

## ONE MAN AND HIS DOG

'This is an outrage!', booms the website fan,. The crime? I did not cast a relative of the original collie 'Pal' who made the first Lassie movie in 1943 in the 'remake' that I have just completed starring Peter O'Toole, Samantha Morton, John Lynch, Peter Dinklage and Kelly MacDonald. There is worse news to come, I did not seek out a sample of Elizabeth Taylor's DNA to remake my own Cilla, and there are probably marauding bands of Roddy McDowell fans out there equally incensed that their hero's bloodline has also been ignored.

There are I have discovered a number of pitfalls awaiting the director who sets out to make an animal movie, but then at the beginning I did not expect to be the director either. I was originally approached by Doug Schwalbe on behalf of rights owners Classic Media to be the producer of a remake of 'Lassie' set in Scotland. 'Why Scotland?' I innocently asked, dimly remembering black and white tales of mid American rural life seen on television, 'Because that's where the book is set'. So I started to read Eric Knight's original story set in his native Yorkshire just before the Second World War about a dog who is sold to a rich aristocrat and transported to Scotland, who then escapes and makes her way home.

It was an unexpectedly muscular tale with humour and emotion and had something of the Western in it's structure of an innocent set in a hostile and arbitrary landscape. At the time, like many other directors, I was bombarding the 'New Line' producers of Philip Pullman's 'Dark Materials' with storyboards and script samples in an effort to persuade them that I was the right person to adapt and direct the trilogy. These they regarded with lordly disdain and so I agreed to write the script for Lassie in the meantime and cheerfully included a complex and demanding set of sequences that I imagined some other director would have to face.

However the first challenge of the 'animal' picture is that the animal in question has to be chosen and trained long before the movie is made and in our case, before it was financed. As there was no one else to do this I started to look for a heroine (or rather a hero as in every Lassie production the female star has been played by a male dog). I began in England, as that was where we intended to shoot and I interviewed animal trainers who read the script and nervously discussed to the demands that would be made on the star. I also started to meet dogs and quickly learned that the English Rough Collie has gone through a drastic evolution in the last hundred years. No longer a working animal it has been bred as a show dog, and has become smaller and more domesticated in every respect. Confident that there must be exceptions to this we had conversations with remote breeders in outlying islands but still could find no convincing path, even when the search was broadened to include Collies in Hungary, Germany and Australia.

It slowly became clear that the American Collies appeared to be the only breed that maintained the size and physical capabilities of the original dog. Time was becoming an issue as the dog required a minimum of four months training before shooting and more seriously an American dog would require vaccination a full six months before travelling

to another country. I discussed the options with Gary Gero who runs 'Birds and Animals', and whose UK division has trained dogs for '101 Dalmatians' and 'Harry Potter' etc etc,. Initially he too thought a European dog might be a possibility but after further fruitless searching, I found myself in Los Angeles where I met a pair of two year old brothers Carter and Dakota. There was no doubt that they were very different from the European dogs I had seen, larger and in every way more formidable and they both sported the 'Lassie Blaze' a white stripe running from nose to forehead . Neither had done film work before but Carter had appeared as 'Lassie' in a Universal Studio's daily show which involved coming on stage, barking and going off again, not exactly Hamlet. If we were to use an American dog they required immediate vaccination to comply with UK quarantine regulations and so both Carter and Dakota took the needle.

The original Lassie involved a total of seven collies, each with different skills. Our budget did not stretch that far, however a third dog was needed as a minimum 'requirement' and we set out to scour the country for one that was the same age and weight as Carter and Dakota and who carried the 'blaze'. Pictures were emailed from scouts all over the country and one of them looked possible, a family dog called 'Mason' who had no 'experience' but who's owners were willing to let him appear in the film. We decided because of time to inoculate 'Mason' even before we had met him as otherwise we would miss the deadlines.

