

# HOME REPAIR FOR DUMMIES

By Judy Trinh

It was a crisp fall day when I ventured into the depths of the Gatineau Hills to track down a two local men who will soon become Home And Garden Television's newest home repair heros. The shooting location was beautiful — a wooden cottage high on a hill overlooking a lake and surrounded by trees flaming with colour. But instead of encountering the aged and bearded wisdom of Bob Villa-type experts, I came face to face with two guys who looked like they knew more about being hammered than they did about hammers.

"Hurry up, the rain is coming!" they screamed as they sprinted down a flight of steep stairs, nearly tripping over themselves before hopping into a Toyota Rav4. (I would find out later they were racing to find a quick-fix for the gaping hole in the cottage roof.) Meanwhile, a camera crew was trained on the Rav4. As the vehicle sped away, the camera panned to another two guys doing cheerleading kicks.

"T-A-R-P! Time to get a tarp! Go-ooo tarp!" Welcome to the set of *Broken House Chronicles*, obviously not your typical home repair show.

"The show is about home improvement for real people," says 31-year-old George Brook, one of the stars and creators of the show. On *Broken House Chronicles*, Brook and his sidekick, 33-year old Leigh Uttley, are both renovators and the show's unconventional hosts. With his crumpled plaid shirt and unruly brown locks, Brook looks like a college freshman on a bender. Uttley, meanwhile, has a silver nose ring and platinum blond hair, a look more suited to a rock 'n' roll roadie than a handyman. In real life, the men are independent audio engineers who double as DJs — creative men who conceived the idea of an amateur renovation show while struggling with a septic tank.

"I was literally shoulder high in crap trying to fix the pump," Brook recounts. "And Leigh, my roommate at the time, was helping." They were unprepared for how difficult and disgusting the task would be. This challenge would lead them to ponder the question that would eventually land them on the same channel as Martha Stewart: "So this is how it really is, why don't they put this on TV?" Uttley smiles as he recalls the moment of epiphany.

That was in 1999. Now, the former roommates have a six-episode pilot series that's set to premiere on HGTV next January. There are no septic problems to deal with, but they still get their hands dirty fixing Brook's 15 year-old cottage which is used as the set of the show.

"It's a beautiful place but there's a lot wrong with it." Fortunately, he'll

get 1,200 square feet of free renovations. But Brook and Uttley will have to tackle all the projects on their own — from replacing the windows to putting in hardwood flooring, to re-shingling the roof. For their hard work, HGTV also pays them an on-air fee. If the *Chronicles* ever gets syndicated, Brook and Uttley will reap some of the rewards as well.

I ask them if they have any construction or handyman expertise — in reply they admit to being do-it-yourselfers who have done very little. The network wanted it that way. "HGTV wanted us to be fresh," explains Brook. "We were told not to take any crash courses or read up on stuff." It is a directive that lends authenticity to the show and gives it an everyman feel. The problems the hosts run into are problems homeowners can expect when caught off-guard. However, unlike other home improvement shows, the mistakes that Brook and Uttley make will be aired, instead of ending up on the cutting room floor.

"There are many repairs (we do on the show) that we haven't done before," Uttley expects the mishaps they encounter to drive the spontaneous humour of the show. "I think people will tune in just to see what messes we get into and how we get out of them." One such mess is in the window installation episode. First they forget to bring their measurements to the shop, then they take the wrong measurements to the store. In the end, the purchased window is too small to fit in the gaping hole in the wall.

BHC also includes elements of contrived comedy. Those come in the form of "ditty breaks" performed by the Broken House Band. Drawing from their musical backgrounds, Uttley and Brook sing along with the band on the songs, which range from gospel to rap to German electronica. Uttley points out the singers serve a dual purpose: to liven the show and to offer home-reno advice in short bursts of song. After Uttley breaks a window, for example, : "If you break the glass, don't you fret — you can put another one in yet."

At times the two stars will shed their overalls to join the chorus. Not content with just whistling while they work, Brook and Uttley sing and dance while wearing flamenco costumes, dominatrix leather and mini-skirts in various episodes. Home repair has never had such a wacky touch.

Although comedy is integral to BHC, the show at its heart is still about repairs and renovation. Professional contractors are often found lurking behind the scenes advising on what is safe and which



methods to use when tackling a project. As well, every episode of BHC will feature a visit to a hardware store and a chat with an expert.

"Most people when they make a mistake they go to a hardware store for advice," says Tim Alp, the show's producer. "So that's what these guys will do." The visits to the hardware store also allows BHC to dispense helpful expert advice to the viewers.

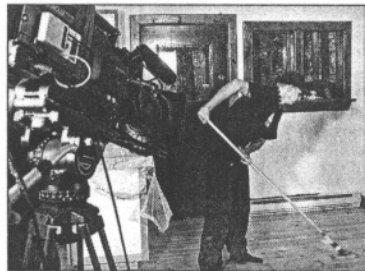
Alp, who also produces HGTV's *Lofty Ideas*, is confident the series will attract new viewers and expand beyond just a pilot series. "The nature of HGTV is such that it's primarily watched by stay-at-home moms. What we're trying to do (with this show) is bring in a

the project has been hard work. For the past month, Brook and Uttley, the five-member production crew along with the ditty singers have worked six days a week putting in 12 to 14 hours each day. But it will soon pay off. Although the time slot for the show has yet to be finalized, BHC has been guaranteed a prime-time broadcast when it airs in January.

Although the prospect of an ongoing series and impending stardom does excite them, Brook says the co-hosts have a more modest goal. "We want people to say: if they can do it, we can do it."

Judy Trinh is an Ottawa media consultant and writer.

**They sing, dance and make mistakes. On air. Welcome to Broken House Chronicles, not your average television home repair show**



George Brook (top left) and Leigh Uttley (top centre) star in *Broken House Chronicles*, a do-it-yourself renovation show for amateurs. They dance, sing and joke their way through some of the work, but eventually get down to business.



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