

SO, YOU WANNA BE A STAR! *(Originally Published in Dogs in Canada)*

The film industry in Canada has blossomed over the past decade or so and it pours millions of dollars per year into Canadian pockets, providing a boost to many facets of the economy. Job and career opportunities have been created in all fields from trades and technical to catering, advertising and acting.

With this growth, a demand for Canadian animal talent has also arisen. Animals of all kinds, but especially dogs, are regularly cast in not only movies and series, but television commercials as well. From my supine position on the couch, layered in Shorthairs and English Cockers, I sometimes idly thought as I watched the tube that it would be fun (and perhaps lucrative) to be involved in the screen industry. I did not, however, have a clue how to get started. In any event, it seemed that I had enough on my plate with career, dog activities, friends and family, and I erroneously thought that if my dogs were involved on screen, it would just be an added and unwanted demand on my already limited time.

Then, surprisingly, the film industry found me. One day, out of the blue, I had a telephone call from an animal co-ordinator who had heard through the obedience grapevine that I had a trained Shorthair, and such a dog was wanted for a commercial. Regrettably, Rudy was pregnant with her first litter at the time. Since I was unwilling to expose her to additional stress, the assignment was turned down. But within a year, a different trainer called me for a well socialized and confident dog to work on a movie being shot in the Vancouver area. The role called for the dog to do sequential roll-overs, on hand signal from behind the camera, in a line with three other dogs. It was a small part, requiring only a few days on set, but Wesley, the English Cocker, and I were paid rather well and it was fun hob-nobbing with a couple of well known names. The down side to that assignment was that I was required to handle the dog, and that meant, as I had originally feared, taking time away from the office.

Parador dogs have since acted in a number of movies and commercials, with several calls coming just in the past year. During one week last August, Rudy did a small part in a movie, and then went straight into a feature role in an Earls Restaurant commercial. Wesley has just finished a three day stint with his trainer doing a guest role on the TV show, "Mysterious Ways", a relatively new series being filmed in this area. He plays a little doggy angel who is reunited with his human mom in Heaven. One movie spot last year required my young Shorthair bitch Riki to simply act at being in a dog show, and thus no special skills or training were required of her. But the rest of the parts have, in one way or the other, been quite demanding.

To avoid frustration and disappointment down the road, it is vital that anyone interested in screen work must first of all stand back and realistically assess the dog's potential. If your dog is shy of new people, noises and situations, then chances are that he will not take well to the bustle and stress of a set. The actual demands on the dog's talents will of course vary from assignment to assignment, but the constants required for any screen work are confidence, stability and adaptability.

It follows, therefore, that those of us with dogs who have been involved in conformation shows or obedience work, or non-ring activities such as flyball and agility, are going to have an advantage. These dogs are used to performing in the presence of other dogs and people, sometimes with a handler and always in distracting situations. Just as with their human counterparts, a basic requirement for canine actors is the ability to focus on the job at hand, whatever the circumstances. Much screen work is done in a relatively small setting, with a crush of cameras, cables and equipment, plus technicians, director, actors and a myriad of other support personnel. There can be boom cameras swinging down from overhead, clapboards, megaphones and the discomfort of heat from lights. On an outside set, the dog may have to work in the vicinity of vehicles, sirens, and crowds, at night or in bad weather. Add to all this the fact that the dog will almost always be handled by someone other than the owner, and it becomes apparent why a composed and well-adjusted animal is essential.

Discard the time-worn "but he's perfect in the backyard" line, and take the dog to a mall, city sidewalk or drop in obedience class and test him on some simple commands. Switch dogs with a friend for an afternoon and see how yours reacts to working with someone else. If, after a reasonable period of training, your dog is still easily distracted by the surroundings, won't perform in public or refuses to work well and react with another person, you better reconsider whether he is a suitable candidate for screen work.

Dana Dube and her husband Andrew Simpson are animal co-ordinators and trainers in B.C. On the other side of the country, Jane Conway runs a similar business in Toronto. Unlike some trainers, neither Jane nor Dana and Andrew keep large numbers of dogs themselves. They prefer instead to have a network of people who are willing to have their animals used when the appropriate role comes along. As Dana says, "in this way it's a win-win situation. We are able to offer a wide selection of well socialized and happy dogs, and the owners enjoy financial benefits, usually some free training, and the chance to see their dog on screen".

I asked if there are any particular breeds of dog, that are more desirable than others for film work. Jane has found that there can be spurts where one breed is more in demand as a result of a specific dog having appeared in a successful movie or series. Dana explained that some scripts are breed specific, and the director is determined to use that particular breed. Other scripts require specific action or characteristics and the director will be more interested in seeing which dog can provide the best performance. Dana and Jane agree that a dog which is solid black or pure white is not often used, since it's more difficult for a camera to read expressions on a dog with a solid dark, or pure white, coat. "On the whole, for each call we get, we provide photos of a variety of dogs that fit the general look required or are best suited to the action scripted. The production company then can make an informed choice." Dana adds, "usually we'll include our recommendations for which dog we think we would be most appropriate for the role". Using Wesley's recent "Mysterious Ways" assignment as an example, she reminded me "you'll recall we were originally asked for a Basset Hound. We recommended Wesley because he has a similar expression, but higher energy. We felt Wesley would be perfect for the role, and he was!"

