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The Torbeck Show
By Nan Lincoln

Bar Harbor — If there were a dynasty of puppeteering, its name would have to be Henson. The late Jim Henson, with his googly-eyed sidekick Kermit, revolutionized the art of puppetry, giving his fabulous, felt creations wonderfully mobile, wisecracking mouths, expressive faces and personalities for every occasion. Even though Jim is gone, his large family has carried on the tradition, so Kermit and his colorful gang of Muppet pals live.

OK, so that's a given. The Hensons rule the puppet stage.

But far, far from *Sesame Street*, on an island off the coast of Maine, Mount Desert Island to be exact, another family of Scandinavian heritage, the Torbecks, are stitching together what may be the beginnings of a new dynasty.

Robin, Erik and Brian Torbeck are three siblings living together in three rooms of a rather ramshackle house on a back street in Bart Harbor which they share with the entire population of a small New England village, a horse, a wolf, a dragon, a couple of monsters and about a dozen lobsters.

Fortunately, since space is tight, on the Torbecks themselves are life-size. The rest are ingenious, Muppet-style hand puppets, most of

which the siblings have recently created for a Halloween puppet show based on the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which they are performing at two venues the weekend before Halloween.

Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers, the name the Torbecks have given their fledgling puppet theater company, apparently got its start back in their childhood home in Philadelphia.

"Somewhere in the basement there's an old puppet theater with 'Torbeck Puppet Show' painted on it," says the eldest Torbeck, Erik. "We used to put on shows with our stuffed animals and hand puppets."

But the Torbeck kids put away such childish things as they grew up, going their separate ways for college and various job and life opportunities.

It was college that brought Erik to Mount Desert Island and College of the Atlantic. The family had spent all their summer vacations in southern Maine, and his love of the state was partially responsible for his choice of college.

"My last year, for fun, I took a course in puppetry, and it just clicked with me," he says. "That year, my brother, Brian, and I put on a puppet show for the Renaissance Fair back home."

The two brothers collaborated on several shows after that, but when Brian left for the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic,

the youngest Torbeck, sister Robin came on board, helping Erik put on performances at their local church and schools.

"Now, whenever they hear we are home, we are asked to do a show," says Robin. "And, of course, we can't say no."

But this original adaptation of Washington Irving's creepy tale about a headless horseman is actually the first time since their childhood that all three Torbeck siblings will be together, behind the scenes, so to speak.

Being grown-ups now has its advantages and disadvantages. Certainly, their scripts have become more clever and complex — entertaining on several different levels so both kids and their parents will enjoy their shows. The puppets are more sophisticated than those old stuffed toys they used to parade across their little theater. Their dragon is animated with two hands, one in the head and one in the tail, which makes it marvelously sinuous. They have also learned by watching themselves on videotape how to make their characters "speak" effectively — closing the mouth on m's and p's, for example, and opening them on vowel sounds. And it really is rather amazing how their puppets — the Headless Horseman's beleaguered and somewhat peevish horse, for instance — come instantly to life as soon as a Torbeck takes it in hand.

“We’ve done a lot of school performances,” says Erik. “And I’m always amazed to notice how kids respond to puppets — to the point where they’ll ignore the adult. It’s a great teaching tool.”

Sure it is. But it’s not just kids who are captivated by this art form. Any parent who has ever put aside the housework to watch *Sesame Street* with a preschooler, and who still occasionally gets detoured there while channel surfing, knows that it isn’t just kids that are delighted by what puppets have to say. In fact, I even found myself wanting to put questions directly to the felt-and-fabric creations.

But back to the disadvantages of being adult puppeteers, which mostly have to do with size and money. With no allowance money to buy the fabrics and other puppet-making materials they need, all three Torbecks have day jobs — two at the YMCA, one at Beech Hill Farm.

“As you can see, we live very cheaply,” says Robin, “and we take on as many odd jobs as we can to finance our shows.” In fact, she says, around Bar Harbor it’s become kind of a catch phrase in certain circles: Got an odd job to do? Call the Torbecks.

Then, there is the size thing. Although their stage is now much bigger than the one back in the home basement, by the nature of the work they sometimes have to climb over each other

while working the 20 different characters in this show — at times, six of them at once.

“I sometimes think the real show is behind the stage,” says Robin, “It’s like this big tangle of arms and legs. When you are looking at the puppets from the audience you’d never know the contortions that go into it.”

Judging from a brief sneak preview of the current work in progress, the audience should be doing a few contortions of their own as “The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow” unfolds — of laughter, that is. While there may be a few scary moments for younger children in the audience, the Torbecks have replaced many of the spine-tingling moments of the original with rib-tickling fun. The title character is indeed headless, but rather inept at scaring people, except for timid schoolteachers. Ichabod Crane is not so much as a hapless victim here as an accomplice, as he coaches the depressed phantom in the fine art of fiendishness.

Anyway, it should all be great fun and for a good cause, as well. The Torbecks will be donating a portion of their proceeds to the Coalition of Children in Need Association, an agency started by Haitian native Hugh Bastien, whom Brian met during his Peace Corps stint.

“He is building a school one class at a time for Haitian children,” says Brian. “He started with kindergarten and is now up to sixth grade, and

plans to go right on through university level. It’s a great organization.”

This winter, the Torbecks will once again go their separate ways — Erik plans to head for L.A. to pursue some filmmaking aspects to add to his puppetry (the Torbecks go to Hollywood?); Robin and Brian aren’t sure, but it’s a pretty good bet that if and when Erik decides to put together another puppet show, his siblings will be there to lend a hand — or four.

“The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow” will be performed on Saturday, Oct. 28, at 4 p.m. at the Bar Harbor Municipal Building; and on Sunday, Oct. 29, at 4 p.m. at the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor.

All tickets are \$4.