

## **Dogs On Deck!**

### ***Raising, Working and Loving the Dogs of Legally Blonde.***

As much as we love all the dogs that share our lives, I'm pretty sure we have all identified those special canines that touch our hearts just that little bit more deeply than others. Soul dogs, kindred spirits. In my twenty odd years as a devoted dog person I've had two boxers that have played this role for me. You can not imagine how strange it is that the third one has recently turned up in the body of a chihuahua.

I would never have met Sparrow if I had not been appointed the role of dog trainer for the stage musical version of the movie Legally Blonde. As I write I am sitting side of stage with Sparrow (Spaz or Rodney to his friends) in my lap waiting for his third appearance on stage for today's performance. We do eight shows every week. Sparrow (along with his brother and understudy Quinn) plays the role of Bruiser Woods, side kick to the show's heroine Elle Woods (played by the divine Lucy Durrack). While their appearances on stage are quick, they are scattered through out the show and in the two and a half odd hours that the show runs we are all kept our toes, much to the delight of the dogs.

Finding a Chihuahua (or chihuahua cross as the case may be - Sparrow and Quinn both have a touch mini foxie in them) to perform in a live stage play is no easy task. Searching for the right dog - one who not only looks the part, but can deal with everything that comes with working in theatre - is no mean feat. I met more chihuahuas looking for a new home than I can tell you while trying to find the right dogs. Nervousness was a big problem. If the dog couldn't deal with me in their normal living environment, they would never be comfortable with what the future Australian Bruiser Woods would have to put up with! Providence stepped in the day I went and saw (on a whim) two six week old puppies. As I laid eyes on the runt of the littler I felt that weird rush of recognition. Here was the dog I was looking for. Somehow I knew straight away that Sparrow, as he would come to be called, had the makings of a great performer.

Sparrow and his brother Quinn came to live with me in April of this year. Why two dogs for the one role? As with the human characters, the role of Bruiser must have an understudy. If the lead dog can't go on for any reason they understudy steps in. This would be my first experience raising two pups from the same litter. As they grew the boys showed that beautiful carefree confidence every puppy should have. Quinn always had a little more exuberance in new situations and when meeting new people which often gets mistaken for "very friendly", but for Quinn at least was more about being a little insecure in new situations. Who can't relate to that? His insecurities have been greatly helped by giving him control of situations. Sparrow from day one has maintained an inner calmness I wish I could master!

Formal training of show behaviours began a week or so after they came home, but the "behaviours" are never as important as the emotional foundation we build them on. This is especially true for a performing animal. "Home" at the time was Brisbane where I was training and working the dogs in the production of Annie. The pups trotted in most days with the two Doodlers who were playing Sandy at the time, so there was lots of opportunity to get them feeling good about theatre. They were not only exposed to curtains coming down, orchestras tuning up, the company doing vocal and physical warm ups, but they were given the chance for these stimuli to be linked with the good stuff! There was lots of playing tug and eating roast chicken as these things all went on. I knew I could train the behaviours they needed to perform in the show without a problem, what needed my attention right then was setting up the emotions that were triggered in the context that they would have to perform the behaviours in. If they didn't feel totally confident and comfortable in and around the theatre all the best training of the behaviours in the world would be pointless.

The boys were about three months old when the Brisbane season of Annie finished and we moved back to Sydney to start focused training for their upcoming role in Legally Blonde. By this time a basic understanding of all of their show behaviour was there: speaking on cue, A to B behaviours, bows and yes, sitting in and being carried around in a hand bag! We continued to work on them over the coming months and one of the criteria I changed very early on was performing the behaviours for lots of different people. This was a very important early part of their training to ensure they found it easy when introduced to the actresses they would be working with in the show. If I had continued to be the only one to work them the contrast of working for someone different would have been a very steep learning curve indeed! By introducing the experience of working with new people early in to their training it was no problem the first time they had to take cues from actresses - after all they had seen a lot of variation on the "cue" already right? This means they had not yet gotten into the rut of "That's not the same as how mumma cues it!"

But wait there's more... Coming back to Sydney saw the search for the other canine star of Legally Blonde - Rufus the bulldog! After several weeks Annie and Luka were found. While Luka is a very mentally solid and beautifully calm dog at three years of age, Annie, at only ten months when she arrived was very... lets say exuberant about life in general! There is an article just on what this dog has taught me about teaching a juvenile dog self control. There were times when I was pretty sure Annie would never be able to contain herself on stage - the first scene we see the bulldog in is highly emotive for the actors and full of excitement and, well, I really didn't know if Annie could focus on the job at hand. While it was Luka that was the star on opening night and has performed eight shows a week solidly for the past seven weeks, Annie has become a huge crowd pleaser of late. Her excitement shines through, but now whatever anyone else is doing she can remain focused and do the job she knows. It's always a very proud moment in the show for me, not only because she made it, but because the ability to control herself will serve her well for the rest of her doggy life.

So we are now well into the show's Sydney run. Over fifty performances in the bag and for the most part the dogs have not put a paw wrong. Little things happen of course, dogs deciding not to speak every now and again and forcing the actress they work with to do some pretty impressive and funny improvisation. Sparrow once went and sniffed at a pink feather on stage on the way to jumping in the bag and got it stuck on his nose, so when he turned around to face the audience and get his treat from Lucy he had a pink mo. That was pretty funny. Sometimes they go out to do their bow - a behaviour that requires them to run around Lucy, bow at her side, get a treat from her and run back to me in the wings - and they don't stop to bow! They know their dinner is waiting! I have to be careful about letting them know what's on offer. It seems the pasta and pork night is a favourite and often results in letting Lucy know she can keep her pissy treat!

I have to say that training these dogs for live theatre - not just training, but choosing, raising training, working them and caring for them twenty-four seven - well it's not for the faint of heart. I don't think I have ever been as nervous as I was on opening night. All that love and work you have put into this two kilogram dog who now has to run out and hold center stage in front of two thousand people. Sink or swim it's your neck on the line. Before we opened I endured many long, sleepless nights wondering if I could actually climb this mountain. Phew. Border collies or golden retrievers they certainly are not! I can definitely see how chihuahuas get their reputation of being nervous ankle biters and bulldogs as commonly thought stubborn and thick. I can also see how whether these breeds live up to that reputation is the owner's responsibility. I have worked long and hard at bringing the best bits of each individual to the forefront and each has required a slightly different approach. While we might have a science to base our craft on, every dog deserves and require us to modify our application of the science for their personality and situation.

And while I have learned a lot more about training animals and putting positive reinforcement into practice the main thing I have learned is this: the most important thing about the work we do with our dogs is that they enjoy the work. Bottom line. This is true whether you are ridiculously lucky like me and get to train and work dogs full time or you are working with your pet dog on some better

manners at home. Sure you might be able to train dogs by giving them something to avoid but you will never ever share the joy and trust with your dogs that you will if you make their happiness your ultimate goal.

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