

BECAUSE OF
WINN
DIXIE

A NEW MUSICAL

GOODSPEED MUSICALS
AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

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BECAUSE OF WINN DIXIE

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THE GOODSPEED

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IN MUSICAL THEATRE

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SYNOPSIS

SPOILER ALERT! Read the short take on the next page for no spoilers.

ACT ONE

The show opens on car headlights, which illuminate a large, scruffy dog digging through a garbage pile. In the car are an almost-13-year-old girl, Opal, and her father, a Preacher. Opal sings about her life with her father, in which they are strays – leaving the home where Opal grew up to follow a preaching job. They arrive at their new, unimpressive home, and Opal heads to the grocery store for supplies. The shaggy dog has followed Opal in, and the staff thinks he belongs to Opal and tells her to take him out. She does, and takes a shine to her fellow stray, whom she names after the grocery store – Winn-Dixie. At home, her father is resistant, but eventually allows Opal to keep the dog on a trial basis.

At church we meet some people of the community. Opal meets two girls, standoffish Amanda and Sweetie Pie, who lives up to her name. Preacher's sermon is disrupted by a barking Winn-Dixie. After the service Opal talks to two boys, Stevie and Dunlop Dewberry, whose father left their family. They sing a song warning Opal about the crazy man who works at the pet store, who went to jail. But Opal is undeterred and heads in to buy a dog collar. Otis, the proprietor, is indeed intimidating, but Opal offers to work in the store to pay off the collar, and Otis accepts.

A storm hits, and Winn-Dixie runs away, afraid of the thunder. Opal, Stevie, and Dunlop chase after him, and are dismayed to see he's run to a house with a large tree outside full of glass bottles (which the boys say is owned by a witch). Opal heads to the house and sees Winn-Dixie with Gloria Dump, an old woman with bad eyesight. Gloria is amused to hear about her reputation as a witch, and explains that the bottles in the tree are from when she drank, and she has filled each one with a note to a person she's wronged or lost.

At home, Preacher tells Opal she has to make the right kind of friends – not just dogs and old ladies. At night, he sings a song to his departed wife, forgiving her and telling her Opal's fine, though they never talk about why her mother, an alcoholic, left.

Opal is hanging out with Stevie and Dunlop and run into Amanda, who only wants to read. When a storm hits they head into the library, where the

librarian, Franny, tells them her story. At the pet store, Otis is playing a song on guitar and Opal encourages him. They talk, and Opal opens up about her mother.

At home, Preacher has heard from Amanda that Opal has been working at the pet store, and he forbids her from spending time with Otis.

ACT TWO

All the kids bemoan the fact that Opal and Winn-Dixie won't play with them anymore. The parents sing about their kids sulking.

Opal heads to the library confront Amanda about her having told her mom, and thus Preacher, about Opal's job. But Franny puts a stop to the fight by handing out lozenges with a secret ingredient. They prompt Amanda to reveal that her brother drowned, and that she feels responsible. She and Opal make up, and Opal takes Amanda to Gloria's, where they can write notes to their departed family members to add to the tree. As they do, Jeanne Dewberry visits Preacher again and they bond over their loneliness. Opal is angry that they're growing closer, as she thinks her mother might still return. As a storm gathers, Winn-Dixie breaks loose of the chicken coop where Preacher has put him and runs away.

In the full force of the storm, Opal goes searching for Winn-Dixie around town with the help of the other kids, and the parents gather to look for their kids. Preacher asks that they all go looking for Winn-Dixie, and the adults are hesitant to work with Gloria and Otis, whom they consider dangerous. But when they share their stories, the adults realize they're not so different. As they head out to look for Winn Dixie, the parents open up about their insecurities to each other and to their kids. Opal asks Preacher to tell her more about her mother, and he does. Opal says she is happy to be with her father, and they hug. But they still cannot find Winn-Dixie.

With the search seeming fruitless, the group has gathered at Gloria's house to dry off. Otis sings, and as he does so Winn-Dixie appears, drawn by the music. Opal hugs her dog, happy to have him home.



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SYNOPSIS

SHORT TAKE: The spoiler-free synopsis

A young girl, Opal, and her father, a Preacher, arrive in a small town in Florida for a new job and a new start after Opal's mother has left the family. After getting settled, Opal heads to the grocery store and finds a large shaggy dog has gotten in. The staff thinks the dog is hers, and she decides to keep him and name him Winn-Dixie after the store. Her father is skeptical, but agrees to let Opal keep Winn-Dixie on a trial basis.

Opal and Preacher meet members of the town, and Preacher attempts to hold a sermon but is interrupted by Winn-Dixie, who won't stop barking until he's let inside. Afterwards, two boys in town warn Opal about the scary man who runs the pet shop, and who once went to jail. Opal is undeterred and heads to the store to buy a collar for Winn-Dixie. Otis, the proprietor, is indeed intimidating, but Opal offers to work at the store to pay off the collar, and is accepted.

A storm hits, and Winn-Dixie runs to a house on the outskirts of town rumored to be owned by a witch. Opal meets Gloria Dump, who isn't a witch but does have a large tree full of bottles, each of which holds a message or apology to someone in Gloria's life. Preacher isn't happy at the friends Opal is making, and finds out about her job at the pet store. He forbids her from working there and makes Winn-Dixie sleep outside.

