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Puppet Regime
By Brendan Watson

Bar Harbor – Brian Torbeck picked up a puppet and slid his arms through its sleeves.

Eric Torbeck took his brother's cue, jumped up from the couch and put his hands through the puppet's neck to control its mouth.

The puppet started to come alive, talking silly and illustrating each sentence with lively gestures.

Robin Torbeck, Brian's and Eric's sister, stood by smiling, then handed them a prop.

By day, the three siblings work at Bar Harbor's YMCA and are "the town bathroom cleaners."

By night, they are the Frog Mountain Puppeteers.

"We were interested in the arts, and this combined all the arts," said Eric, the oldest of the siblings, explaining the troupe's origin. "It seemed like the right outlet."

The troupe hails from Cumberland, Pa., where it got its start at a summer Renaissance fair. The puppeteers

started to perform for their family and at the local church. The puppets are named, loosely, for the mountain on which the Torbeck family lives in Pennsylvania.

They made an international debut while visiting Haiti, where Brian was serving in the Peace Corps. They did a couple of shows for the children at Haiti's Coalition of Children in Need Association.

After Brian had finished his Peace Corps stint and Robin had graduated from college, the Frog Mountain Puppeteers found their home in Bar Harbor. They had first visited the area while Eric was a student at the College of the Atlantic, where he had taken a class in the art of puppets. They decided that this was the place to settle.

When they aren't working, they like to play in the mountains at Acadia National Park.

The Torbecks live in a small second floor apartment in downtown Bar Harbor, which also serves as their studio. The siblings share the one bedroom, while the puppets have the living room. Some hang on a

rack, others are packed away in boxes. On the living room table is a small sewing machine and scraps of material.

"You should see this place about three weeks before a show," said Eric, plucking a feather from the bottom of his shoe.

"There are pieces of material all over the floor. Every time we leave the house we are tracking pieces of scrap with us."

Brian and Eric do most of the work building the puppets and Robin designs the costumes. She also arranges the soundtrack and works on scheduling and publicity.

The three siblings get along well, but at performance time things can get wild.

"It's a little mayhem," said Brian. "We're usually kicking each other to get the cues."

"We'd be idiots to watch, if people could see us," added Eric.

The sets and the puppets have become increasingly extravagant and large. For "The Grinch," one of the latest shows, they used a three-tiered stage.

Eric's late-model Subaru station wagon

serves as the puppeteers' tour bus, but they are quickly outgrowing it. The Torbecks would like to convert an old bus for their travels so eventually they could work as puppeteers year-round, traveling in the fall and winter.

For now, they prefer to take a break from the troupe in the winter.

"We like to split up after the summer so we can stand each other again," said Brian, who went to Nicaragua last winter.

"He left the country to get away from us," said Robin.

Back from their winter break, the troupe is settling into the cozy apartment and preparing for the summer's performances.

Last year's adaptation of "The Sleepy Hollow's" headless horseman received rave reviews from audiences, and will make a return appearance. The group is also working on a new project: "Tales From the Nest." Eric describes this new show as a "conglomerate" of the siblings' interests.

Though many of the group's shows are based on fairy tales, including the most recent, the

troupe tries to appeal to both children and adults.

"Kids get the physical jokes and then there is more adult humor, such as sarcasm, which goes over kids' heads," said Robin.

They have had a respectably sized adult audience. This has gotten the siblings thinking about tailoring a show strictly to an adult audience. Eric displayed Little Chuckie, a puppet clad in pajama bottoms and work boots, holding a can of Miller Beer, who may be the basis for a future adult show.

"We're waiting for him to sober up," said Robin. "Right now he just stays passed out on the desk."

With each summer Frog Mountain Puppeteers receive more show requests and expand their cast. This summer they are performing every two weeks at The Criterion in Bar Harbor starting July 21, and for Sullivan-based Farmstead Barn July 31 and Aug. 1. They will be making other appearances as well, as far away as Boston.

The Torbecks hope that eventually they will be able to support

themselves as full-time puppeteers.

"Then we won't have to clean the bathrooms anymore," Eric said, with hope in his voice.

It might be some time, though, before they save the money to support their addiction to puppets. Each show they pick a charity to receive a portion of their proceeds. In the past they have donated their proceeds to such organizations as Down East AIDS Network, and a portion of the proceeds from the opening shows this season will go to the Coalition of Children in Need Association.