

South Shore Arts
Joanne Jefferson

There are no gruesome ogres or scary monsters among the characters brought to life by Wee Giant Theatre. Artistic Director Monika Wildemann wants her enormous puppets to help people celebrate living in peace and harmony, and to show that it's possible to "create beauty without causing destruction."

Wildemann began her artist path as a student of painting at the Alberta College of Art and Design. At the same time, she worked for a professional theatre company in the props department. Exposure to toxic substances on the job (glues, paints, etc.) ultimately affected her health but the experience sparked her interest in performance.

When a gallery invited her to turn her sculpted masks into puppets, Wildemann's passion for creating walking, dancing giants was born. She now brings her talents to community celebrations and facilitates collaborative workshops, using mostly recycled materials.

The dominant feature of each Wee Giant character is the face. Wildemann uses clay to build a form on a reusable armature, then adds layers of tissue paper or gauze strips in the papier maché method. When those layers dry, the new face can be separated from the clay. The lightweight heads are painted and mounted on necks made of old irrigation pipe.

In performance, each puppet-head is supported by a person who can walk about, hidden inside a fabric "body". Some of the puppets need one operator, others have external arms which are controlled by extra people. Huge hands made of camp-mattress foam allow the puppets to communicate with gesture and touch, while their flowing bodies facilitate smooth and graceful movements.

Wee Giant characters include the Wishing Elf, Aunt Banana-Nose, the Jolly Jester, a summer goddess adorned with greens and flowers, and an ever-growing cast of others. Serene or silly, each wears a deeply emotional expression.

Wildemann is now adding costume elements to a large-eared pirate created at the South Shore Waldorf School's Summer Arts Program last year in Blockhouse. She will be offering workshops through the daily sessions again this summer.

Wee Giant Theatre has also contributed to Mermaid Youtheatre's Theatre Camp, the Deep Roots Festival in Wolfville, and the recent unveiling of the new metro campus of the Nova Scotia Community College.

Indoors or out, Wildemann feels the puppets "create a carnival atmosphere and energize the space" as they parade, dance, and interact with the audience. At many celebrations, such as the Hantsport Canada Day festivities, folks in attendance are given the opportunity to try operating the puppets. For help, Wildemann relies on her network of committed puppeteers, both paid and volunteer.

On Friday, April 13th, Wee Giant Theatre will add a sense of magical play to April Foolish 3, a fundraiser for the Mahone Bay Centre. Tenants and friends of the community-run centre have worked together to organize an "evening of silliness" including a loonie auction, accordian music by Fred Steorig, and appearances by Wee Giant Theatre and two of Nova Scotia's most amusing performers, Mary Colin Chisolm and Christian Murray.

The Centre, converted from its former life as the town's school, now houses studio space for artists (including Wildemann) and offers fitness, dance, meditation, and educational events. Funds raised will help with ongoing renovations to the facility.

April Foolish, at the Mahone Bay Legion, is an evening for adults (the cash bar necessitates an age restriction), but Wildemann is sure her whimsical puppets will help audience members find their childhood sense of wonder and fun. Tickets are \$10 in advance and \$12 at the door. Visit www.aprilfoolish.blogspot.com or call the Centre office at 902-624-0890.

For information about Wee Giant Theatre, contact Monika Wildemann at 902-531-2331, or weegiant@eastlink.ca.