Another storm hits, and Winn-Dixie runs away. Opal gathers the kids of the town to help look for him, and the parents follow to look for their kids. The town comes together for the search, and realizes they all have more in common than they thought. Preacher and Opal have a heart-to-heart about Opal's mom. Opal says she's happy to be with Preacher, and they hug. But Winn Dixie is still missing, and since they've looked everywhere in town, it seems like their search might be fruitless.

CHARACTERS

OPAL BULONI: A nearing thirteen-year-old girl, scrappy and smart and used to fending for herself. She's moved often with her preacher father after her mother, an alcoholic, left the family when she was a toddler. When Opal meets the shaggy dog Winn Dixie, she finds a fellow stray to love.

PREACHER: Opal's father, a good man who's not great at communicating with his daughter, especially about her absent mother. A preacher who has traveled often, he is wrapped up in his own pain at his wife's abandonment, and doesn't quite know how to be a good father to Opal.

WINN DIXIE: A large, shaggy stray dog who does not like to go where he's told. He's scared of thunder.

GLORIA DUMP: An old, nearly blind woman who keeps to herself on the outskirts of town. She has a reputation amongst the kids as a witch, partly because of a large tree full of bottles in her front yard. Both she and her tree are more complicated than they seem – Gloria is an alcoholic in recovery who has filled the tree with the bottles from her past, and filled them with regrets.

OTIS: The proprietor of the local pet store with a reputation as a dangerous man. Although he did go to jail, his gruff exterior hides a good heart and a secret dream of making music.

AMANDA WILKINSON: A girl about the same age as Opal who seems stuck-up and unfriendly, as she always would rather be reading than spending time with the other kids. Despite some initial friction, Opal comes to learn that Amanda is carrying a great deal of sadness over the death of her brother, which she feels responsible for.

STEVIE AND DUNLAP DEWBERRY: Two rambunctious brothers who at first seem rude but become fast friends of Opal's.

SWEETIE PIE THOMAS: Another girl in town who befriends Opal, she's as friendly and sweet as her name indicates.

MISS FRANNY BLOCK: The town librarian, who is full of stories—some her own and some tall tales passed down to her.

JEANNE DEWBERRY: Stevie and Dunlap's mom and an excellent baker. Alone since her husband left, she's lonely and senses a kindred spirit in Preacher.

MEET THE WRITERS



NELL BENJAMIN (*Book and Lyrics*) wrote the lyrics to the current Broadway hit *Mean Girls*, which received multiple Tony Award nominations, including for Best Original Score and Best Musical. She co-wrote the score to *Legally Blonde, the Musical* with composer Laurence O'Keefe, which received Tony Award nominations, Drama Desk nominations, and the Olivier and Helpmann Awards for Best Musical. Nell's play, *The Explorers Club*, won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Play, the Edgerton Foundation New American Plays Award, and an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation grant. Nell has written book and/or lyrics for *Pirates! (or Gilbert and Sullivan plunder'd)*, which was produced at Goodspeed in 2006; *Sarah, Plain and Tall*; *Cam Jansen* (Drama Desk-nominated); *I Want My Hat Back*; *How I Became A Pirate*; *The Mice*; and *Life of the Party*. Her upcoming musicals include *Huzzah!* and *Life of the Party*. Nell's Television writing includes "Unhappily Ever After," Animal Planet's "Whoa! Sunday with Mo Rocca," "Electric Company," "Best Time Ever with Neil Patrick Harris," "Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway," and "Julie's Greenroom." Nell is the recipient of the Kleban Foundation Award and a Jonathan Larson Grant.



DUNCAN SHEIK (*Music*) won the Tony Awards for Best Original Score and Best Orchestrations for *Spring Awakening*. His work on that musical also won the Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Album. Sheik wrote the music and lyrics for *American Psycho*. His other theatre credits include *The Secret Life of Bees* (Atlantic Theater Company 2019), *Alice by Heart* (MCC Theater 2019), *Whisper House* (London 2017, Old Globe Theater 2011), and *Noir* (currently in development). As a recording artist, Sheik received a Grammy nomination for Best Male Pop Vocal for his song "Barely Breathing" off his 1996 album *Duncan Sheik*, which was certified Gold by the Recording Industry Association.



KATE DICAMILLO (*Author of original novel*) is the author of many books for young readers. Her books have been awarded the Newbery Medal (*Flora & Ulysses* in 2014 and *The Tale of Despereaux* in 2004); the Newbery Honor (*Because of Winn-Dixie*, 2001), the *Boston Globe* Horn Book Award (*The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, 2006), and the Theodor Geisel Medal and honor (*Bink and Gollie*, co-author Alison McGhee, 2011; *Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride*, 2007). She is a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Emerita, appointed by the Library of Congress. A native of Florida, Kate now lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

MEET THE CREATIVE TEAM



JOHN RANDO (Director) Broadway: *Gettin' the Band Back Together*, *On the Town* (Tony nomination), *Penn & Teller on Broadway*, *A Christmas Story*, *The Wedding Singer*, *Urinetown* (Tony and Outer Critics Circle Awards), *A Thousand Clowns*, and Neil Simon's *The Dinner Party*. Off-Broadway: *Jerry Springer – The Opera* (New Group), *Lives of the Saints* (Primary Stages), *The Heir Apparent* (SDCF Calloway Award – Classic Stage Company), *All in the Timing* (Primary Stages – Obie Award), *Carousel* (New York Philharmonic), and *The Toxic Avenger*, among many others. Regional: *Because of Winn Dixie* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival); *The Sting* and *The Honeymooners* (Paper Mill Playhouse); *The Royal Family of Broadway*, *On the Town* and *Pirates of Penzance* (Barrington Stage); among many others. City Center Encores!: *High Button Shoes*, *The New Yorkers*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Little Me*, *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Face the Music*, *Damn Yankees*, and others. International: Jay Chou's *The Secret* and *The Jonathan Lee Musical* (Beijing, China, and Asian Tours).



