

THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

REVIEW

Little Willy is a laugh-out-loud parody of Romeo and Juliet – with very little Shakespeare



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAHLIA KATZ

Little Willy is inspired by Romeo and Juliet, but often strays from the Shakespearean play.

“There are no one-man shows,” says Ronnie Burkett near the end of Little Willy, his latest (and perhaps his raunchiest) puppet show, ostensibly inspired by Romeo and Juliet but with far more interest in what it means to spend time in a Canadian theatre than in the particulars of William Shakespeare.

It’s one of several moments of surprising humility in a show about divas – including Burkett himself. For the better part of two hours, Burkett’s at his naughtiest, goading

male audience members into taking their shirts off and cracking sharp jokes at the expense of the Stratford and Shaw festivals. It's hard to tell, sometimes, where he starts and where his sequin-spangled marionettes begin – for much of *Little Willy*, it's as if they're one and the same, creatures connected by a shared heart and propensity for sass.

Indeed, Burkett, an officer of the Order of Canada, carries himself (and his puppets) with a gravitas befitting of his artistic legacy: He's not worried about offending his audience. As ever, he's only worried about making us laugh.



Burkett, an officer of the Order of Canada, isn't worried about offending his guests and is only worried about making them laugh.

But as *Little Willy* inches to its finale, something shifts. Burkett becomes softer, gentler, as his jabs at the Canadian theatre ecosystem calcify into memory. When he thanks Crystal Salverda, his long-time stage manager and technical director (and, at key points in *Little Willy*, his improv partner), it's clear his reverence for the collaborative act of theatre-making is genuine: An artist with a lifetime of solo shows in his personal canon, he highlights the reality that none of them have ever truly been solo.

At once, *Little Willy* – much like *Wonderful Joe*, whose ending I can't so much as think about without starting to cry – becomes a love letter to a life well-lived. In Burkett's case, that life's been spent in the theatre, and while he has plenty of snark to spill about the peculiarities of his chosen industry, there's a lot of love there, too. Getting to witness it feels like being let in on a secret, as if *Little Willy* is the entertainment at some private, eccentric dinner party, and not a centrepiece of Canadian Stage's 2025-26 season.



PHOTO BY DAHLIA KATZ

The puppets are instantly recognizable as members of Burkett's Daisy Theatre.

As far as structure, Little Willy's light on plot: If you're hoping for a faithful adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, this ain't it. Burkett pulls from his stock of puppets to improvise his way through the Bard's tragedy, but regularly gets sidetracked into antics – if he misses a cue, expect more than a few self-deprecating jokes, and if you're sitting in the front row of the Berkeley Street Theatre, good luck. (That said, sitting near the back of the theatre won't save you: Burkett will flirt with anyone, and pull anyone onstage, regardless of how expensive their ticket was.)

Even so, every once in a while Burkett will remember the show he's promised to perform, the Shakespeare-tinged confection advertised on Canadian Stage's website and posters. Almost as if fulfilling some clause in his contract, he regularly grinds Little Willy to a halt and summarizes huge chunks of Romeo and Juliet – technically, yes, Little Willy is an adaptation of that age-old drama, but only if you squint.

And then, as God intended, Burkett gets back to making cracks about genitalia, as sausage-shaped puppets dance across the stage.

Of course, the puppets are outstanding, gorgeous in craft and instantly recognizable as members of Burkett's Daisy Theatre. (As usual, most of the women bear an uncanny resemblance to Tilda Swinton, draped in luxurious costumes and painted with aloof smirks across their faces.)



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But the joy in *Little Willy* – which, if I haven't made clear, you simply must see, on the condition you're not squeamish about swearing and penis jokes – is Burkett. It's the quips you'll hear at your performance, which will surely differ from the ones I heard at mine. It's the reintroduction of Schnitzel, a tiny angel puppet who dreams of one day earning his wings, dressed in the pastel hues of the transgender flag. It's the bellyaches you'll feel while laughing during the show, the warm glow of a fabulous night out you'll carry home. (Burkett knows you'd rather be on your couch watching *The Pitt*, and promises near the top of the show to make the effort of leaving the house worth your while. He succeeds at that, and then some.)

Yes, there's very little Shakespeare in *Little Willy*. But there's plenty of Burkett, in all his talent, irreverence, spikiness and love – and I'd argue that's a treat of similar artistic brilliance.