



STAGE/REVIEWS

Review: 'Little Willy' is a spectacular melange of Shakespeare and marionettes

Ronnie Burkett questions the idea of a one-man show with puppetry and burlesque

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Photo Dahlia Katz

What might seem like a one-man show really isn't, at least according to Ronnie Burkett, the masterclass marionette machine.

Little Willy, created and performed by Ronnie Burkett, produced by his Theatre of Marionettes and presented by Canadian Stage, is more than a captivating, semi-improvised puppet show — it is an artistry that simply must be experienced. Burkett in his element performs his own version of Shakespeare's renowned *Romeo and Juliet*. Don't fret if you are exhausted with copy-and-paste renditions of the original tragedy because this is anything but that. We're taken on a wild ride of humor, raunch and wit alongside the marionettes of the Daisy Theatre, Burkett's meta-theatrical cabaret troupe. (Given the bawdy aspects of the work, it should be noted that this isn't what you might expect as a child-oriented puppet show; [the website](#) even specifies that children under 16 will not be admitted.)

It only takes about 40 seconds to forget Burkett is behind each of these marionettes — they truly are their own beings with their own stories. Burkett's extensive arsenal of accents and voicework as well as his intricacy with gesture are an unmatched treat. Entering the theatre, you notice a miniature stage upon the stage, with the marionettes lined upon the sides of the little box. Burkett stands within the box, operating the marionettes with a nuanced spark reminiscent of *The Sound of Music's The Lonely Goatherd*. Priming the performance is the catchy Daisy Theatre theme song (sung by Laura Hubert), which I find myself humming long after the performance; big shoutout to composer John Alcorn for all of the vibrant music. The costumes (credited to Burkett and Kim Crossley) all do a fantastic job of bringing each marionette alive, with each piece of fabric full of backstory and glam. Even the stage manager (Crystal Salverda) becomes part of the action, interacting with the puppets from up in the booth via her god-mic, and executing hilarious cues that always had me by the collar.

One of *Little Willy's* most defining qualities is its inherent audience inclusion. If the deadly fear of being chosen to participate in the performance plagues

you, then as much as I want everyone to witness Burkett's elan, this performance might not be best suited to you — virtually no choice is given to the elected stage hands from the audience, who are forced to play along lest be seen as a prudish fuddy-duddy. Nevertheless, the levels of enrichment added to the performance thereafter are unparalleled. Audience members are chosen to assist in awakening the tune of the marionetted orchestra and some to aid his puppeteering for a remarkably phallic dance sequence. Another spectator is summoned to play the already-dead Romeo in the finale, lending a degree of lively stiffness to the role. The line between human and marionette blurs showing the height of Burkett's skill in manipulating these characters. There truly are many gems we as the audience get to hold close to us during and after the show. Some of my favourites include the wannabe actor Debbie the Witch, whom the crowd gets to collectively boo off stage (go team spirit!), the Albertan widow Edna Rural's heartfelt monologue about her lifetime of marriage (offering soulful wisdom "life is gonna come tap you on the shoulder, don't be afraid") and the aching sincerity of the youthful fairy Schnitzel (who thoroughly thawed this critic's heart).

So, indeed, with the multitude of distinctive puppets and all the audience participation perhaps *Little Willy* really might not be a one-man show after all. Burkett may be this world's designer but what if, as Schnitzel mentions toward the end, that theatre is great because of how we receive its spectacle, becoming part of its creation? Theatre is great because we support one another. It is safe to say that art falls into place when not forced by a solitary genius pulling all the strings, but rather improvised and collaborated. That creation is in the smallest yet most profound of acts.

Perhaps the world really is a stage, and all the people merely players.