



The secret life of puppets

Z Puppets Rosenschnoz incorporates mindfulness into shows for children and adults

By DEBRA FISHER GOLDSTEIN

I've got a secret to share. I didn't know that the Twin Cities is renowned for its puppetry prowess, and is a thriving scene for artists and companies working in puppet theater. This is in large part due to Lake Street's In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre as well as the scores of actors, directors, artists and writers who have trained and performed there — and then spawned creative puppet theaters of their own.

Shari Aronson is one of those talents, who, through the work of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, has combined her puppetry talents with her more than 10 years of experience as a yoga instructor. The repertoire of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz is vast and its kudos are even bigger — ranging from major artist grants (Minnesota State Arts Board, Ivey Award, Jim Henson Foundation) to exuberant testimonials from teachers, librarians, parents and children.

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In addition, Aronson wrote the stage adaptation of *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* that has been a popular holiday staple at the Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company.

Rimom: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation, will present an Artist Salon lifting up Aronson's imaginative work on Feb. 19 at Open Eye Figure Theatre. The salon, titled "The Secret Life of Puppets: Rekindling the Kid in All of Us," will feature lively dialogue with Aronson and renowned storyteller Carla Vogel, as well as a hands-on demonstration of the wonder and magic that are conjured by a puppet in motion.

What a secret-busting surprise to converse with Aronson, co-creator of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz, and to learn there's more to puppetry than my memories of unwieldy marionette dolls.

"We heard from parents that kids were repeating lines they had heard in our shows," Aronson said. "Some of them had become family jokes."

So with co-director, husband and veteran teaching artist Chris Griffith, Aronson set out to create a different kind of puppet theater.

"We thought, why don't we give the kids — and adults — memorable messages that will serve them in helpful ways?" Aronson said. The result was *Monkey Mind Pirates*, the world's only puppet/rock/yoga opera for families in search of calm.

"Everyone has the capacity for calm. It's no great secret. It just gets buried," Aronson continued. "We need to know how to cultivate it, to return there."

So she and Griffith have "mindfully" have set out to add "mindful-

ness" to their shows.

"Through puppetry, song, dance and story, we're asking the question for both children and adults, how do we navigate in this culture of anxiety? How do we engage young children in concepts like stillness and quietness?" Aronson said. "The use of metaphor, like story told through puppetry, really helps get that message across."

Another secret revealed: It's really the puppets that are running the show.

"The best performances are when the puppeteers get out of the way," Aronson said. "We give the audience just enough details to help fill in the

story, and then [the puppets] play their role in the performance. The audience, each member, will connect from their own emotional experience."

What occurs is a magical, unpredictable transformation in the psyche of the audience. The kids pick up on it right away, and soon the adults come to discover that their imagination has been sparked too. Their spirit has been transformed. As is often the case at the end of the show, Aronson hears the adults say, "You made me feel like a kid again."

A kid with a lot less stress, that is. If you're looking to combine the playful with the mindful, puppets might just pave the way to inner peace. And that might be the best kept secret of all.



Courtesy Z Puppets Rosenschnoz

Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith

The Rimom Artist Salon titled "The Secret Life of Puppets: Rekindling the Kid in All of Us" will take

place 1 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 19 at Open Eye Figure Theatre, 506 E. 24th St., Minneapolis. Salon attendees can get a two-for-one ticket deal at any performance of *Monkey Mind Pirates*, which will be staged Feb. 18-26, 2012, at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, 1500 E. Lake St., Minneapolis.

For tickets and information, contact Rimom at 952-381-3449 or: rimom@sabesjcc.org.