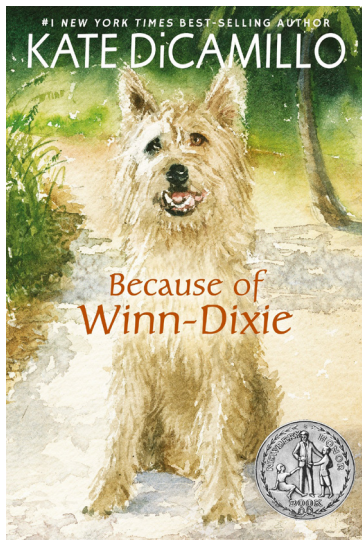
CHRIS BAILEY (Choreographer) choreographed last season's *The Drowsy Chaperone* and *Chasing Rainbows* at The Goodspeed. His other credits include *Gettin' The Band Back Together* (Broadway), *Jerry Springer the Opera* (New Group, 2018 Chita Rivera Award nomination), *The New Yorkers* and *1776* (New York City Center Encores!), *The Entertainer* with Kenneth Branagh (West End), *Assassins* (Menier Chocolate Factory), *Because of Winn Dixie* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival). 2013 Tony Awards opening number "Bigger" (CBS). The Muny: *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (Production Supervisor), *Newsies* (St. Louis Theatre Circle Award), *The Music Man*, *Into the Woods*, *My Fair Lady*, *Tarzan*, *West Side Story*, and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The 2013, 2014, and 2015 Academy Awards (Assistant Choreographer). Feature films: *Cinderella*, *Ted2*, *A Million Ways to Die in the West*, and *Beyond the Sea*.



WILLIAM BERLONI (Animal Director) 2011 Tony Honoree for Excellence in Theatre, 1977 and 2013 Outer Critics Awards, and the 2017 Drama League Award for Unique Contribution to the Theater. Broadway: *Annie* (1977) to *The Ferryman* (2018) and 25 shows in between. Credits include hundreds of off-Broadway and regional theatre productions and the current tour of *Finding Neverland*. Recent television: producer and star of *From Wags to Riches with Bill Berloni* on Discovery Family, *The Village*, *Mr. Robot*, *Power*, *High Maintenance*, *Billions*, *Castle Rock*, *The Sinner*, and *Sesame Street*. Author of *Broadway Tails*. Goodspeed Technical Apprentice 1975-76. Goodspeed Animal Trainer for *Annie*, *Little Rascals*, *Annie Warbucks*, *Annie* (20th Anniversary), *Anything Goes*, and *Darling Grenadine*. Director of Animal Behavior at the Humane Society of New York. All the animals he trains are rescues from shelters.

FROM BOOK TO STAGE

THE MAKING OF *BECAUSE OF WINN DIXIE*



Bill and Dorothy Berloni had been married about 10 years when Bill began talking about training a dog to be the star of a show—not just the loyal companion to a human character, but the main character driving the action of a story. At the time, Dorothy was the Director of Programming at the Bushnell in Hartford and was researching different properties that could be produced as musicals. Their daughter was in grade

school at the time, and Dorothy happened to come across the novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* and thought it could work on the stage.

She and Bill both really wanted to make a show that captured the human-animal bond, even more than the shows Bill had done in the past. That idea stuck in the back of her mind, and in the early 2000s when she read the book, she immediately fell in love with it and thought, “This is the story that we should be telling.” Not only does Winn Dixie develop such a strong bond with the character Opal, but he also rescues the adult characters who make up the larger community in this show.

When Dorothy initially reached out to the publishers of the novel, the movie rights had just been sold, which meant she and Bill would have to wait at least 5 years after the movie was released to the public before they could try again. So, Dorothy made a note in her calendar for 5 years to the day after the movie *Because of Winn-Dixie* came out to call again. Even though several other theaters had also expressed interest in turning this story into a stage production, Kate DiCamillo, the author of the original novel, agreed that Dorothy and Bill were the right people to bring Winn Dixie and Opal’s story to life. Dorothy had never produced or pursued rights to a story for a musical before, despite being in theater all her life, but she found the right partners, Scott Landis and Bud Martin, to help her through the process.

The Berlonis have been intimately involved in all three productions of *Because of Winn Dixie* to date, with Dorothy in a producing role and Bill as Animal Director. Throughout these three productions, they have worked closely with the writers, Nell Benjamin and Duncan Sheik, as well as each creative team, to find the right balance between creating a new musical comedy and honoring the original text of

the book in order to tell the best version of this story. Kate DiCamillo’s original novel has some magical elements interwoven throughout the story, which can be difficult to recreate on stage, but it is also a very homegrown, down-to-earth, emotional story. Finding the right style and flavor for the show has been a lynchpin in getting it right from the beginning.

