



NATHAN DENETTE / NATIONAL POST

Open Door Designs' owner Joanne Bigham turns plush into playmates who perform.

## ANGELS, DEMONS BY THE HANDFUL

Joanne Bigham opens up to Zenya Sirant about creating drama in doorways (thanks to her ingenious, easily transportable, pop-up puppet theatres), pulling strings and the need for both good and bad guys at Open Door Designs.

**Q** How did you start working with puppets?

**A** Well, I was working for Sharon, Lois and Bram for six years, building props and stuff, and that's sort of what got me into the theatre world. I was their elephant gofer/backstage person. Then they allowed me to design for them. Out of that came this notion that I could design stuff. I'm an artist by training, went to York for printmaking.

And so, a friend of mine was performing at libraries and schools and needed something portable to take with her. I thought it was like, eureka, but the concept's been around for hundreds of years. I even met a woman from Austria in her eighties and her grandmother had one. She didn't make it, she must have inherited it, and they still have it.

**Q** Tell us a bit about your theatres.

**A** There are two lines of doorway

theatres; the basic line, without trim is \$80 or \$120 with three puppets. The deluxe ones are all \$150. And they come as a kit. The bag is the colour of the main curtain and there's a swatch that's the Roman blind. All come with their own tension rod.

**Q** Do you have ties with any troupes?

**A** There are two troupes associated with us: Green Pea Puppetry and Crackerjack Puppet Troupe.

**Q** Are your puppets machine-washable?

**A** Yes. And they're meant for younger hands. These [points to stuffed dog puppet] are for kids eight and nine years old; they need something a little bigger to work with. But the hand puppets are for three to five, and for adults who can fit in them. We've got several lines, there's an angel, a devil — you need to have good guys and bad guys in every

story — a girl and a boy and then the basic line, which is touchable, chewable. We do peek-a-boo puppets in a little bag. And these are finger puppets designed by Kelly Kirkham. She does these and the marionettes.

**Q** The marionettes are amazing!

**A** Aren't they gorgeous? They're collector's items. Over here, we have rod puppets, which are great for eight and nine-year-olds; they're a kit that they put together — and you'll even see them come in and buy them with their own money. And here's our big thing: We designed this free-standing theatre [or PPT, portable puppet theatre] for the Cardinal Carter Academy for the Arts three years ago and then we've had sales from Mississauga Public Library and Regina Public Library. I'm working on a commission for East Bay Park in Oakland, Calif., which is an association of parks. So it's a custom job and we're building the Golden Gate Bridge on the top. It's going to be beautiful.

■ 1597 Dupont St., 416-531-1290; [opendoor designs.ca](http://opendoor designs.ca)

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