

Bangor Daily News  
August 20, 2001

Fledgling Frogtown  
Mountain Puppeteers  
earn a growing  
reputation

By Misty Edgecomb

If you happen to be walking in downtown Bar Harbor in the wee hours and hear wild voices screaming from the public restroom: “Let me out” or “What am I doing with my life?” – don’t worry. It’s just the Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers rehearsing their latest show.

The puppeteers, twentysomething siblings Erik, Brian and Robin Torbeck, work together at odd jobs – like keeping town facilities in top shape – to pay the rent on their one-bedroom cabin while the theater company develops.

“Thank God for the town bathrooms,” Robin said, laughing.

The three Torbecks share their cozy little home with dozens of fur and feather beings at all stages of completion. Three fat, baby bird puppets stare, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at

visitors coming up the walk, while faceless felt people hang from the ceiling and a bald Rapunzel gazes flirtatiously from a nearby table.

“It would be nice to have a place where you can get away from them,” Erik said.

But for now, three beds are crammed into one room, and puppets have the run of the place.

“It seemed ridiculous at first, but we’re used to it now,” he said of the tight quarters that the three siblings have shared since they moved to Bar Harbor together after completing college.

Erik, the oldest, graduated from College of the Atlantic in 1995. Brian followed with a degree in international business from Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania two years later. Then in 1999, Robin earned her bachelor’s in women’s studies from Colby.

But none of the siblings wanted to settle into corporate America after graduation.

“When we first all moved in together, we had the idea [of the puppet company], but

we just couldn’t get it organized,” Erik said.

Performing seems to be in the family’s blood – the siblings recall transforming the water heater in their basement into a circus elephant and making home movies about an evil egg-villain.

When the trio performed their first show as Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers last fall, their mother sent an old photograph of the Torbeck siblings and their friends wielding Sesame Street puppets on a refrigerator-box stage.

Growing up in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s in Pennsylvania, Jim Henson’s Muppets were inescapable, and the Torbecks watched television shows like “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” use puppetry to teach children how to create their own Eden in their imagination. In fact, a photograph of Fred Rogers hangs in the Torbeck home today.

“It’s being able to completely control the world,” said Erik, describing the appeal of puppetry. “No matter what idea you get, you can make it happen.”

As adults the lure never faded; Erik's final project at COA included a puppet show, and Brian performed environmental education shows with puppets during a stint with the Peace Corps. The brothers joined forces for a Renaissance fair in Pennsylvania and even tried a make-a-million-by-Christmas scheme selling sheep puppets at craft fairs one year.

"We had a spurt of puppet stuff every couple years," Brian said.

But last year, Robin's addition to the little company brought changes that made Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers come to life. The productions were improved by an extra set of hands and believable voices for female characters – sometimes the men's attempts at falsetto were pretty disgusting, Brian said.

Additionally, Robin brought some structure to the organizationally challenged creative spirits. She handles marketing for the shows, and for each production maps out a schedule of when key elements, such as puppet and set construction, must be

completed. Of course, no one ever follows the schedule, and much of the work is completed in a last minute burst of energy, Robin said.

"We're pretty much always three or four weeks behind schedule, but we try to find time. Then there's about two and a half weeks of super-intensive, 24-hour days," she said.

"We only work under pressure," Brian said.

"We need to be forced," Erik added. "It's a big juggling act to get everything done. There are not enough hands."

Expanding the company would give the puppeteers more freedom in their shows. But the thought of cramming more people backstage, asking someone to stick around for combination brainstorming sessions and rehearsals until 4 a.m., or figuring out the financial complications of new partners is intimidating.

"Bringing anyone into this thing now is kinda like..." Erik pauses, searching for a word, "A nightmare," Brian finishes.

Puppet creation has always been a challenge

involving lots of trial and error – mostly error, Erik joked. "We're getting better with the glue gun. The first few sheep were kind of mutant."

Still, they lugged dozens of sheep to craft fairs in the years before Frogtown Mountain, drawing a big crowd with their antics, but taking home little profit.

"We must have made 100 or so of these sheep. We'd go to craft fairs, and it would be us and 70 old ladies," Brian said.

The entrepreneurial phase didn't go as well as the men had hoped, so woolly, wild-eyed sheep tend to show up in the oddest places.

"There are actually very few shows that sheep aren't in," Brian said.

Sheep are featured prominently in the company's first success, a production of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which was staged last fall and recently revived at the Farmstead Barn in East Sullivan. Children giggle at a specter who lost his head and just isn't scary without it, while adults laugh at sly pop culture references

like Ichabod Crane doing the hustle in a glittery suit while the Bee Gees stay alive.

“We really want adults to come to these shows – it’s not just kid’s stuff. There’s a lot that just goes over the kids’ heads,” Erik said.

Two performances of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” at the municipal building in Bar Harbor and the Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor, drew more than 450 people.

“It was sort of an experiment to see if people would come – and they did,” Robin said. “I couldn’t believe it. We had set up chairs and we had to drag out all sorts of new seats just before the show.”

The trio quickly followed up their success with a spoof of Dr. Seuss’ “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” in time for the holidays.

When the “Grinch” closed and the cold weather set in last fall, Brian headed south to see friends in the Dominican Republic, where he had spent two years working as a member of the Peace Corps. Robin and Erik stayed to perform in The Grand Auditorium’s

production of “Big River” in Ellsworth.

But this winter, the now-experienced puppeteers hope to get their hands on a bus and take their show on the road, performing at schools and festivals throughout Maine, and perhaps venturing south to their mother’s home in Florida or their father’s home in Pennsylvania.

As bigger and bigger audiences turn out for their shows, this hobby is morphing into a full-fledged career. Recently, the company invested in wireless microphones and a more sophisticated sound system to amplify their voices.

“We all really enjoy doing it. We’re taking steps now to make it an actual company, make it a long-term thing,” Erik said.

Ideas for new family-friendly shows are piling up – fairy tales, a spoof of “Grease,” “The Wizard of Oz.” They’d like to stage a black-light show in which different parts of the actors’ bodies move the puppets, or perhaps a marionette show – or even some adult puppet

shows, with an entirely different kind of humor.

“It’s great how many stories are fair game, and we’d like to do some original stuff, too. We definitely have more ideas than time,” Erik said.

*Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers will perform an original show titled “Tales from the Nest” at the Criterion Theatre on Cottage Street in Bar Harbor Saturday afternoon, Aug. 25. The show begins at 4 p.m. and all tickets cost \$4. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to The Next Step (Domestic Violence Project of Hancock County) and Down East AIDS Network. For more information, call 288-5829 or e-mail [frogtownpuppets@hotmail.com](mailto:frogtownpuppets@hotmail.com)*