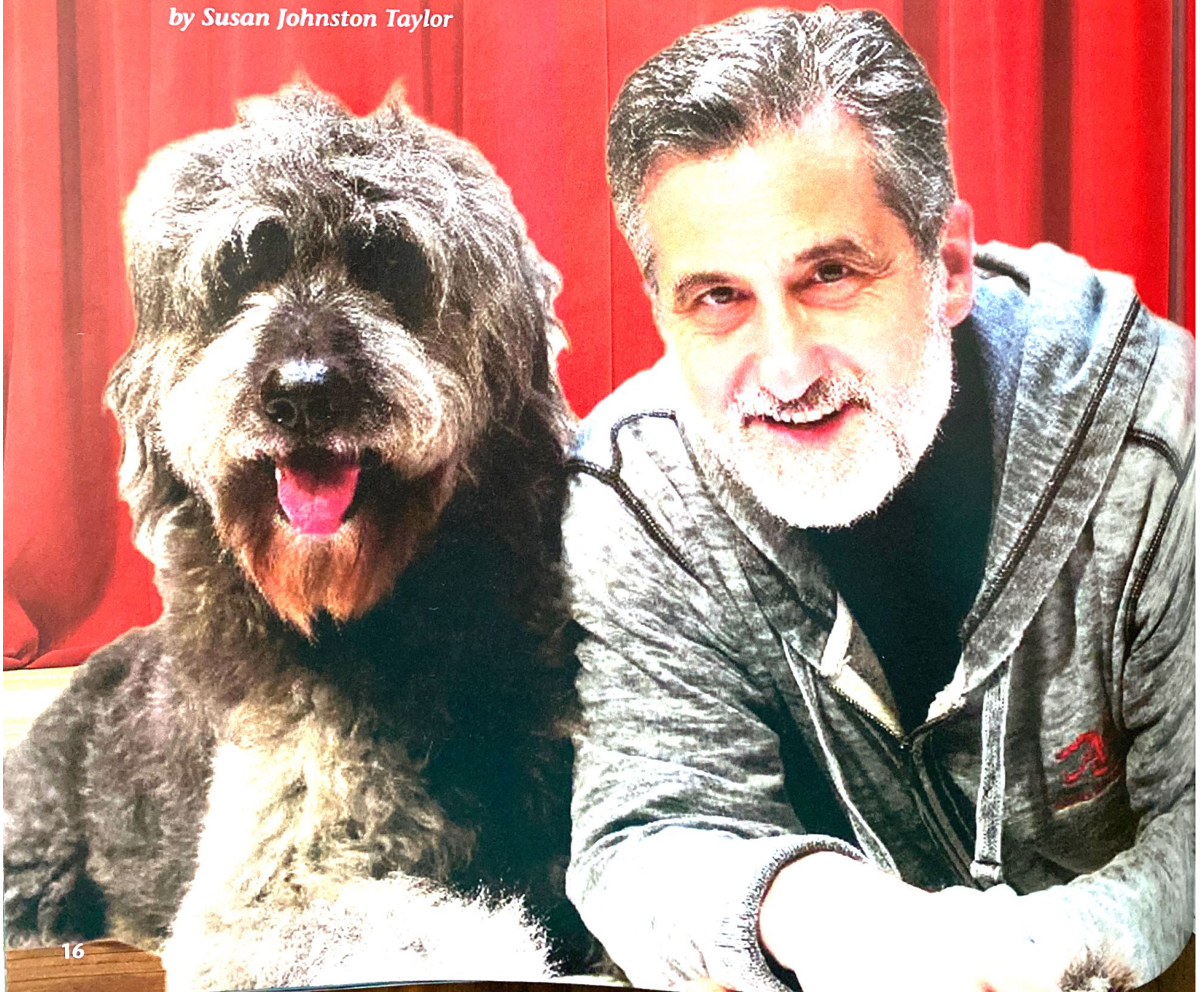


BARKS ON BROADWAY

by Susan Johnston Taylor



If you've ever seen a musical like *Annie*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Legally Blonde*, then you may have seen a canine actor onstage. Often, these shows use live animals to make the story seem as realistic as possible.