Dorothy and Bill had worked with writer Nell Benjamin on *Legally Blonde The Musical* (Elle Woods’ dog “Bruiser” was a Berloni dog), and she was the first and only writer they approached about the project. She came on board to write the book and lyrics quickly, and then the Berlonis asked who she would like to work with as a composer. From there, they contacted Duncan Sheik, and after he learned about the project, he said, “I hear the music.” He had grown up in the southeast and felt connected to the roots of this story that takes place in a small town in Florida. Once Sheik joined the team, they were ready to get to work to bring *Because of Winn Dixie* to the stage.



Bill and Dorothy Berloni with Trixie, who appeared in *Goodspeed’s Anything Goes*.

The very first active work on the show was done right here on the Goodspeed campus. In March of 2012, Goodspeed hosted a two-week-long workshop that culminated in a private presentation at our rehearsal studio to which the Goodspeed producers were invited. In 2013, *Because of Winn Dixie* opened at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre followed by a 2015 production at Delaware Theatre Company and 2017 production at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Goodspeed Producer Donna Lynn Hilton had been interested in *Because of Winn Dixie* since its initial workshop on campus. She went to see the show at Delaware Theatre Company and, while she felt that there was still work to be done, she found that her interest in it remained. Executive Director Michael Gennaro and Donna Lynn wanted to continue to include new work on The Goodspeed stage and felt that *Because of Winn Dixie* would really speak to our audience. As Donna Lynn explains, “It’s a beautiful, heartfelt story with great characters and great songs, which speaks to the strength of communities and families—wherever and however they appear—and with a wonderful canine star, Goodspeed feels like a natural fit.”

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANIMAL DIRECTOR BILL BERLONI

Q: How did you get into this line of work?

A: It's an urban legend in East Haddam, Connecticut. I am originally from Berlin, Connecticut, and when I graduated high school I wanted to become an actor. So, instead of wasting my summers having fun, I decided to find a situation where I could be around professionals. I applied and was accepted into the Goodspeed Technical Apprenticeship Program, even though I had no technical skills whatsoever. But, I was a hardworking kid, and I was sort of the kid who had no experience that everyone picked on. So it was okay, because I was doing shows.

My second summer there—the summer of 1976—was the season they produced *Annie*. After they had agreed on doing the show and it had already been posted, they had to solve the problem of having a dog in the show. I was told they had called animal trainers in New York, but they were too expensive. Then, I was told by my colleagues, the other carpenters and props people, that they were approached about training the dog, and they all banded together and said that if they had to train the dog, they were going to quit. They were there to do other jobs! So, they needed someone they could pull into taking on this responsibility, and somehow, I was the kid who was called in to Michael Price's office.

He sat me in his barber chair, said he had noticed my work, and offered me a part in one of the shows—and my Equity card. I was all of 19 years old, and I knew Michael Price was a genius; he obviously recognized my acting ability by how I had been building scenery for two years. But then he said, "All you have to do, Bill, is find and train the dog for the show we're doing," and of course I said yes, because it was a part and my Equity card. That's how the deal was struck.

In the same conversation, he told me, "I'll give you \$35 to find the dog and feed it all summer." So, I had to either borrow a dog or find a cheap place to get a dog, which is

what led me to searching in animal shelters, where I found the original Sandy. I trained him as I trained my own dogs growing up.

After the show closed, I was a junior in college and moving to New York City to go to NYU, so I took Sandy because

I had bonded with him; if I was going to be a starving actor, he was going to be my starving actor dog. Three or four months later, Martin Charnin, the director, called and said they were doing the show for Broadway, and would I be interested in working on it. And I thought, "Any way to work on a Broadway show! Sure, I'll be an animal trainer." When the show opened on April 21, 1977 and became the phenomenon that it was, overnight I became a world-famous animal trainer at the age of 20. After that, it was just getting more and more offers and continuing to do it!



Bill Berloni bringing the original Sandy home from the shelter.

Q: What about your commitment to rescuing animals? Was that a conscious commitment that you made after *Annie*?

A: The only reason I went to an animal shelter for *Annie* was that they had cheap dogs there. Growing up, I was an only child, and my dad was a horticulturist. So, growing up on

the farm until kindergarten, my only companions were my dog, my cat, and I had a rabbit. I remember having a very happy childhood, so I must have figured out how to interact with animals as my companions, not as my property.

That day I went looking for dogs, I had never been to an animal shelter, and I went up to Middletown and went to their dog pound and was mortified that dogs were being kept in terrible cages. As I went from town to town, I just became more and more distressed at animals being kept like this. I ended up at the Connecticut Humane Society that day, and Sandy was there, and he was going to be put to sleep the next morning. I had met a dog that was going to die, and I literally made a promise to myself as I was leaving: "When I grow up, if I ever get another dog, I'm going to rescue one." That was the promise I made that day.

We did get Sandy, and when we went to Broadway they said, "Oh, you need an understudy." So, I went to the ASPCA,

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANIMAL DIRECTOR BILL BERLONI

and I adopted his understudy and named him Arf. Sandy became famous because he was a rescue dog—we used that publicity to champion that cause. I was just profoundly moved that day searching for dogs, and it changed my life.

Q: How many animals have you rescued and worked with throughout your life?

A: It's somewhere over 200. Between 200 and 300 that I have personally owned. And each one of those dogs have helped other dogs get adopted, so it's been an amazing thing when I look back on it.

