

LITTLE WILLY IS A BIG HIT

BY [COLIN THOMAS](#) | JAN 14, 2023 |



*Who wouldn't love Schnitzel
(pictured here with their creator, Ronnie Burkett)?*

I had almost forgotten what helpless laughter feels like. It's good for the soul. In *Little Willy*, marionette master Ronnie Burkett is working a new premise, using many of the familiar faces from his "repertory company" of puppets and even doing one of his most ... shall we say "time honoured" bits of schtick.

At first, I wasn't sure how well it was going to work. The premise of *Little Willy* is that the Daisy Theatre, a traveling group of marionettes, has been booked into a venue that has mistakenly advertised them as a Shakespearean troupe, so they decide to improvise *Romeo and Juliet*.

The show starts off with Dolly Wiggler doing her familiar striptease. In terms of technique, it's undeniably virtuosic, but I've seen it a bunch of times. And then Burkett trots out a series of beautifully crafted marionette characters — who don't do much. The major general. The major general in drag. A librarian who's an unfortunately stereotypical old maid.

The best jokes in this section are metatheatrical. Burkett's only got two hands so, when he's dealing with three puppet characters, one of them has to just hang there. This leads to some great gags about diva Esmee Masengill's extraordinary technique, the discipline of her stillness.

And then *Little Willy* suddenly gains depth. Schnitzel arrives. Schnitzel is a little fairy with twisty ears and a flower growing out of their bald head. Schnitzel makes the pitch that they should be allowed to perform the balcony scene all by themselves: they are, after all, gender fluid. The pitch itself is moving and, when Schnitzel launched into “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” Schnitzel/Burkett delivered the speech with such innocence and feeling it was like I’d never heard it before. By the time Schnitzel got to “Romeo, doff thy name,/And for that name, which is no part of thee,/Take all myself”, I was in tears.

And then there’s Edna Rural, the housewife “in a Sears housedress” from Turnip Corners, Saskatchewan. Another familiar character if you’ve seen Burkett’s *Daisy Theatre* before — and you needn’t have to enjoy *Little Willy* — Edna is, like Schnitzel, a genius creation.

In *Little Willy*, she’s been hired to play the Nurse and, as she understands it, her job is to tell Juliet how to embrace her womanhood, so Edna plunks herself down in an overstuffed armchair and tells us about her relationship with her now-dead husband. The storytelling is masterful in its combination of wit, longing, and tenderness. Other than that, I won’t tell you a jot because you deserve to discover it for yourself. Throughout, you can always marvel at Burkett’s technique, the humanizing trademark gestures he brings to his characters: Edna’s constantly turning head, Esmé’s shrugging shoulders, and the shimmying hips of another fabulously named diva, Rosemary Focaccia.

And then came the most predictable passage of the evening — and the most hilarious. If you haven’t seen it before, I won’t ruin the surprise by giving too many details, but I will say it involves a third diva, an audience volunteer, and the juxtaposition of puppet and human scale.

This bit hasn’t always worked for me but, this time around, Burkett has toned down the salaciousness. Sure, he’s naughty, but he’s also generous. There’s a fundamental innocence in that generosity and, the night I was there, that innocence was more than matched by a wonderful volunteer named Locke.

This is the part of the show where I lost control, howling helplessly, sitting beside a good friend who was also off the rails, embedded in an audience of hysterics. It doesn’t get much better than that.