

What It Takes to Be a Dog Actor

Find out from the pros what it takes to have your dog appear in movies, theater, or on TV.

Denise Flaim

In show business, good looks only get you so far. And that applies to animal stars just as much as their human counterparts.

To be sure, most directors and casting agents are seeking out a specific "look" or breed for the project they have in mind. After all, a "Lassie" remake starring a Dachshund would be off to a shaky start. But beyond that, canine actors need a solid foundation in advanced obedience training. That means a prospective four-legged thespian will have mastered simple commands such as Sit, Down, Stand, Stay, and Come. Retrieving and barking on command are useful skills to have, too.

But if you hope to have your dog work in television, film, or theater, mum's the word: He must be able to recognize and respond to hand signals.

"Your dog needs to be able to recall and stay on a hand signal, or go from sitting to a standing position" with just a gesture from you, says Bill Berloni, who has chronicled his 30 years of training animals for center stage in the newly published "Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Became Showbiz Superstars" (Lyons Press, 2008). "If you have a dog that just performs on verbal cues, you can only do photo work. Because when they say, 'Roll it,' you can't be talking over the lines."

Berloni gets all his dogs from shelters, which is where he found his very first one, Sandy, the "Annie" star, in 1976. For theater work, with its bustling backstage and constant stream of activity, two criteria are essential, he says: a low threshold for aggression and the ability to cope with stress.

"I'm basically looking for a well-rounded dog who isn't rude," Berloni explains. Such a dog has a good relationship with his handler based on trust and mutual respect, but isn't so needy that he won't work for someone else. "Basically, superdog," Berloni says, likening the ideal candidate to a confident, self-possessed show dog who turns on under pressure, walks into the ring like he owns it, and "wows the judges."

Or, in this case, the audience.

Denise Flaim is a DOG FANCY contributing editor.

For more on the lives of animal actors, check out the September 2008 issue of DOG FANCY.