

Marian Seldes in *The Royal Family*, which played at L.A.'s Ahmanson Theatre, accompanied by a friend that was trained by William Berloni

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It's a *Dog's* Life

William Berloni has a special occupation that has earned him a unique niche in theater: training animals for the stage.

By Evan Henerson

The Cavendish family, director Tom Moore decided, wouldn't be simply theatrical, spotlight loving and a bit eccentric. They would also have dogs. Lots of dogs.

Enough dogs that William Berloni, stage animal trainer par excellence, would end up breaking his own record for number of dogs assembled on stage. Moore's production of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber's *The Royal Family*, which played the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles last April, used five dogs. One each for Fanny, Julie and Gwen Cavendish plus a pair of Great Danes to enter with a certain amount of flair when ne'er-do-well brother Tony Cavendish reappears in the second act.

If there are beasts onstage, chances are Berloni, or one of his trainers, is somewhere in the wings giving them cues. The man responsible for discovering and training Broadway's first Sandy in the musical *Annie* (and several subsequent Sandys) is often the man producers and directors call when they need a well-behaved pet.

Bull's Eye, the sinister dog belonging to Bill Sykes in Cameron Mackintosh's tour of *Oliver!*, was trained by Berloni. Chowse, the little white dog carried around by Bernadette Peter's Mama Rose in Sam Mendes's recent Broadway revival of *Gypsy* was coached by Berloni. For the same production, Berloni also supplied the lamb needed for the "Little Lamb" number.

One or two pooches is a tall enough order. For *The Royal Family*, which

necessitated an extended stay on the West Coast, Berloni employed practically an entire kennel. "Tom Moore was an avid animal lover," explains Berloni. "He knew this was a dated piece and he felt putting animals in it would make it more alive and sort of accessible to the audience. Having real live dogs would make it more palatable to the audience. It was risky on a lot of levels. The trick was he didn't want shtick. He wanted it to look like those dogs lived there."

Live there, they did. Barney, the small black poodle (called "Hotspur" in the play) and Buster the lab mix (aka "Cyrano"), are both owned by Berloni, two of 14 dogs he keeps on his Connecticut farm. Buddy, the tiny Maltese who plays Puck and is asked to sit in a downstage armchair until Marian Seldes' Fanny Cavendish comes to pick him up, came from a Maltese rescue organization. He has since been adopted.

In addition to being toted or staying put, *The Royal Family* dogs dashed across the stage, down stairways and to tables. Their behavior was easily learned and Berloni was able to leave fellow trainer Tammy Karecki (who supplied the Great Danes) in charge once the run was well under way, so he could return to Connecticut.

But it wasn't an easy assignment. Getting the animals to do what they're supposed to is the easy part, according to Berloni. They're not, however, accustomed to rolling with onstage mishaps. One stepped-on tail or similar mishap and a dog can get spooked for

The cast—human and animal—of *The Royal Family*. All animal actors were trained by William Berloni.



the rest of the run.

The actorly adage about working with animals cuts both ways. If a two-legged performer doesn't take the time to bond with his or her four-legged stage partner, the collaboration won't necessarily be successful. Berloni is accustomed to negotiating his way through delicate situations, anything from allergies, to dislike, to out-and-out fear.

"Kate Mulgrew, who played Julie Cavendish in *The Royal Family*, had had an awful experience with a dog onstage," says Berloni. "It took us many weeks to get her to trust the fact that the dog she was working with was not going to do anything to upstage her. If you have a star and a star vehicle, and the star isn't agreeable, nobody's going to fire the star."

Case in point? Another Buster adventure. "The black poodle is doing a new play that's in development, and we were working with Marlo Thomas," he continues. "At first she was reluctant and at one point I said, 'Look Marlo, I would hate for this dog to do anything to upstage you while you're acting. If he doesn't love you, he's going to be looking offstage at me.'"

"She realized I was there to make it look better. She dove into it with great conviction and was one of the most professional people I have ever worked with. Would she take the dog home? No. But she'd listen to everything I said about warming up to the dog."

That's Berloni: part problem solver, part star soother, part psychologist. What kind of a dog do you get for Bernadette Peters when the star is allergic but the director hates poodles? Simple. A "party poodle"—a poodle with multiple coloring that doesn't resemble a poodle and has dander-free fur that won't bother sensitive sinuses. How do you get a lamb to remain calm and accident-free onstage for nearly three minutes? You feed it a strategic bottle of milk to give it a calming buzz and you fashion an old-fashioned cloth diaper. And you switch lambs every few days when the babies get too heavy. "Trade secrets," says Berloni.

A set builder and an aspiring actor fresh out of high school, Berloni was an intern at Connecticut's Goodspeed Opera House when he learned that whoever was hired as the animal trainer for the new musical, *Annie*, would earn an Equity card. Berloni signed on, adopted the original Sandy for \$7 out of an animal shelter and a career was born.

"A year later, it opened on Broadway with my dog and I was a world-famous animal trainer," recalls Berloni. "How lucky was that? I get to play with and train animals and get paid for it. It's a great career."

He has since trained many Sandys and more than a few Totos. Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the demand for lighter, more family-friendly shows like *Annie* and *The Wizard of Oz* has increased, according to Berloni.

The majority of Berloni's stage dogs come from shelters or rescue organizations and once they're done with a show, they can live on Berloni's farm if they're not adopted. Berloni is also the director of animal behavior for the New York Humane Society.

He'll supply a couple of German shepherds for an upcoming musical, *Masada*, and he might even see his own record topple if he lands the Broadway version of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. "At first I thought Tom Moore was crazy when he wanted to put five dogs onstage," says Berloni. "As fate would have it, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* has 10." SD

Evan Henerson is a lifestyle/features writer who covers theater for the Los Angeles Daily News.