

Open Door Designs Opens Its Doors

Open Door Designs, creator of quality puppets and puppet theatres, was launched in 2001 by Joanne Bigham.

A recent move to a storefront property in Toronto's evolving Junction neighbourhood has made the name seem oddly prophetic. The ground level space has developed from a simple studio to an active storefront that alternates between commercial activity and an art installation venue called *Vitrine 1597*. The ever-changing storefront is an anomaly on Dupont between Lansdowne Avenue and Dundas Street West "where we are beginning to see a regeneration of commercial activity at street level".

An accomplished painter, sculptor and printmaker, Joanne entered the world of puppet theatre by chance. She spent six years on the road with children's entertainers Sharon, Lois and Bram as an "elephant keeper", props person and designer and later wrangled *Ella* and *CC Copy Cat* for Skinnamarink TV, wildly popular with the under-six t.v. crowd. Open Door Designs was born when a friend asked Joanne to make a puppet theatre that could be taken to libraries and schools. She designed a simple fabric panel, the width of a doorway that is held in place by a tension rod, making it adjustable to any height. Ingenious in its simplicity and perhaps the only custom-made puppet theatre on the market, the puppeteer stands behind the panel, pulls on a cord and a roman-style blind raises to reveal the stage.

"The notion of using a doorway is not new", says Bigham in her fabric-filled studio. "But most of them are mass-produced." Open Door Designs Puppet Theatres are limited editions, ranging from \$75 for whimsically printed cotton to \$150 for the deluxe models, made from luscious, rich velvets and trimmed with tassles, baubles and beads. Open Door Designs can also make custom theatres for pass-throughs, double doors or even specially requested fabric.

Of course, what's a puppet theatre without puppets? Bigham's line of cute but quirky creatures sparks children's imaginations. Imaginative play may seem like a throwback to a simpler time — before the Internet and video games dominated children's lives — but Bigham has found parents and children are drawn to puppets.

"The theatre is very magical, the way it suddenly appears in a doorway," she says, "and puppets have a way of removing a child's inhibitions. Children don't have any fear when they speak through puppets" With this in mind itinerant educators, music and speech therapists are using the Open Door Theatre for a variety of purposes one of which is teaching English as a second language to adults. Recently Open Door Designs was commissioned to produce a full size, portable theatre for Cardinal Carter Academy for the Arts and it is currently being used by Grade 10 French immersion students.

Open Door Designs' distinctive booth appears at several craft shows throughout the year, including the Cabbagetown Festival and the One of a Kind Show in November. Theatres can also be purchased at Top Banana the fabulous neighbourhood toy store on Mt. Pleasant Road in Toronto. This year from December 8 to 18, Joanne will open the storefront again for a show entitled "Cadeaux: Gifts for Giving", hosting several local artists.

To purchase an Open Door Puppet Theatre and accessories or for more information on any of the activities at 1597 Dupont St. including the "Vitrine 1597" calendar, visit www.opendoordesigns.ca.



Window from "Spring Thing" at 1597 Dupont St, May 2005.



Open Door Design's theatre in action.



1597 Dupont Street with Installation: *Heal Thyself*, by Joanne Bigham, September 2005



Open Door Designs' booth at the 2004 Christmas One of a Kind Show