



# LIGHTS!

For 125 years, dogs in American films have caused audiences to cheer, weep, laugh, and even gasp in terror—all depending upon the script, director, and the dog's talents.

by Brian Patrick Duggan

# CANINES!

# ACTION!

he first known appearance of a dog in motion picture film is Thomas Edison's *Athlete with Wand* (1894). There was no casting call, and the dog was probably told to lie beside the man—or else that sunny spot in Edison's studio was just a nice place to lounge.

In Hollywood's early years, canine typecasting was summarized by J.B. Griswold in a 1938 article, "Pomeranians and poodles for luxurious boudoir scenes; just plain mutts for kid pictures; staghounds and borzois for kings; wires and cockers and Scotties for home touches; pointers and setters for hunters; and shepherd dogs for Westerns."

Without considering the "fantasy" dogs (animated or talking), this old rule holds largely true for Hollywood's immutable canine stereotypes.



## CASTING DOGS

Finding the right dog for a film is an equation of type, talent, and availability. The dog should closely resemble the dog in the script but trainability and availability often triumph over physical appearance (it's common to think of dog stars "acting," but they're actually performing behaviors on command).

*Old Yeller* was a Black Mouth Cur (a Southeastern hunting breed) in the book but for the 1957 film, a clever yellow Labrador Retriever mix was easier to find. A Berger Picard had the title role in *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2005) because the breed was unfamiliar to American audiences and best matched the book's scruffy mutt.

Author L. Frank Baum's Toto was, "... a little black dog, with long, silky hair and small black eyes that twinkled merrily on either side of his funny, wee nose." Terry, a Cairn Terrier, was so memorable

in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), she was renamed "Toto." For Bradley Cooper's *A Star Is Born* (2018), the dog's rapport with him and Lady Gaga on screen was so important that he cast his own adopted dog, Charlie.

Sometimes, the dog must be a specific breed—only a yellow Lab would do for *Marley & Me* (2008), and Rin Tin Tin and Lassie are always a German Shepherd Dog and a Collie. So well-known are the dogs of General Patton and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that casting the white Bull Terrier for *Patton* (1970) and Scottish Terrier for *Pearl Harbor* (2001) was non-negotiable.

## CANINE ARCHETYPES

German Shepherd Dogs—perhaps the most often used breed on the silver screen—have been family pets, police dogs, and monsters. Thanks to the legacy of Strongheart, his successor, Rin Tin Tin, and many other GSDs, screen portrayals of them and their working cousins, the Belgian Malinois and Tervuren, always come back to the canine heroes we've seen in *K-9* (1989), *Megan Leavey* (2017), and Seal Team Six's dog (briefly seen) in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Terriers are inevitably charming buddies and comic relief. Asta the energetic Wire Fox Terrier was a detective's sidekick in *The Thin Man* films (1934–1947), a comic foil in



The first known cinema canine (top): Toto in print (middle); Old Yeller (left)  
Opposite: The evil Egyptian seductress and her Afghans







*The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) etc., and sparked a lengthy fad for the breed. Interest in terriers has been recently revived by Uggie, the Parson Russell Terrier in *The Artist* (2011).

Films set in the Middle Ages and Renaissance frequently include a

nobleman's hounds, and the bigger the better. Irish Wolfhounds or Scottish Deerhounds perfectly answer that casting need and are seen in *Ivanhoe* (1952), *The War Lord* (1965), *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (1966), and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991). If not hunting, they are lounging by thrones or in banquet halls. Great hounds evince masculinity and authority, but the right dogs can convey femininity and grace as evidenced by the dainty, fawn Whippet snuggling with Guenevere in *Camelot* (1967)—or in a more modern setting, Elle Woods' costumed Chihuahua in *Legally Blonde* (2001).

#### ESTABLISHING CHARACTER

Dogs can convey character for the director in a single glance. In the *Bride of*

*Frankenstein* (1935), before Lord Byron and Mary Shelley first speak, four aristocratic Borzoi walked by a maid establish their social class. Having served that purpose, they are not seen again. Exotic-looking breeds like Afghan Hounds are often used for a touch of the "mysterious Middle East." Lobby cards for *The Egyptian* (1954) show two Afghans (out of place in

ancient Egypt) in proximity to actress Gene Tierney's arrogant seductress in scenes eventually cut from the film.

