Puppet picaresque
On Joe's journey, it's people who give a street character

By: Ben Waldman Friday, Oct. 10, 2025

The wrecking ball is a meteor that predicts a sidewalk-level extinction event in marionette artist Ronnie Burkett's *Wonderful Joe*, an urban journey that begins with an eviction notice delivered to a denizen who remembers when the cornerstones were laid and the first bricks were thrown. Neither Burkett, who manipulates a coterie of neighbourhood everybodies, nor Joe ever uses the term "aging in place," but once the superintendent delivers the decree that redevelopment is on the horizon, the octogenarian springs into motion as a walking-tour guide along a promenade of fading history.

With one month to go before the jackhammers rattle the foundation, Joe gently carries his ancient pup Mister down to the sidewalk for one last stomp around Eileen Street, a thoroughfare that houses a wide array of impressive characters amid the graffiti.
In his return to the Tom Hendry Warehouse after a 20-year hiatus, the Toronto-based Burkett, a Siminovich Prize laureate, brings along a supporting cast of marionettes who each possess their own fascinating wrinkles and elongated features.

Not quite lifelike, yet not quite unreal, the puppets — developed by Burkett and his nine-person studio — navigate their space with startling control, carrying within their bodies the weight of lived experience as they step up, lean back and turn away, perhaps forever.
Throughout the production (which ran shorter than its advertised 95 minutes, with no intermission), Burkett, who performs from a perch, is careful not to look down his nose at the residents of Eileen Street, imbuing his characters with enough complexity to evade accusation of caricature.

Joe is not simply a kindly old man: he's an erstwhile hustler, a back-lane survivor and gender-affirming barber who's on a first-name basis with everyone he sees, including Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and Jesus Christ.

Joe's disposition is one grounded in unshakable belief: tomorrow is only a day away.
While *Wonderful Joe* is quite overtly a story of gentrification in a geographical sense, it also forces consideration of how the displacement of longtime residents and frequenters can upset the delicate balance of inter-relativity and community support that sprouts up when official channels fall short.

In an early scene, Minnie, the leader of a back-alley theatre company, approaches Joe with concern that Terry, a social worker who used to work in the housing department, is conspiring to have her killed.

In certain rows, this at first elicited laughter, but Burkett's flips the script during a remarkably potent exchange between the two women. Terry's heard all this before from Minnie, and reassures her that she loves her, even if the drama queen's mood swings. Who would understand Minnie so readily as her neighbours if she were shunted to the other side of town? The narrative impact of gentrification is also illustrated quite well during Minnie's grand production, a collection of monologues she calls *The Last Dinosaurs*.

Each of the stories shared — by a fiercely independent mother wrestling with child services; a trans sex worker who stands up; and an aging punk who loves the queen — is a stirring reminder of the importance of preserving and amplifying queer histories on a broader scale, though it's not that these characters who've made it to the end of this respective era had hoped to stand alone as keepers of "I never wanted to be a historian," says Sketch, the mohawked punk.

Neither necessarily did Burkett, whose punchy writing elevates *Wonderful Joe* throughout its discursive structure, ooey-gooey ending aside. But like Minnie's monologists, Burkett knows how precious it is to stand before a captive audience.

While Burkett is mostly in the shadows, he is briefly cast in bright spotlight during *The Last Dinosaurs* segment, a gentle nod to the puppetmaster's acceptance of himself as an elder who has seen enough to know where he stands.

These are the stories that Burkett has lived to tell.