For more than 40 years, Bill Berloni (pronounced Ber-LOH-nee), founder of Theatrical Animals, has trained animals for Broadway shows and other stages. Berloni grew up on a farm with animals and originally wanted to be an actor. He got his start one summer at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut. The theater was doing the very first production of the musical *Annie*, and the show's producer needed a dog to play Annie's canine sidekick Sandy. "He offered me a part in one of his shows if I would find and train the dog," says Berloni. "It was my golden opportunity and I took it."

« Bill Berloni has been training dogs for theater productions for 40 years.

Berloni, then age 19, found the original Sandy at an animal shelter. "I made a promise to myself that when I grew up, if I ever got a dog, I would adopt it," he says. "I've kept that promise and I've made animal rescue my personal mission. We only use rescue dogs in the theater business." *Annie* opened on Broadway in New York City a year later. Berloni became a world-famous animal trainer who's worked on 27 Broadway shows and even won a Tony Award.

"When we go to the pound and we find the adopted dog for a show, we are committed to giving it a forever home," he says. After dogs retire from acting, they still have a home on Berloni's farm. He also volunteers with the Humane Society of New York once a week, checking on the dogs while they wait to get adopted.

How does Berloni find the right animal for each role? "The first thing is obviously the look for the character which we have to match," he says. Berloni also looks for dogs that can stay



Berloni finds all the dogs he trains at a local shelter.



calm even with lights, travel, and other stressors. "They have to be food motivated or willing to want to be with humans," he adds.

One of the challenges of training dogs for the stage is that they need to follow commands from an actor who isn't their trainer or owner. "In film, a trainer can be behind the camera," Berloni says. "But if you're doing *The Wizard of Oz* [onstage], Toto has to be looking at the character that he's interacting with."

Most dogs undergo a year of training and testing before they even enter a theater. "We have a training room," says Berloni. "We take them out on a lot of trips." The dogs are trained to follow patterns. They do a behavior and then get a treat. Next, the dog might start out in a small production

Now can we
train this guy?



Bowdie is the
canine star
of *Because of
Winn-Dixie*.





Berloni gives Trixie a brushing between scenes.

to make sure he or she is ready for a bigger show, like on Broadway.

"When they're in performance mode, they're sort of like Olympic athletes," Berloni says. "They have to be in their best physical and mental state." He and his team of trainers make sure that the performing dogs rest during the day so they're ready for each performance.

"They look forward to seeing their friends and getting cookies," Berloni says. "Just like actors warm up their voice, we warm up their dogs to remind them they're doing the show with this person."

While the dogs are well trained for each performance, sometimes things go wrong, usually because of human error. For instance, during *Legally Blonde* on Broadway, there's a scene where one of the sorority sisters asks Bruiser about Elle.

During one show, instead of performing as rehearsed, the dog playing Bruiser (Chico) went right to the edge of the stage. Berloni later discovered that Chico was distracted by people in the front row eating fried chicken. "Who would bring fried chicken to the Palace Theatre?" Berloni laughs.

During *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* on Broadway, in the scene where several dogs destroy the candy factory, the leading actor handed out treats to the dogs one at a time and the dancers moved around them. The scene had been

carefully planned out to look chaotic. It was supposed to follow a specific pattern. "One of the first dogs jumped out and knocked the treats out of his hands," Berloni says. The scene turned into mayhem as treats and dogs scattered across the stage, and the dancers had to lead the dogs offstage.

Berloni's next project is preparing the canine star of *Because of Winn-Dixie* (a musical based on the novel by Kate DiCamillo) for Broadway. That show is Bill's most challenging project to date, but he loves his work. "If you

have something you're good at, pursue that and hopefully you can make your dreams come true, which is really what happened to me," he says.

FAST FACTS

» Bill Berloni and his family live on a farm in Connecticut with 25 dogs, three cats, two pigs, a donkey, two geese, a rabbit, and a macaw.

» Berloni's dog, geese, and rabbits have performed. The other animals are just for fun.

Susan Johnston Taylor lives with her husband and their rescue dog Sebastian in Austin, Texas. She has written for *Boys' Life*, *Dramatics Magazine*, and many other publications.