



VOICE CHOICE. Ronnie Burkett's LITTLE WILLY is a much-needed cure for the winter blahs. Absurdly absurd. Wickedly raunchy, with adult-humour zingers flying with abandon and aplomb.

Absolutely Wonderful!

by [Joe Szekeres](#)

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Credit: Dahlia Katz. Pictured: Schnitzel and William Shakespeare

The absurdly raunchy humour, musings, and stylings of marionette artist Ronnie Burkett have gloriously returned to Canadian Stage's Berkeley Street Theatre for a near five-week run of the marvellous *Little Willy*.

I had the chance to see Burkett's *Little Dickens* twice: once in Toronto and once in Montreal during the Christmas season a few years ago. I wasn't a show virgin coming in to see Willy, as many audience members around me were. (You'll understand that reference when you see the show.)

Canadian Stage describes this highly enjoyable but adult opening night as a sassy take on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. While Willy is sassy and saucy (especially in the dick-pick jokes of the show's title), our beloved Ronnie makes the show something so much more. At the top of *Little Willy*, Ronnie comes out to speak to the audience. He's personable, witty, and gregarious. There's also a hint that the show will include audience participation. Spoiler alert: there is, and Burkett doesn't pick from people sitting in the front row. Three men pulled from the audience are asked to remove something they are wearing. I'm not going to spoil that hilarious bit, dear reader; I'm sure you know what Ronnie asks of these guys.

Burlesque star Dolly Wiggler opens the evening's shenanigans with a satirical peek-a-boo, bump-and-grind striptease in the beloved manner of famed artist Gypsy Rose Lee. A cavalcade of wonderful marionette re-creations of leading ladies and characters (Shakespeare himself and Jesus Christ are only two) unfolds throughout the evening as the attempt to perform *Romeo & Juliet* takes a backseat. The catfight between two of the fading theatre stars (Esme Masingill and Jolie Jolie) over who will play the 16-year-old ingenue is a riot, especially since the conversation centres on community theatre in the Durham Region, just east of the Greater Toronto Area, where I live.

Two beloved *Dickens* characters also appear in *Willy*: Masingill and Schnitzel. The former is a boozy, chain-smoking, foul-mouthed, bitter combination of Carol Burnett's and Patti LuPone's Norma Desmond. Schnitzel is a fairy who speaks with a childlike, gentle whisper, whose closing remarks at the end of the show made me appreciate and value just what and who I have in my life.

Burkett worked his 'thing' off in *Dickens*. He's working his 'thing' off in *Willy*. He's the curtain puller. He's the set changer. He's the emcee. He devises unique voices for the marionettes while dutifully maintaining the show's at times frenetic pacing with amazing stamina. Sometimes he calls out to Stage Manager Crystal Salverda to remind him where he is in the story, and that's highly understandable given the ad-lib improvisation throughout the show.

But we need artists like our beloved Ronnie Burkett right now more than ever.

He loves what he's doing. He loves performing and improvising.

Given the state of our world today, he reminds us that it is alright to smile, think, reflect and ponder. Burkett's cavalcade of archetypal marionettes, from nerdy librarian to drunken diva, helps us enjoy both a good belly laugh and a moment to appreciate what we do have in our lives.

I'll take that any day.