

# Minnesota Monthly

## Z Puppets Celebrates 20 Years

While you might not know them by name, Z Puppets has been changing people through the power of play

By [Lianna Matt McLernon](#)

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A photo of Chris Griffith and Shari Aronson taken even before Z Puppets began 20 years ago.

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The beginning of [Z Puppets Rosenchoz's](#) *Monkey Mind Pirates* was controlled chaos. Every time a monkey puppet poked its head up above the set screen, the hundred or so kindergarteners filling the gymnasium at Moreland Arts & Health Sciences Magnet School this past October shrieked with glee. Their immediate response would sometimes drown out David DeGennaro as he played the keyboard as Cap'n Fitz, singing, "My bones—they quiver! My timbers shiver! I've got monkeys on my mind!" It's okay, though; the show was designed to handle (and encourage) children's rambunctious energies.

Z Puppets is celebrating 20 years of bringing the power of play to the Twin Cities, but even those who know them best probably know them more by the names of their most performed shows, including *Monkey Mind Pirates*, *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus*, and *Cellula*. Over the years, the company, founded and run by creative directors Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith, has connected with thousands of people through its performances at community festivals, residencies, play-based workshops and labs, and more.

They might not receive the marquee glory like other theaters, but they fill an essential part of the arts and culture scene as the missing laughter at a community event, a reminder for amusement, and a gentle guiding force to all. Plus, as Aronson says, for that small time in the echoey walls of an elementary school gym, they're rock stars.

"We take it as a big responsibility and honor that we're often people's first experience with live performance," Aronson says. "I think that there can be quality work designed for only young people, but too often, there's work that underestimates young people."



A 2008 performance of *Monkey Mind Pirates* in Duluth with David DeGennaro as captain and Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith playing the monkeys.

Z Puppets began when Aronson, a journalist turned playwright, and Griffith, a juggler street performer and physical comedian, met at the puppetry gateway for most Twin Cities residents: In the Heart of the Beast Theatre. Aronson's initial introduction to In the Heart of the Beast was meeting then artistic director Sandy Spieler in a dumpster of a florist (naturally scavenging flowers for an upcoming production), and when Aronson moved back from grad school in Arizona, she offered her talents. Griffith, working as both the outreach and education director, was whom she connected with.

Aronson and Griffith's first show under the Z Puppets banner was titled, *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus*. Born from the single inspirational moment of seeing a ping pong glow in the blacklight, the show was exactly what it sounds like: the world's only ping pong ball circus with tight-rope walkers, clowns, daredevils, and more.

Depending on the show, puppets are found more or less along the physical spectrum. There are the ping pong performers with minimal costumes and props for the *Gnip Gnop Circus* that leave more to the imagination, and there are the three-foot dangling monkeys of *Monkey Mind Pirates* with their own faces and full-fledged outfits. Griffith says the sweet spot for him is when the audience and the puppeteer have to imagine just enough for it to have a spark but not too much for it to take effort. Their new show, *Through the Narrows* tries to hit that dead center.

The premise of the show is to find the strength to tell your truth as a way to get through "life's narrow passages." Part performance and part audience participation, the 75-minute event first brings you the story of an ancient Jewish woman who was with Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea and then tells the story of a six-year-old Cherokee time traveler who saw the Trail of Tears. Each has its own confusion and pain to be conquered, as do the viewers, which is why after the performance, audience members make and take their own puppet figure from pipe cleaners and wooden beads.

"When we approach serious topics with playfulness, in a way it disarms the seriousness of it, or we're able to get a depth you can't get to otherwise," Griffith says.

You see this all of the time with kids—perhaps because they're less self-conscious or cynical about it. Katie Wiley, the visual arts specialist and magnet coordinator of Moreland, says that she sees the students engage with ideas in a different way than they would if they were learning from a human to human interaction. The students are just so open to the "magic" of puppetry, Wiley says. When you combine that with Z Puppets' affinity for music, "after just one session with Z Puppets, I heard kindergarteners humming the music about how to find calm."



Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith during their partnership with the city of Maplewood in 2015. As part of their placemaking project, they created this idea of Kid City and sparked laughter from all ages.

Just because you grow up doesn't mean puppetry loses that special, indescribable quality. Griffith says adults—especially adults—will say things to puppets they won't say to another person, so he's hoping "Through the Narrows" can get people to open up and start healing.

*Through the Narrows* was developed in the past two years, but unlike other companies, Z Puppets continues to perform all of its original shows. They get added to a repertoire, not a past portfolio. Even now, 20 years after they began, they still perform *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus*.

"It's really interesting to know the beats and show so intimately that you don't have to worry about them," Griffith says. "You know it's going to work, so then you can focus on the performance of it and not the logistics. It becomes much more nuanced."

Aronson is more blunt about her feelings: Before she started Z Puppets, she had heard about a couple performing the same show for 10 years and she thought it sounded horrifying. Yet here she is now, and she still loves what she's doing. She hadn't anticipated knowing the characters so well they felt alive, and she hadn't predicted how new audiences would keep it fresh.

For more than seven years, Z Puppets has been performing *Monkey Mind Pirates* at Moreland Magnet School with a corresponding classroom curriculum. Even before that, though, they had been bringing it to community festivals and places around the state. (Longer partnerships aren't out of the ordinary with this group—they once worked with Maplewood for a creative placemaking project.) Going from place to place with the show, it is not very common to see the same people at each performance, but there was one fan who made sure to see it every time for a while.

As Griffith recalls, the boy was from the Duluth area and dealt with anxiety, making it difficult to fall asleep at night. After watching "Monkey Mind Pirates," he really empathized with the Lady Brontë character—the monkey who was overwhelmed with worry. However, after he saw the show, he began listening to the music every night before he went to bed and would talk to Lady Brontë to calm himself down. While he certainly had the music memorized and knew the plot, when he and his family could travel to see a show, they did—it meant that much to them.

"Formally our mission is to bring people into the transformative power of playfulness and feats of imagination, and then what shape or form that takes changes, even just from show to show," Aronson says.

For shows like *Monkey Mind Pirates*, the power of playfulness acts as a way to teach methods of calming yourself. For *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus* or *Cellula*, it's about taking what is ordinary or relegated to dry facts and making it extraordinary and wonder-filled. And, for *Through the Narrows*, the power of play is being used to think about the trappings and snares you didn't know were there and breaking them. That is the power of play and the magic of puppets, and under Aronson and Griffith, Z Puppets is tackling all of it.

Z Puppets can be surprisingly hard to track down sometimes, so here are some of their upcoming events:

### **Z Puppets' 20th Anniversary All-Ages Dance**

March 8 from 7 to 10 p.m., Walker Church, Minneapolis

When you arrive, make a wearable glow-in-the-dark creation to wear on the blacklight dance floor, or brush up on your moves with dance instructor D.J. Mehdi Kennar of Mehdi Dance Unity. Small bites are provided by the Marc Heu Patisserie Paris pop-up, and other activities will be there as well. Go crazy and creative with what you where—you'll be in good company.

### **The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus**

March 29 from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m., Galaxie Library, Apple Valley

See the circus that started it all. After 20 years, the glow-in-the-dark ping pong balls are still as agile, daring, and active as ever. Recommended for ages 2 and up.

### **From the Monkey Mountains**

Movements 1, 2, 3, and 4 from March 30 to April 18, various times, Stillwater Public Library

Unrelated to the *Monkey Mind Pirates*, Z Puppets is teaming up with The Bakken Trio to go through each of the four movements of classical Czech composer Pavel Haas' 1925 piece. Learn about Haas' life, how to approach classical music, and more. Designed for ages 12 to adult or youth 8 to 11 accompanied by adults.

### **Through the Narrows**

June 1-15, various times, Z Puppets Rosenchoz studio, Minneapolis

After a few trial runs of the newest Z Puppets play, now it's ready for its world premiere. Come to this watch it, make it, and take it event with an open mind and remember, you're never too old to learn from the power of play.

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