

The Montreal Rampage

Comedy Larger than Life : Review of Little Willy

[Rachel Levine](#)



Daisy Theatre Cast Membes. Photo by Dahlia Katz.

Sit in the front row and if you can't sit in the front row, sit in the second. To appreciate the labour of love that is The Daisy Theatre, you need to see the marionettes sweat.

Okay, marionettes don't perspire, but everything about them from their individual grimaces to the snaps on their pyjamas makes the 15 (plus or minus a few) characters in *Little Willy* feel like living, breathing actors complete with union cards. These loving and attentive details could only be the work of a master artisan. And while you won't see the marionettes sweat, you definitely will see the marionette's animating force, Ronnie Burkett, sweat as he keeps multiple [puppets](#) "alive" on stage with nothing more than his own two hands, good voice work, and clever scripting.

Little Willy, all dick jokes intended, outlines the story of Romeo and Juliette in broad strokes through the personalities of the Daisy Theatre, Burkett's ensemble cast of marionettes. Some scenes in the show come directly from Shakespeare's play, while most are re-imaginings, such as when two stage divas fight for the role of Juliet in lieu of Shakespeare's opening street brawl between the Capulets and Montagues. The whole production is structured as a cabaret complete with an opening strip tease, a feel-good monologue ending, and a line-up of songs, puns, sexy banter, possibly tears for the more melodramatically minded, and raunchy jokes in-between. Overall, the production has a delightfully vaudevillian, campy feel, especially with its stage in a stage in a stage set.

There is much to commend here. Burkett smartly weaves words, whether it's a rimshot joke (Esmé Massengill thinks she's starring in the naval masterpiece "All Hands on Dick" complete with seamen), a diva fight given in what might be iambic pentameter (or not), or

just clever one-off improvised lines and asides about Montreal and Canada. The energy is high and Burkett never slows down, whether the marionettes are bemoaning the tribulations of a life on stage or delivering a moving reflection on marriage. At the same time, it's a bit of extraordinary magic how Burkett recedes for much of the show even though he is the animating spirit and voice of every marionette.

The marionettes are magnificent works of art, as I alluded to already. Their bodies, faces, heads, hands, clothes, gestures, voices are an inspired variety. They each have tremendous presence that far exceeds their diminutive size and their wardrobe would make any costume master jealous. Burkett informs the audience at the start of the show that certain characters are regulars in his stable, and they have appeared in other productions. However, for a self-identified virgin to The Daisy Theatre ("I didn't think Montreal would have so many virgins"), they were all new to me.

While each character is a lovable individual, they are in many ways archetypes: nerdy librarian, demanding aged diva, effete thespian, wise child (trans-fairy child, that is), prairie farm-wife, bohemian singer-songwriter. Yes, they all had quirks and said surprising things. Some even showed moments of emotional depth and clarity. But, I found myself waiting for one character whose appearance and words were at cross purposes. Perhaps I wanted a complexity that just doesn't work in this type of show, but it struck me as a missed opportunity to push the edginess even further.

One area where Burkett has no problem being edgy is involving the audience. This is where his talent shines brightest. It begins when he first introduces the show and then has the audience shout out phrases en masse à la Rocky Horror Picture Show. By the end, though, he brings volunteers to stage both as puppeteers and actors. Watching the marionettes and volunteers co-create theatre together is brave and brilliant.

Little Willy is a fun romp and an entertaining re-telling of Romeo and Juliet. That Burkett does all this alone on stage through marionettes with his signature campy humour long ago earned him a spot as a treasure of Canadian theatre. His show is an experience. If you've never had a chance to see him and his marionettes perform, now's your chance.