So in the end we started out training three Collies: Carter Dakota and Mason. Inevitably thing did not turn out quite as expected. From the beginning it was clear that 'Mason' who did not look as much like the other two as I had hoped, had a very special quality. It is hard to explain what this means except that filmmaking is a very unreasonable process of pretending and those who excel at it do so because they can communicate to the audience at this unreasoning level. Mason was resourceful, energetic and yet had a soul which was recognised by everybody.

A few weeks into training it was discovered that Carter had a congenital spinal defect that while unserious in normal life presented a possible risk under the demands of the film. Carter was with us for the whole shoot but took no active part. Thus I was left with Dakota and Mason who were by no means identical and therefore could not be used interchangeably and whose characters were very different. Inevitably and simply, Mason became Lassie, and though we never quite explained this to the insurers (who had also insisted on three interchangeable dogs) Mason did everything. Well, not quite. During the training process we discovered that Dakota was quite extraordinarily brave, and liked jumping and even swimming (Collies don't because of the long hair) and so Dakota became the 'stunt dog' and pretty brilliant he was too.

When I talk about 'training' which was undertaken by a formidable team from 'Birds and Animals' led by Mathilde De Cagnay, I think it was me who was being trained as much as the animals. Clearly you can't explain to an animal that when Nicholas Lyndhurst is chasing you through the forest with a stick he doesn't mean any harm , so you have to re-imagine every action in the film as a game from the animals point of view and create a set of rules and expectations that allow the animal to participate enthusiastically and

therefore have no reluctance repeating the same action again and again. To put it mildly this requires some ingenuity on the part of trainer and director, and it was now clear to me after the long hunt for the dog that I could not imagine anyone else directing the film so I had accepted the inevitable.

This process is testing actors as well as directors, including Peter Dinklage (The Station Agent) who plays a travelling puppeteer and whose scenes were almost entirely with Lassie and another dog called Toots (I had innocently written parts for several other animals). This was something of a brutal education as he had to create and maintain his character and at the same time construct a series of labyrinthine games with his co-star who worked surrounded by trainers whispering (and sometime shouting) encouragement and direction with little regard for his or anyone else's dialogue. On second thoughts perhaps this is not so unusual. Peter O'Toole characteristically retaliated, clearing his throat before each take by barking very loudly. This was mildly confusing to the other actors and extremely confusing to the dogs, but both parties eventually got used to it.

Our whole process was carefully monitored by the American Humane Association whose job it is to ensure that the animal safety is never compromised. There were few people on the planet who had a greater interest in Mason's safety than myself however we had a formidable observer on set at all times in the person of Barbara Casey who watched everything we did and took copious notes. Our only disagreement came during a scene in which the wicked kennel man, Hynes (Steve Pemberton) was whipping 'Lassie' with his belt. For this sequence there were two shots, one in which Steve lashed at Mason with a belt made of felt that Mason had been trained to try and catch. It was harmless and painless. In the second shot Steve with the real belt lashed out at thin air.

'Stop' shouted Barbara. It was a quarter to seven in the evening fifteen minutes before we had to stop shooting, a time at which directorial humour is at a low ebb. 'Yes, Barbara', she was looking very agitated, 'You can't do that', 'Why not, is Mason being harmed?'. 'How am I going to explain this,' she said, 'it looks too realistic, the audience will think the dog is really being hurt'. 'That Barbara is the general idea,' I replied. 'You see my job it to make it look as though the dog is being hurt and your job is to make sure that it isn't really hurt'. 'But how will I convince them?' she said. 'Get out you camera', I suggested (she took pictures of every set up), by now it was about five to seven. I knelt down on the ground in front of Steve. 'Whip me' I said. 'With pleasure' he replied I called out 'Turn over' the camera rolled and Barbara clicked away. So when you see the wicked Hynes beating Lassie it is my back on which the blows are falling, Barbara has the pictures but I hope that she will have the decency to keep them to herself.

As for the Lassie bloodline, there is in fact a direct descendant of the original Lassie in the film, Hey Hey, a beautiful ten year old, who (and this is a first for Pal's descendants) actually gets to play a male dog on film for once. Hopefully this will offer some relief to the fans.