

INTERVIEW | Theatre Legend Ronnie Burkett Talks About Reinventing Shakespeare In Little Willy

By [Anya Wassenberg](#) on February 25, 2026



Ronnie Burkett's Little Willy (Photo: Dahlia Katz)

Ronnie Burkett's show Little Willy will open at Canadian Stage on February 27. Produced by Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, the unique artist offers a bawdy and irreverent take on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

Little Willy reprises characters that will be familiar to the many fans of Burkett's work. The story takes the familiar story and turns it inside out.

It's also a very adult reinvention of the story, designed for audience members age 16+ only.

Ronnie Burkett

Ronnie Burkett was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and became fascinated with puppets as a young child. He developed the ambition to become a puppeteer, and was writing and touring his first shows by the age of 14. He attended Brigham Young University in Utah on a theatre scholarship for a year, but left to pursue his career.

He pursued his craft as a puppeteer – and he creates all his own puppets and marionettes by hand – in various forms. He won a regional Emmy in 1979 for the puppets he created for a show called Cinderrabbit on PBS in the United States. He went on to form his own theatre company in 1986.

His international breakthrough came with a show titled Tinka's New Dress, which won two Dora Awards, four Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards, and a special citation from the Obie Awards. It toured internationally, and became part of a trilogy of works. He won a Chalmers Award in 1996 for his show Old Friends, and in 2009, a Siminovitch Prize in Theatre. He received the Distinguished Artist Award from the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Arts Awards for his contributions to the arts in Alberta in 2015.

Burkett writes his own scripts, and voices all the characters. Unlike Little Willy, his pieces often deal with darker subjects, and he often uses unusual characters, and elements of the grotesque.

Ronnie Burkett: The Interview

In Little Willy, Burkett takes Shakespeare's play and puts it into a larger story.

"Well you know, with The Daisy Theatre in general, it's a bunch of vaudevillians that do a show," he explains.

His Daisy Theatre troupe, in other words, will produce Romeo and Juliet, and various hijinks ensue.

Why that play in particular?

"When I did **Little Dickens**, it was so easy, because the general public knows The Christmas Carol," he points out. "When I was thinking of Shakespearean stuff, I thought, what is the one everyone would know?"

Romeo and Juliet naturally came to mind. He points out it's a good entry point for Shakespeare in general.

"Two kids meet, have underaged sex, unsupervised, and six people die," as he sums up.

Shakespeare himself shows up in Little Willy in marionette form.

"Well, I just thought he was a good hook," he says. He relates that a mentor of his in the 1970s produced a puppet version of the Bard's Taming of the Shrew, and created a puppet of Shakespeare himself to appear in it. The idea stuck with him. "It was just in my mind to have Shakespeare in this show."

The revered playwright makes his appearance in the story outraged at what the Daisy Theatre actors are doing to his work.



Ronnie Burkett's Little Willy (Photo: Dahlia Katz)

Improv & Music

Like most of Burkett's shows, the performance involves improvisation.

"Any Daisy Theatre show, there's never been a script written down ever," he says. In the case of Little Willy, there is a structure to the performance, with specific scenes, and songs written by John Alcorn.

"I have to drive the car and take the audience through this in less than two hours," Ronnie says.

Songs and music are always an important part of The Daisy Theatre shows.

"Every Daisy Theatre show has always begun with a burlesque strip show," he says. "Dolly Wiggler, who is the house burlesque artist, has an Elizabethan strip show." She goes through four layers of clothing to the opening song.

Casting Romeo and Juliet also involves a musical number as two aging divas vie each other for the role.

"There's a battle song between the two divas of the show. It's called I Am Juliet," he says. "They are both well past their prime."

Recurring Daisy Theatre characters who appear in the show include Edna Rurals, a woman from the prairies. She's a turnip farmer with a conservative bent, a kind of every-mom or auntie. "She has a beautiful ballad," Burkett says. It involves advice to young girl.

Another number is sung by a Las Vegas lounge singer, who explains why passions are so heightened – they're Italian is the reasoning. Naturally, it's an Italian song.

Little Willy is a send up of Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, theatre and its conventions, and more.

"All of it."

The Audience

What would he say to potential audience members?

"I sell pretty well everywhere I play, and to be honest, I think it's primarily word of mouth," Burkett says.

He speculates that anyone suggesting a puppet show for adults to anyone unfamiliar with his work as an evening out would likely be turned down.

"The reaction would be pretty strong – I'm busy that night," he laughs. "Once people are in the show, they have no idea that it could be that silly."

As he points out, his show is pure performance, without any of the theatrical tech that is common nowadays.

"It's a true theatrical experience," he says. "It's not a franchise musical. It's a one of a kind."

His shows are for those who simply love live theatre.

"My work doesn't translate to camera work," he notes, pointing out that film and TV is designed to control the viewing perspective, which tends not to work with his shows. "The camera makes the puppets look boring and static. This is theatrical."

Characters

"There's pretty much the standard characters [of The Daisy Theatre]," he says. Another character Burkett aficionados will recognize is Schnitzel, an innocent based on the idea of a fairy. Esme is another, based on an aging Gloria Swanson who's been on the road for decades, and is drunk most of the time. She's got an acid tongue, and a mean sense of humour.

But, recurring characters doesn't mean the same marionettes he's used before.

"Whenever a marionette changes their clothes, I have to create a new puppet," he explains. "Shakespeare I think was the only new character that I made for the show."

Various puppets have been added over the years. "In The Daisy Theatre now we have 56 puppets," he explains. Not all of them show up in every show. Physically, he has built hundreds of puppets.



Ronnie Burkett's Little Willy (Photo: Dahlia Katz)

Little Willy

Little Willy began during the years of the COVID pandemic.

"During lockdown, unbeknownst to me, I was going to be in my studio for two and half years," he says. "I thought, I've got the studio, let's build as many shows as we can." He ended up creating four new shows during that period.

Once presenters got back to planning their performance seasons, Burkett's first suggestion was Wonderful Joe, a story about an old man, his dog, and gentrification. (Wonderful Joe toured through 2024 and 2025.)

"The response from presenters was, we're coming out of lockdown [...] do you have anything that's just silly?" he says.

Little Willy fits that bill.

"I think, for Toronto right now, with this weather, with politics in the world, with the state of things, I think it's the perfect show to present pre-spring," Burkett says.

"It's deliciously stupid."

The Show

Ronnie Burkett serves as playwright, set and costume designer, and marionette designer for the show, with music arrangements and production by John Alcorn.