Q: Do you train all of them to work in show business? Are some just family pets?

A: In 42 years, I've had two family pets. One was a gift to my wife, Dorothy Berloni, when we got married. Then, when my daughter Jenna turned 10, she said, "I want a dog of my own." I told her, "Honey, just go out and pick one, take it up to your bedroom, and it will be yours." And she said, "No, I want one that's mine that you're not going to send on tour!" So, we got her a little dog. But everybody else comes to help pay the mortgage, and they get a forever home, a good retirement plan, and health benefits out of it.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about Bowdie and how you came to know him? What is his personality like?

A: Bowdie is actually the third generation Winn Dixie. When my wife Dorothy first got the rights to do the play, the cover of the book had this large, thin dog on it, and Dorothy found two female dogs—Izzy and Phoebe—who looked exactly like the photo. They were Deerhound-Borzoi mixes, so they were sighthounds. And I had never trained a sighthound. After we adopted them—and this was years before the first production—I started working with them and realized you can't train sighthounds to perform. After that experiment, I thought, "We need a dog that's good with kids and big – Irish Wolfhounds! They're sweet." So, we adopted two Irish Wolfhounds.

Their names were Taran and Callie, and they were actually the dogs that did the Arkansas Repertory Theatre premiere. They were very sweet, and they were great working at the house. And then when actually got into a studio for the rehearsal period, these 150 pound dogs looked at me and went, "You know what? This is too hard. I think I'm just going to lay here." As sweet as they were with the kids—the kids would climb all over them—they were just not that motivated to do the show.

We needed to find the right breed—something that

had Lab in it, maybe a Golden. So, we started looking for mixed breeds, and Dorothy found Bowdie in a newspaper classified ad. He was being put up for adoption by a family in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was a year-old pup who was basically out of control and too big for their home, so I flew out to meet him. He was sweet, he was energetic, he was totally smart, and I thought, "I can train this dog." So, we brought him back in May of 2014, and we were planning to do *Because of Winn Dixie* 8 months later at the Delaware Theatre Company. Except—within 3 months of having him—NBC called and said they were doing *Peter Pan Live!*, and they were looking for a sheepdog. I said, "I don't have a sheepdog, but I have a big, grey dog that could look like a sheepdog." So, before Bowdie even started rehearsal for *Because of Winn Dixie*, he made his television debut in front of 9 million people on NBC and proved to be a real trooper.

He is an amazing dog. He has done the last two productions of the show at the Delaware Theatre Company and Alabama Shakespeare. He's also got quite a film résumé! Between productions, he's a regular character on *Sesame Street*; he plays Schmoodle the Poodle. He starred in an episode of *High Maintenance* which is an HBO show. He's appearing in an upcoming movie called *After the Wedding* as Julianne Moore's dog. So he's got an explosive film career as he comes into the production of *Winn Dixie* here at The Goodspeed.



Bowdie as Schmoodle the Poodle on Sesame Street.

Q: What's it like working with dogs and directors and making a director's vision for the dog come to life? Have you ever had to tell a director their idea just won't work with a particular animal?

A: I believe part of my success is the fact that I had been in theatre, been on stage, and now the more important part of my role is to do just that. I get calls with a project, and I have to sit down and say, "Yes, you can do that in a movie, but you can't do that on stage 8 times a week." Then I give them a different solution to achieve something similar. With

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANIMAL DIRECTOR BILL BERLONI

the ones who listen to that advice, we achieve amazing things. Sometimes it goes well; sometimes it doesn't go well.

On this particular project, obviously not only would my input be important in taking Nell Benjamin's vision and telling them how to make it happen, working with John Rando to find out how within the scene it happens, but I then have to train the actors. On this show, I'm the Animal Director, because the participation starts not only at the script but at the auditions. We have to hire actors who can do this sort of stuff and work with directors who understand my participation. We had worked with John Rando on *A Christmas Story*. We knew John, we loved his work, and he got what it would take to get an animal to perform, so he's really open to listening and working to find what is possible to tell that story.



Bowdie with Josie Todd who plays Opal in Goodspeed's Because of Winn Dixie. ©Diane Sobolewski.

Q: What's it like working with a child actor as the primary person interacting with the dog in *Because of Winn Dixie*?

A: You know, there were so many lucky coincidences in my life that made it all happen. The first of which was that the show that I first worked on with a dog had a child star. Imagine, I'm 19 years old, I've never trained a dog before, and they go, "Here's Kristen Vigard for your rehearsal." I had no idea what we were doing! I basically said to Kristen, who was the original Annie, "Okay, let's go outside and play with Sandy," as I was trying to figure out what we were doing. Then, that natural thing of kids and dogs bonding with each other happened so that, ultimately, when Sandy was in the wings during performance, he was pulling away from me to go see the little girl that he loved.

It was there I learned that the training is secondary to the actors having a real connection with the dog, the bonding. That was the lesson I learned there, because when I started doing shows with adults, and I said, "Okay, let's go outside and play ball!" They'd go, "Are you kidding?" They're less willing to bond, play, get down on all fours with the dog than children are, so children are actually much, much easier to work with because the whole methodology is positive reinforcement, and kids are willing to play more than adult actors.

The people that we have in this show, well, it's very clear that everyone has to love dogs to work on this show. Because everybody in the cast has to have that warm, welcoming feeling to make this show happen. Working with kids made it happen for me and taught me what was really important.

