



Finding the Perfect Sandy

BY AMY HEMPE

“ASHLEY! OUR SANDY is singing again!”

The stage manager called to me, and I moved to the wings to watch. While our star, Kayla, was belting out “Tomorrow,” the hound sitting next to her had decided to chime in as well, his earsplitting *a-rooooo* echoing Kayla’s emotional high notes.

“Knock it off!” Kayla shouted at the dog, breaking character. She motioned for the orchestra to stop. “This isn’t working! I can’t sing this song until we find a decent Sandy!” She stormed off the stage.

I walked onstage to clip the leash onto Baily, the foxhound who had wanted a duet.

Sandy is supposed to be merely a supporting role in *Annie*, our school’s musical about a Depression-era orphan and the stray dog she rescues. But Baily clearly thought otherwise. He was our third Sandy, but I knew he would not be the last.

The first Sandy we hired barked at everyone. The second Sandy would get a mad case of the zoomies both onstage and off, leaving a ruin of smashed sets and props in his wake. Our director was very close to just getting a stuffed animal or an actor in a dog suit.

“Ashley, can you please find another dog for us by Monday?” asked Mr. Loomis, our director and drama teacher.

HERE, WINGS ARE SIDE AREAS OF THE STAGE HIDDEN BEHIND THE CURTAINS.



Illustrated by Victoria Tentler-Krylov

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BREAKING CHARACTER IS WHEN AN ACTOR STEPS OUT OF THE ROLE HE OR SHE IS PLAYING.



Somehow, as the assistant stage manager, this had become my job. While I had relished taking on more responsibility, being a canine casting agent was not part of my dream. This had begun to look like an impossible task.

"You bet," I said as I supervised the crew resetting the rehearsal props on the shelves backstage.

For the show, I had found some fantastic 1930s-era furniture. Then I helped design the giant stairway in the home of Daddy Warbucks, the rich man who takes in Annie, so that it looked like it could be in a Vanderbilt mansion. I took pride in this work. But now I felt completely stumped.

I knew that this dog had to be perfect. It had to have a winning personality, but it would also have to look the part. It needed something akin to Kayla's star quality. Despite playing a scraggly orphan, Kayla was beautiful and had a luminous element that you couldn't turn away from. She didn't look at all like an unwanted child, but that didn't matter. This was theater, and the audience wanted to be swept away by the magic.

"I think I can help you get a dog," offered José, our assistant director, when we were all done for the afternoon. Like me, he was in eighth grade. He loved the backstage world and being a problem solver.

"That'd be great," I said, opening the stage door. "I have no idea where to get this elusive pup."

"Personally, I'm more of a lizard person," José said. "Mr. Loomis didn't like my joke that we turn Sandy into a Komodo dragon."

My cousin offered his iguana. He'd be great in the role. All he does is sit there."

"That sounds way too avant-garde for Mr. Loomis," I laughed.

José nodded but added, "In fairness, Mr. Loomis has to keep our program going. There are always threats to cut it, so he doesn't want to see anything too bizarre onstage."

Truer words were never spoken. That was why I chose to stay backstage, despite my love for singing and dancing. My giant wine-colored birthmark that covered half of my face would be too much of a distraction. I had been in the ensemble for one musical, *The Music Man*, and loved it, but afterward I overheard a lady telling Mr. Loomis how *kind* it had been for him to cast me. After that, I relegated myself to working behind the scenes. I decided that I couldn't distract from the main show, and frankly, somebody else could be Mr. Loomis's charity case.

"Let's avoid bizarre," I agreed.

José nodded. "I texted my neighbor Mrs. Karstaadt as soon as Baily started howling. She runs the local shelter, so I thought she could help. She texted me right back saying she knew the perfect dog."

Desperation compelled me to say yes. We could at least look. I'd avoided the shelter so far because we needed a star, not a sad rescue case.

We walked to José's neighbor's house. Once there, Mrs. Karstaadt greeted us with a huge smile and invited us into her kitchen.

"Have I got the dog for you!" She announced. "His name is Farley, and he's a love

CORNELIUS VANDERBILT (1794-1877) WAS A RAILROAD TYCOON AND ONE OF THE RICHEST HUMAN BEANS IN AMERICA AT THE TIME.



LUMINOUS MEANS BRIGHT AND GLOWING, BRILLIANT!



ELUSIVE MEANS DIFFICULT TO CAPTURE OR GRASP.



RELEGATED MEANS ASSIGNED TO A LESSER POSITION.

bug! He works part-time at the airport comforting passengers who are nervous about flying.”

“Farley isn’t a shelter dog?” I asked.

“He used to be,” she explained. “He’d been hit by a car and abandoned before somebody brought him to us. He was adopted by my friend next-door who saw his fantastic potential. Let me get him. He’s out in the backyard playing.” She quickly stepped outside.

I had waited with José for just a moment when she burst back through the door with a wiggly bundle of energy. Farley had soulful eyes



A MONGREL IS A
MIXED-BREED DOG, NOT
A FANCY PUREBRED.



