

Dogs Get Acting Gigs in 'Year of the Dog'

"Saturday Night Live" alum Molly Shannon stars in "Year of the Dog."

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In her latest film "Year of the Dog," "Saturday Night Live" alum Molly Shannon plays Peggy, a happy-go-lucky secretary who lives with her beloved dog – a Beagle named Pencil.

Peggy and Pencil are inseparable: they sleep, eat and watch movies together, and are even pictured in a customized Christmas card together. Despite being involved in a co-dependent relationship with her dog, she's happy. But when Pencil meets an untimely death in her neighbor's (John C. Reilly of "Chicago") yard, Peggy's world comes crashing down.

With nothing else to do but pick up the pieces of her shattered life, Peggy seeks the help of family and friends, and does a little soul searching in order to recover from her loss. She dates her neighbor Al (Reilly) and vegan-animal activist Newt (Peter Sarsgaard of "Jarhead"), and rescues 15-plus dogs from a shelter.

Although the tone of the film depicts sadness and loss, the vibe behind the scenes of this film was anything but.

"We all had a blast," says Ursula Brauner, of Boone's Animals for Hollywood in Castaic, Calif., head animal trainer for "Year of the Dog." "The dogs all had so much fun working on this movie – it was like one big giant dog party for them."

And a big party it was indeed.

Not only was there a team of five dog trainers, which included Mark Harden, Devon Evans, Kim Bonham and Karl Brian Miller, but the film called for almost 50 dogs to play the character and secondary roles. There were five lead character dogs in the film: Pencil, played by Prada and CK; Valentine, a German Shepherd Dog played by Radar; and "Newt's Trio," Chopper, Buster, and Travis.

"In addition to these dogs, there was a total of 48 dogs," says Brauner, who also worked on "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," "Must Love Dogs," and TV's "CSI: NY" and "Desperate Housewives." "We needed so many additional dogs for the dog park and the adoption fair scenes that we worked with two other movie animal companies."

And with this many dogs on-set come many obstacles. "Our biggest challenge working with so many dogs at once – especially the shelter dogs Peggy brings home – was to be able to re-create the 'madness' for additional takes and different angles of the same scenes," Brauner says. "We called it 'controlled chaos.' Each dog was pre-trained separately ... to do a specific action. Then when the cameras rolled, we turned everybody loose on the set and just let it happen naturally."

In his directorial debut, writer Mike White – whose writing credits include "The School of Rock" and "The Good Girl" – really wanted the dogs to look as natural as possible. So he summoned Brauner to her own on-screen debut as "Dog owner."

"Mike had written a scene in the dog park that called for Valentine to attack another dog," Brauner explains. "But he realized that the action might look more realistic if I could be the dog owner, rather than have the dogs working to a trainer off camera."

It seems that when one dog trainer became an actor, two actors became dog trainers. To prepare for their roles, both Shannon and Sarsgaard spent a considerable amount of time training with the dogs. "We choreographed all the scenes with Molly, and she even helped us cue the dogs on occasion to get the eye line and the action more believable," Brauner explains. "She was such a great sport, and all the dogs fell in love with her."

Ditto with Sarsgaard. "Peter had such a natural ability with dogs that we didn't have to do much to coach him in looking like a dog expert," Brauner says. "I honestly think the dogs just thought he was another trainer coming in to work with them." Brauner says that the actor was such a natural at being a dog expert that after the shoot, the team offered him a permanent training gig. "We often joked to him that, 'if this acting thing doesn't work out, there's always an opening at



Boone's for you!"

"Year of the Dog," from Paramount Pictures, hits theaters Friday, April 13, 2007. For more information, check out www.yearofthedogmovie.com