

# My grandma was a mermaid

## Playwright takes a walk on wild side

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN

This story comes with a warning. Insanity is infectious. Just ask Newfoundland actor and playwright Torquil Colbo, who is fascinated by the idea of "weird."

"Weird," he says, "is what anyone would be if raised by a grandfather and a half-human father."

Let me try to explain. Colbo wrote and acted in a 20-minute play called *The Cryptozoologist* last May at Eastern Front Theatre Company's Waterfront Festival. It's about a somewhat dazed young man named Muckie Muggerridge, whose grandmother was a mermaid.

On Tuesday, in Halifax's North Street Church, Colbo, co-star Ruth Madoc-Jones and director Gyllian Raby present an expanded version of the adventures of Muckie. It's called *Beyond Zebra* and it shares a double bill on Eastern Front's season opener with Mike Petersen's *Don't Get Me Started*. Original music for both productions is by Paul Cram.

"Muckie starts out a few cards shy of a full deck," Colbo says, "and ends up half a deck shy."

Muckie, it appears, is a janitor. He possesses a tape, made by his father, of a conversation with a mermaid. Unfortunately, Muckie has repressed any understanding of the words on the tape that he might once have had. The incomprehensible language sounds suspiciously like Dr. Seuss's *Beyond Zebra*.

Enter Jenny. She's a cafeteria worker, and she's got the hots for an anthropologist who is studying



Ingrid Bulmer / Herald Photo

Ruth Madoc-Jones and Torquil Colbo star in Eastern Front Theatre Company's *Beyond Zebra*.

Muckie's grandfather. She cleans up after him, collects his notes, reads them, becomes intrigued.

Jenny decides to investigate this bizarre occurrence on her own. "She hypnotizes Muckie," says Colbo, "to get him to relive the times he had with his grandfather, to get him to translate his father's tape."

Unfortunately, Muckie doesn't wake up when he's supposed to. Jenny tries to get him back by playing along with him. She ends up, in Colbo's phrase, "maybe a quarter shy of a full deck."

"At the end, we have gone beyond zebra. The story is based on Dr. Seuss's book where you get a feeling of having broken through to the other side."

Colbo's own father is an entomologist at Memorial University. He studies flies. In fact, Colbo says, he's even had a fly named after him. "That's not unusual," he says. "There are thousands of flies. Everybody's got one named after him."

He insists that *Beyond Zebra* is not autobiographical. But he had to think a moment before answering my question.

"It's the incredible expanding play," he says. "It's been an amazing process. I started with a couple of pages of notes, took it to Parrsboro and workshopped it with Gyllian. It's been growing ever since. First it was 20 minutes long. Now it's an hour, and I brought in new things. Some didn't fit in. I can

see making this a full-length play in the future."

Part of the growth concerns Jenny. She was mostly a mermaid in *The Cryptozoologist*. Now she's a main character, played in the Eastern Front production by Madoc-Jones.

Colbo is the latest in a long line of Newfoundland comedians who have been alarming not only the whole country but even Garth Brooks and Margaret Atwood, both of whom have been interviewed by Mary Walsh characters from CBC-TV's *This Hour has 22 Minutes*.

As it was for Codco and *This Hour* actors, the LSPU Hall in St. John's, which he calls "the birthing ground of Newfoundland theatre," was Colbo's creative home.