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ARTS & CULTURE

BY CATHERINE GUDEN
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Local Puppet Troupe Teaches People of All Ages 'the Power of Playfulness'



Z Puppets Rosenschnoz brings creativity and laughter to kids and families.

Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith

Photo by:

Tate Carlson

Innovation, quirkiness, art and science come together with Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, a troupe that performs puppet shows that include humor, live music and educational messages. For the last 20 years, partners Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith have combined their talents to lead the troupe, which also offers workshops. Z Puppets Rosenschnoz frequently wins awards for their art and the joy they bring to families.

“Our favorite part of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz is hearing and seeing people delight in the power of playfulness and creativity,” Aronson says.

In the late 1990s, Aronson, a playwright, and Griffith, a street performer, met and decided to try a wacky idea. They took a small package of ping-pong balls and a black light, which when combined became *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus*. They used fluorescent paint, small top hats and clown noses to transform these ordinary objects into a circus complete with live music and zany sound effects.

From there, the troupe began to grow, performing in shows such as *Cellula*, an a cappella performance about cell division, and *Monkey Mind Pirates*, a swashbuckling adventure story with rock music.

“Those moments of ‘ahas,’ when people light up with the pure joy of discovery and laughter are what fuel us,” says Aronson.

Monkey Mind Pirates is the tale of Captain Fitz and his search for an island of calm. During his travels, the captain is captured by the monkey mind pirates and thrust into situations filled with chaos. During a storm, he falls into the sea where he meets Wise Sea Monkey, who is knowledgeable about breathing, relaxing and maintaining calm. The cast is full of silly life-size characters such as the queen, Lady Bronte—a prim and proper monkey constantly plagued by worry—as well as Ansel, a ball of energy with wild fur and bulging blue eyes.

Z Puppets also offers workshops with themes like arts and mindfulness, STEM of puppetry and arts for all abilities.

“We have led workshops for people of all ages and abilities in public schools, community centers, social service organizations, parks, nonprofit organizations and corporations,” says Aronson.

Their arts and mindfulness class offers children a way to learn how to relax themselves in the midst of the stress of everyday life. Classes may incorporate yoga with puppets, design clay islands or build giant 10-foot tall puppets to represent the struggles that can interrupt a state of calm. Z Puppets travels to several schools to offer these programs.

“We are about to start our ninth year of arts and mindfulness residencies at Moreland Arts & Health Sciences Magnet School in West St. Paul and our third year at Lincoln School for the Arts in Anoka,” says Aronson.

Coming up during the month of November is the premiere of *The Weaver*, a new work created by Griffith. Based on his Cherokee background and his membership in the Cherokee nation, the piece intertwines Griffith’s own family stories with Cherokee legends.

Z Puppets is hosting a series of listening parties in collaboration with Bakken Trio for participants to learn about the composer Pavel Haas and his work *From the Monkey Mountains*. The audience listens to live music and Z Puppets facilitates the audience drawing what they hear. “The audience will be responding to the music through Z Puppets’ guided drawing activity and in the spring, Z Puppets and Bakken Trio will perform a full production of *From the Monkey Mountains*, inspired by the images in participants’ drawings,” say Aronson.

Z Puppets Rosenschnoz

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