Q: Do the dogs have a training regimen at home when they're not rehearsing for a show? How do they learn all of their commands?

A: Most people think that to train dogs they have to go through their paces every day to be perfect, and what's really important in dog training is being consistent. When you give a command, follow through. It doesn't matter whether it's one time a day or a hundred times a day when we do a show. When the dogs are home, and they're not working, we allow them to be dogs. They run out in the back, and they get dirty, and they roll in the mud, and they play with each other, and they chew up toys—you know, they're dogs, so that they're well balanced. But every time we say to them, "Come on in," we follow through with that command. We continue to be in training every day, but not in that regimented sense.

We teach them how to listen and continue from there. Then, when we get closer to a project, if there's a special behavior, we'll start working with that as part of their daily routine, but not as part of a drill. Once a day, we'll go through the new behaviors, keep them fun, keep them light, and keep reminding them that they have to listen to us. And then it's fun to work with us.

Q: Are you the sole trainer? Do you have other folks who work with you and the animals?

A: Currently, we have a young woman named Kristen Sobanski—she was the trainer on *Darling Grenadine* at The Terris Theatre—Kristen works on the farm full-time. When we get a project, we'll sit down, I'll devise what has to be done, if I'm home I'll work on it, but if I am away,

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANIMAL DIRECTOR BILL BERLONI

she continues the training. On this show, in addition to me backstage we have two of our best trainers—Brian Michael Hoffman and Tyler Garstka. So, we all participate in it, but as the guy who can create the artistic vision, I'm going from one show to the next show, making all that stuff happen. For *Because of Winn Dixie*, I'm committed to the show until we close, so I'll be doing it all.

Q: Do you find that there are certain dogs who respond better to different types of reinforcement? How do you figure out what that dog's style is?

A: Yes, it's a complicated question in that, I don't believe you can train every dog to do every behavior, because we're all a product of nature versus nurture. There are people who have certain IQs, and there are people who don't. There are people who have been sent to schools of higher education, and there are people who haven't. It's the same with dogs, but unfortunately, dogs that are purebred have been engineered genetically to do one thing well. Whether it's a hunting dog, whether it's a guard dog, whether it's a sense dog.

The bloodhounds in *A Christmas Story*, for example, were bred to be hunters. They have really elevated olfactory senses. They're basically dogs with noses, and they just want to sniff everything. Ask them to sit, and they can't focus because their brains are wired to sniff all the time. Finding bloodhounds who would listen to us? We had to meet a lot of them and find two dogs that were actually atypical. They were bad sniffers but a little better at



Bowdie and Bill Berloni. ©Diane Sobolewski.

listening. It's just like casting actors. If I had gone out and met Bowdie and he had bitten me, I would have said, "No, thanks." But if they're willing, have a low threshold for aggression, and they're friendly to people, then I can work with them.

Some dogs work for toys. Some dogs work for food. Some dogs work for affection. We all have our preferences, again, based on nature or nurture, and whatever that thing is that they like the most is what we use as their positive reinforcement.

Q: Do you have any advice or encouragement for people who want to learn more about rescuing animals and how to give them better lives?

A: Yes. The key to my success has been good casting in terms of dogs. Finding the right dog for the right situation. I've been the Director of Animal Behavior at the Humane Society of New York for over 20 years, and I've assisted many adoption agencies. And what happens is well-meaning people come in, and they have this romantic vision of the dog they want. But you have to answer the question, "What is my life like?" My advice to most people who are looking for successful adoptions is to listen to the adoption counselors. They're there to find the right home for the dog, and if you're not the right home, it's only going to fail. Get something that's more suited to your lifestyle, and that's what the adoption agencies are about. And do your research before you go. But most shelters have an adoption process in which they will screen you to see what dog will be good for your lifestyle. That is the best way for an adoption to succeed.

DOGS AND CHILDREN IN POPULAR CULTURE

"It is a book populated with stray dogs and strange musicians, lonely children and lonelier adults. They are all the kind of people that, too often, get lost in the mainstream rush of life. Spending time with them was a revelation for me. What I discovered is that each time you look at the world and the people in it closely, imaginatively, the effort changes you. The world, under the microscope of your attention, opens up like a beautiful, strange flower and gives itself back to you in ways you could never imagine. What stories are hiding behind the faces of the people who you walk past everyday? What love? What hopes? What despair?"

-Kate DiCamillo, on her inspiration for writing Because of Winn-Dixie

In *Because of Winn Dixie*, Opal Buloni's life is seemingly turned upside down when she and her father, a preacher, are forced to move to a small town in Florida. However, just when Opal begins to feel impossibly lonely, she finds a large, always smiling stray dog rummaging through the back dumpsters of the local grocery store. She names the dog Winn Dixie, after the name of that same grocery store, and their journey begins. As Opal spends the summer exploring her new town, Winn Dixie becomes a catalyst for her emotional journey, as well; with the dog's help, Opal gains the courage to meet new people and invest in her community in ways that she never could have expected, and she learns to see people for who they really are and not how others judge them to be.

Part of what makes the story of *Because of Winn Dixie* so deeply adored by so many is the fact that it is a narrative that has been told many times before. Stories about children, their dogs, and the inimitable bond that they share has become somewhat of a cultural mainstay for decades, inspiring hundreds of films, novels, and memoirs of the same theme. American audiences have long been emotionally invested in stories of this kind, so much so, in fact, that an entire website exists to let movie audiences know if the dog dies in a particular film.

