

The 101 Dalmatians Musical

By Kerri Danskin

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Today I'd like to make a confession here on this blog. I am a gigantic theater nerd. At age 12, I developed an irrational love for the Les Miserables score and it's been a sordid affair ever since. Sure, things may have calmed down a little since I graduated from high school and no longer had the opportunity to play roles like Moonbeam McSwine in Lil' Abner and Svetlana Sergievsky in Chess, but my heart still goes aflutter when I see a good show or hear a line from a song I've known and loved before. Two years ago my sister and I took my mother to see Mary Poppins on Broadway for Mother's Day and all three of us cried. Nothing sad happened. We just loved it that much. So, you see, it's not my fault. It runs in the family.

Naturally when I heard that a traveling musical production of 101 Dalmatians was about to take the stage in theaters across this country starting in the fall, I needed to know the details. And thanks to this blog, I had the opportunity to call the producer and ask.

Producer Lee Marshall was more than happy to share. The show will launch in Minneapolis October 13, he says, and will complete a 23-week tour ending at Madison Square Garden in New York City, after which it will likely remain on Broadway and have a touring production.

Marshall's producing partner, Luis Alvarez, produced a Spanish version of the production in Madrid for three years successfully and the two men worked together to find the right cast of characters to create an American version.

Director Jerry Zaks has won four Tony Awards and has been nominated for a total of seven, so he means business with this show.

Dennis DeYoung, best known as the keyboard player, lead vocalist and songwriter of the band Styx, composed the score and wrote lyrics with B.T. McNichol, who also wrote the script. DeYoung has been doing some work on Broadway for a while now.

"After this show he won't be an undiscovered Broadway writer anymore," Marshall says.

All of that is very exciting, of course, but we're here to talk about dogs, aren't we? Marshall says he and his team have taken an unusual route in their animal casting for the show: they're rescuing Dalmatians from shelters and training them. When we spoke, Marshall told me that 13 dogs had already been rescued and were in training at a ranch in Florida and a total of 18 would probably be used in the live show.

"They'll be fully trained," he says. "We've been all over the country working with animal shelters to find animals that will not only just be rescued but also fit the personality of the show."

Joel Slaven, who trained all of the animals in the movie Ace Ventura: Pet Detective, among other productions, is working with all of the dogs, helping them through any issues they developed as shelter animals, and then getting them ready to play their parts using a replica of the show's set.

The dogs will travel the country on their own bus with caretakers on board and plenty of stops for sniffing and such, Marshall says.

"They'll go city to city and we have four trainers who are going to live with the dogs," Marshall says. "They'll have full-on human interaction 24/7. Two trainers will live with the dogs at night and two during the day."

The dogs will be on stage twice during the production, including a finale during which no humans will be onstage, Marshall says.

"This show is basically told by humans," he says. "The humans in the show will be walking on 2-foot stilts. Everything is in perspective to the dogs. Our Cruella DeVille will be 7 feet tall."



The visual aspect of the show will be interesting, I think. The characters are dogs, but of course the speaking roles are played by humans.

"The story is sung and told through human beings playing dogs," Marshall says. "The costumes reflect the imagery of the Dalmatian. When you see them you'll know that it's a dog. But they can sing, they can talk, they can have relationships. The story is told on a human level, an adult dog level. The puppies in our show will be children."

One concern animal lovers have had when the 101 Dalmatians story has gained public attention in the past is that families may be motivated to adopt Dalmatians and be surprised by their temperaments, which can be difficult for the average pet owner.

"The movies and animated features have come out in the past, I don't think anyone has really communicated what kind of dogs Dalmatians are," Marshall says. "We're going to try to explain to people that Dalmatians... They're not necessarily the best breed for every family. We're going to try to communicate to everyone in the theatre. We might even make an announcement in the theater. They're not meant to be left alone, not the best with kids, some are born deaf. We've rescued animals and we don't want to create more rescue animals."

It sounds like this show is going to be great entertainment and I'm very glad to hear how Marshall and his team have gone about caring for the dogs and their plan to educate their audience. Working dogs (including actors!) deserve the best possible care and respect from their humans.

Keep an eye out for the show if you're a theater nerd like I am. You can get tour information here: www.the101dalmatianmusical.com. I may have to see it when it reaches New York!