

Do you ever

feel like your brain is swinging from thought to thought, like a monkey swinging through trees? With the fast pace of life and nearly constant barrage of noise and lights that make up our daily existence, “monkey mind” is common. Left to the wilds, “monkey mind” can hijack our brains and veer us towards increased agitation, distraction and anxiety.

Monkey Mind Pirates is Z Puppets’ quest to help children and adults tap into the power of puppets, rock and yoga to navigate the stormy seas of stress and find calm. A year and a half into touring with the world’s only puppet, rock, yoga opera, we are amazed at the impact—on audiences, participants and ourselves.

The inspiration for infusing yoga into our puppetry sprung out of our personal experiences, as performers, arts educators and human beings making our way in this modern world.

For many years, adult audience members have told Chris and me that they repeat lines from our shows as family in-jokes for months—sometimes years — after they see our performances. We were amused by the notion of people running around all corners of the Midwest proclaiming, “Je Suis un Chef Professionale!” in Chris’ clown French from our show *A La Carte* and “Ladies and Gentlemen!” in our signature ping-pong ball gibberish from *The Amazing Gnip Gnop Circus*.

Like any good children of 1970s advertising (with visions of Darren Stevens and subliminally-charged ice cubes), we asked ourselves, “If families are going to repeat lines from our shows, what messages do we want to spread?”

Before even looking beyond the end of our own toes, we knew our answer.

Soon after I first moved to Minneapolis in 1989, in the same year I discovered puppetry (by stumbling across Artistic Director of In the Heart of the Beast Puppet & Mask Theatre, Sandy Spieler at a florist dumpster—



Shari Aronson and Chris Griffith are co-founders and creative directors of Z Puppets Rosenschnoz (formerly Circus Minimus Puppetry) in Minneapolis.

but that’s another story), I took my first yoga class. For the twenty-odd years since, my daily practice of yoga has influenced every aspect of my life—how I breathe, think, eat, move and relate to the world.

A whim to teach a yoga workshop for high school students at the International Thespian Festival turned into a 14-year run there and led to a 10-year stint teaching yoga at the University of Minnesota. Through teaching yoga I realized that everyone has the capacity for calm—but many people need to dig it out from under heaps of distraction, emotion and patterned behavior. Once you become familiar with the experience of calm, you can learn how to cultivate it in your brain, your body and your whole being. In 2010, I went through the certification program of *Yoga for Youth*, eager to find ways to help even younger children connect with calm.

At the same time, after decades of teaching arts residencies with K-12 students in public schools, Chris was seeing an increase in children struggling with complex emotional and behavioral challenges. He began slipping simple mindfulness exercises into the curriculum. “Even just inviting kids to quietly listen to a ringing chime or taking a few deep breaths has such an immediate, powerful effect,” Chris says. “When I thought about how this may be the one moment of calm a child experiences in the day, I realized it was important for me to provide children with these tools to address their anxiety, distraction and stress.”

Luckily, this was also a mission of great interest to our musical collaborator, David DeGennaro. Chris and I met David when he showed up to play in the band at our wedding ten years ago. After dazzling us that night with his high-speed *Hava Nagila*, he’s since composed lyrics and music for five of our productions. Favorites include a bouncy, cancer-prevention ditty, a ukelele sing-a-long about great Minnesota inventions, an entire score for a platypus musical and our Z Puppets Theme Song.

We start by giving David a list of highly specific requests (“must rhyme w/ cancer” or

“need to mention Spam, kitty litter and water-skis” or “would like a platypus lament number”). Then we lock him in a room for 15 minutes. And, quite often, *voilà!* Once he has a draft, we go back and forth, fine-tuning the lyrics. With a background in playing everything from zydeco, pop and funk to show tunes (not to mention a brief, spangle-covered stint in Abba tribute band, *Abbasolutely*), David is a master of catchy tunes and comical compositions.

When we first started working with David, he was creating songs for Chris and me to perform in our shows. Soon, we were creating roles in our shows for him to perform along with us.

From twenty years of teaching music to students of all ages in community settings, he was also seeing the need for giving youth tools for stress relief.

In Fall of 2009, we came up with the idea for a puppet-rock-yoga-opera named *Monkey Mind Pirates*, in one brainstorming session. Over the next few months, we worked together to outline the plot, the characters and the songs. Then, we split into our areas of expertise: Chris designed and built the puppets and set, I developed the script to the next phase and David wrote the music and lyrics. The three of us devised an accompanying residency in which children make shadow and blacklight puppets, learn yoga, write music and lyrics for the song “The Legend of Calm” and perform with us as “sailors” in the show.

The story of *Monkey Mind Pirates* follows the adventures of a Ahab-like sea captain on an eternal search for the Legendary Waters of Calm. As Cap’n Fitz sets sail, he confronts doubt, anxiety, and distraction—all represented by the unruly Monkey Mind Pirates (and one rude 1st Mate Ferret). The Pirates board Cap’n Fitz’s ship and wreak havoc until — at the point of all-out catastrophe— he meets the Wise Sea Monkey. The Sea Monkey teaches him how to turn his *arrghs* into *Oms*, catch his breath and tame the monkeys.

To convey to children and adults that people have been struggling with (and overcoming) “monkey mind” for ages, we named the Monkeys after historical figures who suffered from common mental afflictions. In homage to Ansel Adams, Ansel is the monkey prone to distraction. Sir Winston, is modeled after Winston Churchill’s tendency for depression. With a nod to all the Brontes, Lady Bronte rules the Monkeys with her fierce anxiety.

