Sesaya Arts
MAGAZINE

Review: Puppet-powered “Little Willy” Is a bawdy, boisterous love letter to the theatre

By Scott Sneddon March 4, 2026

Ronnie Burkett is Canada’s singular marionette auteur. He designs and builds the puppets, directs the show, sings, and gives every character its own gait, a presence, and a voice. He threads, tunes, and animates entire worlds with such godlike omnipotence that it would be unbearable if it weren’t so joyous. In *Little Willy*, now showing at Canadian Stage, that omnipotence is the point and the pleasure: the delight of seeing one artist at the absolute top of his game creating and wrangling theatrical chaos with ten fingers, a wicked grin, and a restless, puckish curiosity.

"Little Willy," created, designed and performed by Ronnie Burkett. (photo by Dahlia Katz)

Little Willy bills itself as a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, but that premise is a feint. What Burkett actually offers is an absurdist backstage comedy about the strangest theatre company imaginable, suddenly tasked with "pulling together" a version of Shakespeare's tragedy. It's a gleeful, turned-up-to-11 dissection of how the theatrical sausage gets made (and speaking of sausages, watch out for the ones in the chorus doing their … things). The result is a bawdy, boisterous love letter to theatre – *all* theatre, from classic drama like Shakespeare to vaudeville striptease, Vegas razzle dazzle, solo shows, professional repertory and community theatre, with the former's swagger and the latter's earnest heart squarely in the crosshairs. With the lubrication of satire (glancing blows land on countless theatrical targets, including Stratford and Shaw), Burkett stitches it all together in a riot of invention.

He roots *Little Willy* in his Daisy Theatre: its stars are the recurring marionette misfits who powered *Little Dickens* before reincarnating here. As he explains before the show, there's no fixed script – just a core plot, a concept, and some songs that must land at appointed moments (John Alcorn's music and often-wistful lyrics anchor the romp). The rest of the show he calibrates in real time to the moment, his mood, and the murmuring crowd. If the audience seems sluggish, he warns that he'll get us out in one short hour, "in time to watch *The Pitt*." If we're into it, we could be here all night. The evening I saw the show, it

landed deliciously in the middle: close to two hours of fizzy improvisation with a deck of marked cards he skilfully dealt.

Centre stage is the miniaturized Daisy Theatre stage. Above is the visible virtuosity of Burkett's hands and voice. Below is the impossibly lifelike wood: characters like Dolly Wiggler, the burlesque dynamo who opens with a remarkable striptease; faded, boozy diva Esme Massengill; Schnitzel, the plucky gender-fluid naïf; and Mrs. Edna Rural, the sly, prairie-plain Albertan obsessing about "bunwiches". Shakespeare himself wanders in to help cast the show and explain his work, as does Jesus himself—because why not, in a play about theatre's many cults and miracles?

In the end, we spend most of our time backstage: where octogenarians insist they can play a fourteen-year-old Juliet, where stage egos clash, and where the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* is mostly summarized, rather than enacted. The comedy is in the vying, the vanity, the desperate striving for competence – and of course, Burkett's lightning-fast topicality. And none of it is ultimately destructive: beneath the surface is appreciation for aspiration itself, and the wistful and poignant underground currents that theatre taps into.

"Little Willy," created, designed and performed by Ronnie Burkett. (photo by Dahlia Katz)

Oh, and Burkett knows how to pull human as well as puppet strings: audience participation, coerced masterfully, is hilariously risqué. With jovial authority, he recruits shirtless puppeteers, a non-speaking actor and orchestra support; and turns the house into a gleeful profane chorus. Crystal Salverda is Burkett's lifeline, providing audible and visible stage management that heightens the live-wire meta-theatre, while dramaturge Tanja Jacobs keeps the chaos legible.

Little Willy is sprawling, surreal, swift, and very funny. And what remains after all of the laughter is not a lampoon of *Romeo and Juliet*, but a provocation about why we gather: the shared electricity of complicity and consent, and the radical tenderness of play. *Little Willy* is puppet theatre about human theatre. It says vulgarity is a conduit for grace, comedy is a vehicle for insight, the Bard is only six degrees of separation from a Vegas routine—and that the oldest, bawdiest, most enduring love story might just be the one between performers and their audience.

Little Willy runs at Berkeley Street Theatre through April 5, 2026 (ages 16+ only). Tickets are available at canadianstage.com.