To further explore these stories and gain a deeper understanding of the popularity of stories featuring the bond between children and their beloved dogs, keep on reading to see several examples of these stories. Perhaps you will see your own favorites, too!

Clifford the Big Red Dog, a series by Norman Bridwell

"I was having fun at grandma's house, but I kept thinking



about Clifford.

I wondered if he was thinking of me. He was. He loves his mom, but as soon as he could, he hurried home. So did I...because I am thankful for Clifford, and he is thankful for me."

Believe it or not, this series of bestselling children's books, which were later turned into a popular animated video series and then a television series on PBS Kids, almost never happened. Norman Bridwell was told by numerous critics that his illustrations of dogs were boring and not original enough to be noticed as an artist; then, one critic reached out to Bridwell with the idea that he should create a story about a giant dog and her owner, a little girl who rides around on his back like a horse.

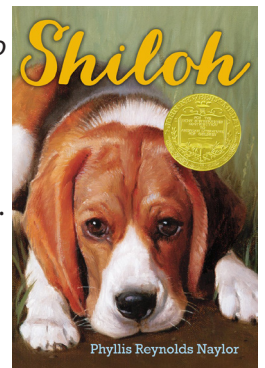
Bridwell took that idea and ran with it, using his daughter and his wife's childhood imaginary friend as inspirations for the story. In each installment of the series, Clifford is seen trying to be a good dog, but due to his size, he is often bumping into things or making mistakes. However, by the end of the story, Emily Elizabeth always forgives Clifford and understands that even though he made these mistakes, he was just trying to be a good boy. This demonstration of forgiveness and acceptance is a major theme in these stories, which allows children to see themselves in Clifford's clumsiness and see that, regardless of their actions, they can still be met with unconditional love and friendship in the same way that Clifford is loved by Emily Elizabeth.

Shiloh, a novel by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

"You get a dog on your mind, it seems to fill up the whole space. Everything you do reminds you of that dog."

Another beloved children's novel, *Shiloh* is the first book in a series by popular author Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. Set in the small town of Friendly, West Virginia in the mid 1900s, *Shiloh* tells the story of Marty, a young boy who finds an abused dog named Shiloh wandering in the hills near his home.

Like *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *Shiloh* has long been a favorite novel of educators because of its complex themes of morality and ethics. At multiple points in the novel, Marty is forced to break rules set by his parents in order to protect Shiloh. The reader comes to understand that though these actions aren't morally good, Marty is ultimately trying to save Shiloh from abuse, and it grows more evident as the story unfolds that humanity is neither purely good nor purely evil. In the same way that Opal discovers that those

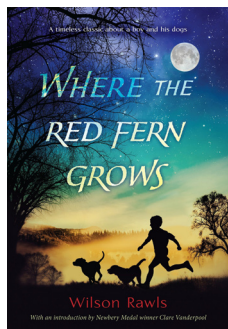


DOGS AND CHILDREN IN POPULAR CULTURE

in her community are more complex than they seem, Shiloh demonstrates that the world is full of contradictions.

Where the Red Fern Grows, a novel by Wilson Rawls

"It's strange indeed how memories can lie dormant in a man's mind for so many years. Yet those memories can be awakened and brought forth fresh and new, just by something you've seen, or something you've heard, or the sight of an old familiar face."



This novel focuses on the story of Billy, who has long dreamt of owning not one, but two dogs. However, he comes from a poor family in the Ozark Mountains, and his parents are unable to afford them. Billy comes up with a plan to earn the money, and he is able to buy the dogs, naming them Old Dan and Little Ann. Soon Billy and his hounds become the best hunting team in the area. Stories of their great achievements spread throughout the region, and Old Dan and Little Ann work together to roam the Ozarks and hunt raccoons, along with Billy's guidance. Wilson Rawls' story has garnered a reputation as one of the most popular children's novels ever written, and a statue of Billy, Dan, and Little Ann is on display at a library in the Ozarks. What makes this novel so compelling is the strength of the bond between Billy and the two hounds; though Billy brought them home and trained them, Old Dan and Little Ann both literally and metaphorically saved him, just like Winn Dixie and Opal.

Lassie

"There are breeds of hunting dogs that are never so happy as when a gun is sounded. But not a collie. It seems as if this breed, having worked so long as man's companion, has learnt that such sharp, savage sounds may mean hurt."

-Lassie Come-Home, a novel by Eric Knight

It's impossible to discuss the impact that dogs have on American popular culture without including Lassie, arguably the original canine superstar! The character of Lassie has roots that can be traced back all the way to 1859, in British author Elizabeth Gaskell's short story "The Half Brothers." In the story, Lassie is described as a female collie with "intelligent, apprehensive eyes" who rescues two half-brothers who are lost and dying in the snow. Lassie's heroic actions in Gaskell's work serves as the origin of Lassie's "hero dog" narrative that continues to grow and evolve through multiple books, film adaptations, and a long running television series. Lassie serves as a symbol of courage, and often inspires the humans around her to take risks and act courageously too, much like Winn Dixie. Whether she

is escaping dogcatchers to find her way home, rescuing a falcon that got caught in a hunting trap, or even rescuing Timmy from the well, Lassie's devotion to her owners and desire to help others has won the hearts of American audiences for decades.



