. Watch the Edna puppet settle her weary bones into her easy chair and move her tiny hands in the subtlest gestures while reminiscing about her relationship with her late husband.

Some of the evening’s funniest moments involve the men Burkett pulls out of the audience to interact with his puppets, especially the guy chosen to play Romeo in the crypt scene where Juliet awakens to find him dead. I’m not generally a fan of audience participation, but Burkett is masterful at integrating puppetry and real humans without ever humiliating his volunteers or exploiting them for cheap laughs. (Okay, maybe there are a couple of cheap-ish laughs near the end but they’re huge belly laughs and no one is any the worse for them.)

If you’re a Ronnie Burkett fan, you don’t need me to tell you to go see this show. If you’ve never seen Burkett in action, don’t miss this opportunity to see a genius at work and play. How many more times will we get to see him. The guy is in his mid-60s. Though he still looks boyishly youthful, the manic energy he puts into every show (over 100 minutes, no intermission) would give many a younger man a coronary.

At the risk of repeating myself: Ronnie Burkett is a genius.

Jerry Wasserman