Shelter to Stage

On Broadway, many stage actors have a ritual before each show to bring them good luck. Sunny’s ritual involves a quiet walk through New York City’s Central Park. Then, 15 minutes before show time, she meets up with her co-star, Lilla Crawford, backstage at the Palace Theater. Lilla and Sunny are the stars of the newest production of the musical Annie, opening on November 8.

The musical is based on the classic comic strip, Little Orphan Annie, created by cartoonist Harold Gray in 1924. Lilla, 11, plays red-headed orphan Annie, who meets Sandy when she saves the stray dog from being taken to the pound by dog catchers. The two actors appear on stage together while Annie sings the show’s popular song, “Tomorrow.”

Paws for Broadway

DON HEINY FOR TIME FOR KIDS

Sunny plays with a toy in her dressing room backstage at the Palace Theater, in New York City.

Sunny got her big break on Broadway thanks to animal trainer Bill Berloni, who tells Sunny’s story in his book Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Became Showbiz Superstars. (Scroll down or click here to watch TFK’s video interview with Berloni). Berloni found Sunny at an animal shelter in Houston, Texas. He has been training Sunny to perform on the Palace Theater stage for eight shows a week. If Sunny is unable to perform, Sunny’s
understudy Casey—also rescued from a shelter—is ready to go on in her place.

Berloni has been rescuing—and training—shelter dogs to play Sandy since 1976, when he found the first Sandy to appear in the first-ever production of Annie in Connecticut. The original dog was hours from being put down at an overcrowded shelter in Connecticut. After that first production, Berloni and Sandy followed the musical to Broadway, where the dog performed for seven years. Since then, Berloni has trained several pooches to play Sandy on Broadway, and in touring and regional productions of Annie. "I've had so many wonderful dogs in my life," Berloni told TFK. “Each one of them brings something different to the role of Sandy."

Bruisers and Totos

Berloni's book is available in bookstores now.

Berloni also adopts and trains dogs for other shows, including Chihuahuas who play Bruiser in Legally Blonde and Cairn terriers who appear as Toto in The Wizard of Oz. The dogs are always rescue animals. And when they are done with the stage—whether it’s after a few performances or a few years—they live with Berloni’s family and their other dogs on a farm in Connecticut. “If you adopt an animal, you should take care of it for its entire life,” Berloni says.

Berloni donates a portion of the sales of Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Became Showbiz Superstars to the New York Humane Society, which helps animals. In 2011, he received a special Tony Honor for Excellence in the Theater award for his work. “Every time I do this, I see a little bit of heroism in these animals,” Berloni says. “They are overcoming adversity and doing something great.”
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