WHO CARES? HE'S
PERFECTLY ADORABLE!

and black and white splotches, but the main thing about him was that he was missing a leg.

"He's a three-legged dog!" I exclaimed, stating the obvious.

"Yes," Mrs. Karstaadt said. "The vet had to amputate his front right leg after he'd been hit. But he gets around very well."

"What kind of dog is he?"

"A hodgepodge!" Mrs. Kartstaadt answered brightly. "We haven't done any DNA testing, so he could be anything. But he has the temperament you need. He's compliant and calm." As she said that, Farley turned around and kissed her.

Both José and I stood back for a moment as we considered this dog. He sat as patient as could be, looking at us.

"Do you think he could be on the stage?" I asked.

"Easily!" Mrs. Karstaadt replied emphatically.

I sighed. "Are there any other dogs at the shelter?"

"Not like him. I have my two labs in the backyard, but they're too goofy for a production like yours. They'd just jump off the stage and try to play with people in the audience." She leaned down to rub Farley's fur. "His owner loves going to shows, so he's excited about the possibility of Farley being onstage."

"Great," I said through clenched teeth. I didn't think that there was any way we could take this dog. People might find his lack of a fourth leg distracting. That was something I'd always heard—you can't make the audience nervous with imperfections. That's what I had

worried happened when I was onstage. People were uncomfortable with half of my face being burgundy. Perhaps Farley could be a great comfort dog backstage for actors with stage fright. But he couldn't be one of the main performers.

"Thanks, Mrs. Karstaadt! Bring him by on Monday, please," José said as we left. I feared my assistant stage managing career would screech to a sudden ending once Mr. Loomis saw this mongrel.

Unfortunately, my weekend search did not yield any other possibilities. The owner of a cute terrier I saw in the park told me that her dog was too terrified to go near others. Another person out walking a schnauzer admitted that her pet had some housetraining issues and might pee on the stage.

I had no idea that finding a dog actor was so hard. What did they do in Hollywood?

On Monday after school, Mr. Loomis called me into his office. I cringed, expecting the worst.

"Ashley! This new dog is going to be fantastic!" he gushed.

I was stunned. "Which dog do you mean?" Did he find someone else?

"Farley! He's a perfect Sandy. Mrs. Karstaadt brought him by earlier this morning. Well done!"

"You mean the three-legged mutt?"

"That's the one! He's wonderful. We practiced with Kayla, and she loves him. He doesn't chew or bark or do anything bad. He just follows her around."

I was confused. "Aren't you worried that people will freak out over him having only three legs?"

“What? Of course not! Look, his personality speaks for itself. If he can work at a busy airport, then he can work in a theater.”

“But I thought that performers had to be perfect.” Mr. Loomis looked startled by that. “Or at least, not have any blatant imperfections,” I clarified.

He looked at me carefully. “Is there something going on?” he asked.

“People were distracted when I was in *The Music Man*. That’s why I stopped performing. I didn’t want to create visual tension. And I didn’t want to be a charity case.”

“Oh, Ashley,” he said. “You have to know that you weren’t cast out of pity. You were cast because you have a good vocal range, and you can follow choreography well.”

“But that lady after the show . . .,” I started to say.

“What lady?” he asked.

“The one who said you were so kind to put me in the show. She acted like there’d be no reason to cast me other than sympathy.”

“She clearly has some issues that frankly are none of our concern. I was very disappointed when you didn’t audition for *Annie*. I thought you would have been a great Miss Hannigan.”

I felt very confused. “I thought you only wanted perfection, like Kayla. That’s why I kept looking for the perfect Sandy.”

“Oh, my goodness,” he said, smiling.

“Theater is art, and if everyone in it were perfect, it would be the most boring place in the world. As for Kayla, I can tell you that

she works her butt off. She has a dream, and whatever you may think of her, she has talent and skill. But she’s only one actress. The world needs all sorts of performers.”

He was right. Kayla had taken music and dancing lessons since she was a toddler, and she spent nearly every weekend performing somewhere. I had been unfair to assume she’d gotten her roles because of her looks.

“So you think Farley will work out as Sandy?”





"Farley will nail the part, I believe."

Farley was a huge hit, it turned out. He put his head in Kayla's lap when she sang her big number, and looked appropriately adorable everywhere else. A few people made comments about how sweet it was for us to give this dog a chance, but we pointed out that he was the best dog actor we knew and that he had a second job to boot. We had stellar reviews, and all of them mentioned both Kayla's talent and Farley's adorableness. A few of them mentioned the set with the mansion stairway, which delighted me.

Once *Annie* ended, we had one more play to put on. No singing or dancing, but it was still a chance to be onstage. I was looking at the audition sheet when José spotted me.

"Mr. Loomis asked me to give this to you," he said. "It's information about a performing arts camp."

"Thanks." I smiled and took the packet. I looked back at the audition sheet and signed my name next to the 3:30 slot that was available.

"So you're returning to the world of performing?" José asked.

"Why not?" I responded. "After all, theater is for everyone." 🐜

