LE DEVOIR

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Wonderful Joe': a glorious parade down the avenue of forgotten stories

Puppeteer Ronnie Burkett (winner of, amongst other awards, the Siminovitch Prize and the Governor General's Award for the Performing Arts) tackles a highly topical issue in his latest production: the gentrification of neighbourhoods whose history is being swallowed up by the concrete of new luxury housing developments.

Evicted from the flat he has lived in for decades, Joe sets off with his dog on a farewell tour of the neighbourhood where he had previously made his home, treating himself to one last glimpse of the human landscape that gave it its soul.

For what makes Joe wonderful is that he has managed to nurture his own sense of wonder. Despite a life journey not without cruel twists and turns, he has never ceased to take a sincere interest in others, to lend a listening ear an open his heart. Accompanying him on this final lap, the audience will meet members of the LGBTQ community contributing, in their own very personal way, to the sex industry; a paranoid old lady orchestrating a backstreet theatre troupe; the members of the 'Greatly Forgotten 'club — including Father Christmas, Jesus and Mother Nature who has seen better days, now repurposed as a worn-out cabaret singer — right up to a young runaway from a more affluent part of the city, to whom the singular hero will pass on the spark of his faith. His faith in the magic and magnificence of human existence, whatever form it may take.

Whilst the characteristic humour of the Toronto-based Alberta artist — brimming with irony, punctuated by puns, and spiced with a touch of bawdiness — naturally permeates his *Wonderful Joe*, this production proves less zany than some of his earlier works, which Montreal audiences have been fortunate enough to experience. Take *Little Willy* or *Little Dickens*, for example. In fact, the downward curve of the humour as the show progresses proves to be inversely proportional to the upward trajectory of the tragedy, though one never quite eclipses the other.

The creator, perched on a two-tiered scaffold replicating the graffiti-covered walls of the area slated for demolition, seems to have captured the spirit of the times — with all that it entails: change, loss, short-term thinking and the marginalised — and, in breathing it out, he has transformed it into a work of art whose beauty is as poignant as it is profound. And whilst we were already well aware of the virtuosity of his technique, here we are enthralled to see just how the tilt of a face, a hand resting on a bench, or a shrug of the shoulders—imparted to these wire-framed creatures with such finely sculpted features—infuse them with a transcendent humanity.

Some might even go so far as to argue that *Wonderful Joe* allows viewers to grasp more keenly than ever the full extent of Ronnie Bu's brilliance and sensitivity