On the opposite end of that spectrum, in *A Christmas Story* (1983), the invasions of the Bump-ass dogs, a raucous pack of thieving Bloodhounds, tell us all we need to know about Ralphie's never-seen neighbors. Foxhounds and Bloodhounds can either be

## Breaking into the Film Business

David Allsberry, co-owner of Animals for Hollywood whose work includes *Cats & Dogs* (2001), *Year of the Dog* (2007), *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), and *Beautiful Boy* (2018), spoke to me about his work with dog actors.

#### Can I get my dog a job in films?

We get solicitations every month from people about their wonderful pet who does tricks. ... Your best bet is to have a trained dog of a breed or type the businesses don't already have. The make or break for any dog actor is always, "Can they do the cute tricks they do at home multiple times in a completely strange environment?"

#### Where do your dog actors come from?

There are wonderful dogs in county shelters and breed rescues, and those are always our first places to go for a specific film if we can't cast from our own dogs here on the ranch. ... We take pride in adopting dogs for training and either keep them for life or place them with a family.

#### What are the ideal qualities in a dog actor?

A very talented dog is not only the one who has thirty tricks in his repertoire and is very good and confident on set, but also able to enjoy being with their actors.

#### What's your favorite dog performance in a film?

*Turner & Hooch* (1989). Beasley, the Dogue de Bordeaux responded brilliantly to training, and the clever camera work enhanced his performance. Tom Hanks not only had a great relationship with Beasley but was game for anything—including more slobber!



*The baseball-loving kids in The Sandlot* (1993) invent a whopping legend about "The Beast"—a vicious brute in a neighbor's yard who devours both men and stray balls. As the boys discover, the dog is actually a playful Mastiff. Above: A queen and her Whippet



playful as shown in both the Red Skelton comedy *A Southern Yankee* (1948) and as Cadet Custer's gregarious hounds in *They Died with their Boots On* (1941) or terrifying when portraying man-trackers in *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and *Django Unchained* (2012).

## THE VERSATILE DANE

Because of their size, Great Danes have been everything on film from clown to savage. Cecil B. DeMille (a stickler for accuracy) cast a pair of period-correct Salukis for Marc Antony's dogs in *Cleopatra* (1934) but at the last minute changed them for more macho Great Danes (which were not a breed until the late 1900s). In Disney's *The Ugly Dachshund* (1966), a comically confused Dane thinks he's one of the Dachsies he was fostered with.

In contrast, Great Danes are arguably the first "terror" dog in an American film. The killer pack of *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939) are genuinely unnerving to watch. The potentially fierce appearance and size of the Dane make it a natural for movie "villains." Horror dogs are generally typecast because of their bulk, dark color, and ability to mimic savagery. For

these malevolent characters, Rottweilers and Mastiffs join Danes, Dobermans, German Shepherds, and Malamutes and Huskies (the latter two usually portraying wolves) are typical monster dogs—their prick ears recalling primal fears of bats, wolves, and the Devil—despite the good temperaments their owners know they have. Even with its prick ears, the Corgi would never make a horror casting call.

## ACCIDENTAL DOGS

Sometimes the most natural cinema canines are the ones without backstage passes. In John Ford's *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), Navajo herding dogs were allowed to wander around the cavalry fort in Monument Valley and appear on screen many times with the soldiers and horses. In these unintended film appearances, a dog's intrinsic nature can cause problems. In *Thunderball* (1965), James Bond is evading two pistol-toting henchmen in a rowdy carnival parade. In one shot, behind the bad guys a stray dog is lifting his leg on the street. Clearly, the director decided the audience wasn't likely to notice the dog's transgression amidst all the fast action and used the take.



From Top: Ellie Woods and Bruiser; Rottweiler in one of the more terrifying scenes in *The Omen*; Winn Dixie

His instinct was largely correct. I've seen *Thunderball* countless times since a

teenager and only recently spotted that accidental dog. **FD**

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