Dana and Jane agree that, when interviewing a prospective client, they look first for a good screen temperament - is the dog outgoing, motivated and intelligent enough to pick up on what is being asked of him. The dogs need not all be motivated by the same thing. Dana again uses Wesley as an example. "He is so food oriented that he focuses everything he has on figuring out what he must do to get paid (i.e. rewarded). If you're holding the food, you have Wesley's complete and undivided attention. This makes him highly trainable and extremely easy to work with." Both Dana and Andrew have also worked with Rudy on different roles. "She is ridiculously smart and very extroverted. She's motivated by not only food and toys but also praise and attention." Dana makes another very important point. "Just as not all people are cut out to be actors, not all dogs are suited for film work. There's another more intangible quality needed - a desire to be on set and to work. Rudy's a prime example of this. She was born to act. She thrives on being the center of attention and showing off! This is the extra something that makes a star".

The trainer next looks for what "behaviours" a dog has. Obviously, the more a dog can do initially, the less specific training and "prep time" will be needed if the dog is chosen for a role. Jane will look most closely at a dog whose resume lists at least a CD title and preferably a CDX. Dana's wish list is much the same. She gives the following as the basic behaviours that she trains in her own dogs: sit, stay, down, stand, drop, head down, speak, and fetch and carry, all taught with hand and voice where applicable. More advanced training involves the dog waving, playing dead dog on its side, circling itself, go to (a mark), go with (another person), pushing doors open, kissing, digging, walking slowly as if old or in pain, and lastly, looking from side to side. Again, all these are preferable with hand signals as well as voice. The dog's behaviours are the building blocks, and if it can master most of the foregoing, then as both Dana and Jane believe, there is probably little that the dog cannot be taught to do with only minimal adaptation.

And this is one of the keys. When a part comes up for a dog, usually the various agents will "bid" on the role, submitting photos of their canine clients and quoting on what the cost to the production company will be. This estimate of cost is based on "prep time" and "filming time". Obviously, if a particular dog is going to take a relatively large amount of prep (training) time, then another animal who has a better foundation of behaviours is going to need less specific training for the role, and may be preferable from the cost perspective. So, the behaviours that a dog has learned may be a valuable indication of not only its trainability but also its cost effectiveness. For example, Rudy has been reprimanded for all her almost nine years when she jumps up to counters to steal food. Then, she was chosen for the Earls commercial, which required her to walk slowly and guiltily into a kitchen, jump up to a counter and lick (not bite) at a roast. Initially, this scenario concerned her greatly since she obviously thought she was being set up! For the first couple of prep sessions, she paced and whined and wanted to comply, but she was worried about being scolded. Because, however, she has such a broad foundation of obedience work and other behaviours, she was very receptive to being taught a behaviour modification by Dana. Thus, she quickly overcame her reluctance, and the results were a complete success with the commercial being award winning.

Another component of trainability is whether the dog is confident enough to work independently. Most screen roles involve the dog working reliably off leash and accepting direction at a distance from the trainer. Unlike the obedience ring where the dog is given an expected command in a controlled arena, or flyball and agility where there is a repetitive and set course of action, the canine actor most often is going to have to adapt its training to fit the demands of the role. If you have a dog, such as my Shorthair, Ben, who is fine on close work, but is reluctant to move away to go to a set mark, or to interact with a stranger, then he will not be suitable for many roles.

If, after considering all this, you have a dog which seems to be a suitable candidate for the screen, the next step is to find and work successfully with a trainer/co-ordinator. Beware! There are pitfalls here for the unwary or inexperienced.

If a prospective co-ordinator wants a sign up fee or tells you that your dog needs a portfolio of professional photos (which he can take right here and now for you but get your chequebook please), then quickly go elsewhere. Producers are seeking a dog with a certain "look" for most parts. A good co-ordinator will ask you for pictures which best show your dog's personality, and usually these don't come from a formal sitting. And if your candid snapshots aren't exactly what's needed when a particular job is coming up, the co-ordinator should take others at no cost to you. Don't get involved in the screen equivalent of the old "vanity press" conundrum where anxious writers paid to have their works published.

Once you have submitted photos, and if you are called for a role, don't be carried away by the thought of your pride and joy appearing on screen. Approach it as you would any other business dealing. And that means agreeing on approximately how long the dog will be needed, how much you will get paid for prep time and filming time (the rates differ or there may be no pay for prep), will you be paid for your time in teaching a specific behaviour, when will you get paid and by whom, whether there will be any payment if the dog doesn't work out for any reason, and whether there are any hidden charges such as board fees. Agree on who is responsible for getting the dog to and from the set or to a casting call and ask who will be tending to him on set, during waiting time. The lawyer in me says get this all in writing but I have to admit that knowing Dana and Andrew, my dealings have been verbal over the phone. If the trainer is handling the dog, then your pay will of course be just for use of the dog. But if you are to supply a handler as well, make it clear that you are to be paid separately for the dog, if the handler is not you. I know of someone who had her Belgian Tervuren used in a movie a few years ago, with the dog handled by a friend who was better suited for the physical demands of the set. Only one cheque was issued, however, to the handler, and the owner never was able to get her share.

Lastly, you must be prepared to accommodate delays and last minute changes in shooting and prep schedules. If you are the type of person who likes arrangements set in stone, you are probably not going to be happy being involved with the film industry, which is notorious for its schedule changes. You must be prepared to go with the proverbial flow.

If you are to handle the dog yourself, as I did Wesley in his first movie role, it can be particularly worrisome if you have allotted a certain time to do the job, only to have last minute changes or time over-runs thrown at you. My professional life is based on appointments and time commitments and I learned from that first nail-biting experience to let someone else handle my dogs if possible.

So, having said all this, if you and your dog are compatible with the pressures and demands of this exciting business, the rewards are wonderful. The money of course is always welcome. But it is truly secondary to the most inexplicable sense of pride and accomplishment which comes from having one of your best buddies recognized for his talent, his training and his overall essence, in a tough and results oriented industry.