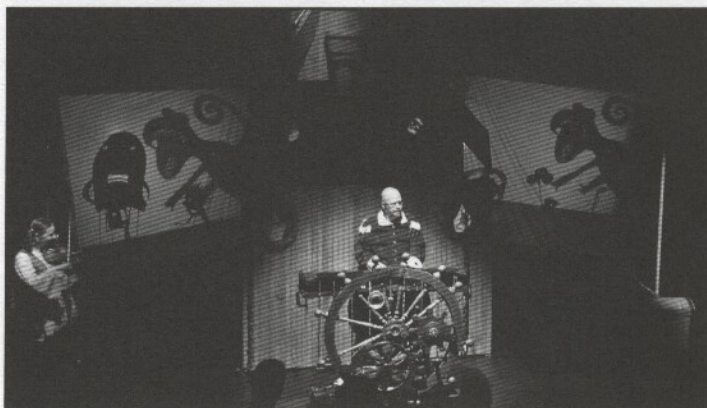
With the support of a regional arts council, community music school and North Minneapolis neighborhood association, we premiered *Monkey Mind Pirates* in July 2010.



The Captain and the tyrannical monkeys: Lady Bronte, Ansel, and Sir Winston

Thanks to funding from the Minnesota State Arts Board, *Monkey Mind Pirates* has been sailing the Plains ever since, presenting performances and residencies in urban, rural and suburban communities throughout the state.

In February 2011, Z Puppets released a CD of the *Monkey Mind Pirates* soundtrack. The CDs include *Monkey Mind Pirates* trading cards, shadow puppet instructions and mindfulness exercises. The CD of the soundtrack has won critical acclaim from national mom-bloggers and magazines such as *Creative Play* and *Creative Child*.



Our most ambitious project yet, *Monkey Mind Pirates* now features a 4-piece band and multi-media projections. We now give our sailors *Monkey Mind Pirates* CDs, workbooks, trading cards, yoga mats and sailor hats to use to cultivate calm long after our ship has left port. In addition to the week-long *Monkey Mind Pirates* residencies, we offer single-session playful mindfulness workshops in yoga studios, schools and community centers.

In the year since Z Puppets launched *Monkey Mind Pirates*, our sailors have included youth with and without ADHD, anxiety disorders, depression and autism. We’ve performed at children’s museums, performing arts centers, and public schools. Recent projects include workshops with junior high boys at the American Indian Family Center in St. Paul and a production with adults at the Down Syndrome Association of MN.

“The Legend of Calm,” the song that the sailors write anew for each location in which we perform, has morphed from a lilting lullaby to a kazoo blues to a heavy-metal epic.



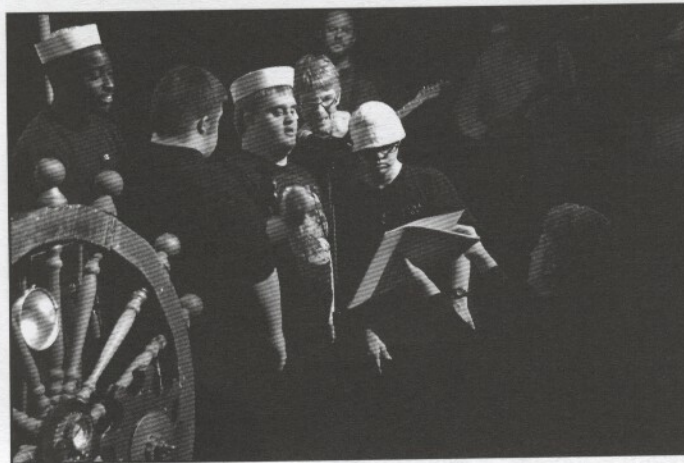
Shari and Chris rehearse with the “sailors” — this time from the Downs Syndrome Association of Minnesota

Newspapers and television stations have featured *Monkey Mind Pirates* in every town we've performed, with a Twin Cities news channel declaring it a "swashbuckling good time."

Most importantly, children and adults from our workshops and audiences have told us that they continue to draw on *Monkey Mind Pirates* to deal with everything from insomnia and road rage to sibling rivalry.

Children describe their feelings in terms of the characters to work out ideas of how to overcome their own "stormy seas." Parents pick up on the language, relieved to have a way to engage their children in talking about difficult feelings. Adults— including our band members and us— confess to calling on the wisdom of the Sea Monkey to find peace in moments of extreme stress.

At a recent performance, one father of a young man with Down Syndrome and Autism approached us with tears in his eyes, thanking us for the profound impact we were having on his son. A six year old boy in one of our workshops told us about getting angry at his little sister and wanting to hit her, but stopping himself and practicing the deep breathing techniques he had learned instead.



In rehearsal, Chris helps the sailors practice their lines

A few years ago, a mentor challenged us to define our vision for Z Puppets in the loftiest terms we could muster. We responded with, "Z Puppets seeks to alleviate human suffering one laugh at a time." We write it down, we repeat it to ourselves, and though it still sounds incredibly lofty, most days we believe it.

With *Monkey Mind Pirates*, Z Puppets is setting out to transform the culture of anxiety into a culture of calm through puppets, rock and yoga. Whether or not we fully achieve this vision, we know that we are giving children tools and techniques to manage chaos for the rest of their lives. Everywhere we go, we will free children, families and ourselves from stress, one monkey at a time.

To order Monkey Mind Pirates CDs, workbooks, find out more info about the show, residencies and workshops, www.zpuppets.org and follow Monkey Mind Pirates and Z Puppets on facebook and Twitter.

Show photos by Paul Eide