A View from the Box

Posted on March 2, 2026

Ronnie Burkett Theatre of Marionettes, presented by Canadian Stage's "Little Willy"

"Little Willy"

What do you do when your programming falls through? You put on the Bard of Avon, that's who! Ronnie Burkett's revival of *Little Willy* combines all of the silliness and irreverence I've come to expect from a Daisy Theatre show with the words and wisdom of William Shakespeare. Definitely for adult audiences only, *Little Willy* is the most fun you'll have at the theatre!

Dolly Wiggler in **Little Willy** by Ronnie Burkett Photos by Dahlia Katz

The Daisy Theatre is stuck: the shows they wanted to do simply aren't going to work, so they have to schedule something else to fill the space. The stage manager Enoch decides that maybe this is a good time to pull out a classic – *Romeo and Juliet*.

Except, the play doesn't really fully happen, or at least, not like you'd expect it to. From heated arguments over which aging starlet should play Juliet to a chorus of dancing phalluses behind a Vegas showgirl, *Little Willy* is unlike any performance of The Bard's works you've ever seen in the best possible way.

Jolie Jolie and Esmé Massengill **Little Willy** by Ronnie Burkett
Photos by Dahlia Katz

Of course, *Little Willy* features your Daisy Theatre favourites, like Dolly Wiggler, Esmé Massengill, and my personal favourite Schnitzel, who grace the boards for *Little Willy*, along with William Shakespeare himself! These marionettes are so intricately detailed and finely costumed (created by Kim Crossley along with Burkett), that I do at times find myself getting lost in their little world and fully forgetting that they're not moving on their own. Burkett has so fully fleshed out this little company, that you feel like you know them personally. This is the second show now where Schnitzel's passionate speeches have brought a tear to my eye, and he endears himself to me more and more with each passing Daisy Theatre production I attend.

Schnitzel and William Shakespeare in **LITTLE WILLY** by Ronnie Burkett
Photos by Dahlia Katz

However, what I didn't realize about *Little Willy* is that the whole thing is improvised. While Burkett has certain songs (created by John Alcorn) and plot points that he has to hit along the way, the rest of the show is essentially up to Burkett and the whims of the audience. This means that Crystal Salverda, the show's stage manager, has a slightly more active role in the production, and Burkett will at times call out to her for a reminder of which scene is supposed to come next or chastise her for missing a joke or spot light. These meta-theatrical moments not only play into the storyline of these characters putting on a play, but they help ground me in the actual world of the Berkeley Theatre space and not just The Daisy Theatre.

Edna Rural in **LITTLE WILLY** by Ronnie Burkett
Photos by Dahlia Katz

Along with this improvisation was some of the most hilarious audience participation I think I've ever witnessed. Ranging from lending a helping hand, to having a small puppet hand in less than appropriate places, the four folks who got brought up on stage could not have been prepared for what was about to happen. It made the show all the better and Burkett milked these moments to the audience's pure delight. My stomach actually hurt from how hard I was laughing during this show, it's truly that funny.

Little Willy is both a masterful display of Burkett's work, while also being a self-referential and totally cheeky night at the theatre. Silly me, I thought I'd be going to see some marionettes perform Shakespeare, and while I got a little bit of that (particularly well done by my little Schnitzel), what I actually witnessed was a craftsman at work and an unforgettable night at the theatre.