

Open Door Designs Opens Its Doors

Open Door Designs' Joanne Bigham has been creating quality puppet theatres and puppets since 2001, but a recent move to a storefront property in Toronto's evolving Junction neighbourhood has made her business name seem somewhat prophetic.



Open Door Designs
1597 Dupont Street
Toronto, ON

The doors have opened at the ground level space, which has developed from a simple studio to the Open Door Designs store open Saturdays, noon-6. Open Door Designs also hosts a number of group shows of local artists. The ever-changing window is an anomaly on Dupont between Lansdowne Avenue and Dundas Street West.

An accomplished painter, sculptor and printmaker, Bigham 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 *Skinamarink* TV, wildly popular with the under-six TV 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 size 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 portable puppet theatres are mass-produced." Open Door Designs Puppet Theatres are limited editions, ranging from \$75 for those made from whimsical cotton prints to \$150 for the deluxe models, fashioned 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 from 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 alike 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, educators are using the Open Door Theatre for a variety of purposes, including teaching English as a second language to adults. Recently, Open Door Designs was commissioned to produce a full size, portable theatre (pictured at right) for Cardinal Carter Academy for the Arts and it is currently being used by Grade 10 French immersion students.



You may already have seen Open Door Designs creations on *CITYLINE* on CITY TV with Marilyn Dennis and Lana Ogilvie or more recently when *SHOP TORONTO* of Rogers TV visited the retail store. Open Door Designs' distinctive booth appears at number craft shows throughout the year, including the Cabbagetown Festival and the One of a Kind Show in November. Open Door Designs has been the recipient of two Best Designed Booth awards at both the Cabbagetown and London Home County Arts & Crafts Shows.

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