Why are these stories so popular?

The stories and dogs mentioned above are merely a small sampling of thousands of books, movies, plays, and even songs that explore the unique bond between dogs and humans, especially children. What is not clear, however, is exactly why this narrative is explored so often in popular culture.

An answer to the popularity question may lie in the fact that animals live objectively innocent lives, in comparison to the often messy and complex lives of humans. When watching a movie or reading a novel centered around a dog, it is easy to root for that dog; the animal has no secret agenda or hidden subtext in its actions but rather reacts honestly and instinctively to each obstacle that is thrown its way. Audiences find it easy to sympathize with such a character, and it makes the injury or death of an animal so much harder to endure.

In an article titled "Timmy's in the well: Empathy and prosocial helping in dogs," researchers showed that dogs with strong bonds to their owners ran to the door when they heard their owner crying in the next room. In a different study, researchers at Kent State University asked 99 children ages 9-11 several questions about their relationships with their parents, friends, siblings, and dogs. The study found if one type of relationship was strong, it's likely the others were, too. In general, children with strong bonds with their dogs also had strong bonds with their parents and best friends. These studies demonstrate that dogs and humans share a bond that is not easily replicated elsewhere. As a result, dog owners may find comfort in stories that celebrates this type of relationship and may enjoy seeing characters that go through similar feelings.

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

In *Because of Winn Dixie*, The Preacher and Opal are given a number of home-cooked meals to welcome them to the town. They're treated to some southern favorites such as seven layer salad, Frito pie, and icebox cake. Make a southern-inspired meal and try the recipes below!

Callie's "It's a Miracle" Seven Layer Salad

Prep Time: 15 Minutes | Serves 10



Recipe Source: <https://feastandfarm.com/traditional-seven-layer-salad/>

Ingredients

3/4 head iceberg lettuce
1 cup frozen peas thawed
4 hard boiled eggs chopped
3/4 cup chopped green onions
2 medium tomatoes diced bite size pieces
6 slices bacon cooked crisp and crumbled
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
1 cup Miracle Whip mayonnaise
1 cup sour cream
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
salt and pepper for sprinkling

Instructions

1. In a large glass bowl or trifle dish, chop the lettuce in to bite size pieces and add it to the bottom of the bowl in an even layer.
2. Add a pinch of salt and pepper over the lettuce.
3. Add the peas, eggs, onions, tomatoes, bacon and cheese, layering them closer to the edges of the bowl if you choose. Add another sprinkle of salt and pepper then set aside.
4. In a medium bowl, mix the mayonnaise, sour cream and sugar. Stir well and spread over the top of the salad "sealing" it all the way to the edge of the bowl. Sprinkle with a bit of cheese or bacon before serving, or cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to two days.

Dunlap's Favorite Frito Pie

Prep Time: 30 Minutes | Total Time: 50 Minutes | Serves 8



Recipe Source: <https://www.bettycrocker.com/recipes/fritos-pie-casserole/385cf06d-1ead-4fea-afbf-91f2821696fa>

Ingredients

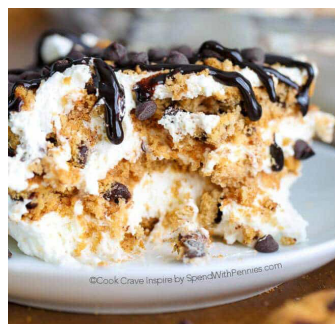
1 lb lean (at least 80%) ground beef
1 cup chopped onions
1 pkg (1 oz) taco seasoning mix
2/3 cup water
1 can (19 oz) enchilada sauce
1 can (15 oz) black beans, drained, rinsed
1 bag (9.25 oz) Fritos™ corn chips
2 cups shredded Mexican cheese blend
1/4 cup chopped green onions
1 cup sour cream

Instructions

1. Heat oven to 350°F. Spray 13x9-inch (3-quart) glass baking dish with cooking spray.
2. In 12-inch nonstick skillet, cook beef and onions over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until brown; drain. Stir in seasoning mix and water. Heat to boiling. Reduce heat to medium; simmer uncovered 3 to 4 minutes or until thickened. Stir in enchilada sauce and black beans; cook 1 to 2 minutes or until heated through.
3. Place 4 cups of Fritos in single layer in baking dish. Top with 1 cup of the cheese; spoon beef mixture over cheese, then top with remaining 1 cup cheese.
4. Bake 18 to 20 minutes or until cheese is melted and edges are bubbly. Top with remaining corn chips and the green onions.

Jeanne's Sorry-It's-Not-Red-Velvet Icebox Cake

Prep Time: 10 Minutes | Total Time: 6 Hours | Serves 12



Recipe Source: <https://www.spendwithpennies.com/chips-ahoy-icebox-cake/>

Ingredients

45 Original Chips Ahoy Cookies (approx. 2 pkgs)
4 cups of heavy cream
3 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla

Instructions

1. Place cold cream, sugar and vanilla in a large bowl. Beat on high until stiff peaks form, set aside.
2. Lay cookies out to cover the bottom of a 9x13 pan. Spread 1/3 of the whipped cream on top of the cookie layer. Repeat two more times finishing with a layer of whipped cream.
3. Crush remaining cookies and sprinkle on top of cake. Cover and refrigerate for 6 hours or overnight.

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