

“Theatre of the Canine”

Notes for the owner-handler.

For over thirty years, I have made a living in live theatre--as technician, actor, director, and for the last twenty years, artistic director for a small dinner theatre. I acquired my first AKC Chihuahua in 1978, and for the last twenty-eight years my recreational time has been spent doing “Theatre of the Canine”. The confirmation ring is, after all, the most theatrical of canine pursuits. Agility, obedience, and field trials are competition events where the highest score or lowest time wins; they are truly sport. The conformation ring is about beauty, aesthetics and the poetry of movement. *That* is theatre.

Hopefully the opening statement will help you understand my approach to handling. I am not saying that handlers should be flamboyant, or melodramatic in their presentation, but just the opposite; performance in the ring should look natural, real, and unrehearsed. In order to achieve this look and feel, it takes a lot of work. It’s not just about teaching the dog the routines, but also building a relationship that will give the dog complete trust in the handler, and will allow the dog to enjoy the performance.

As an owner-handler, you will wear a lot of hats. During the training period, you are the director, the dog the actor. You are training for a high stress situation, so working in a low stress environment won’t do. Train in an area with distractions--such as noise, various surfaces, and unusual lighting situations. When training a Chihuahua to stack on the table, train from both sides; it will come in handy later on. You must also train yourself for your role in the ring, which is that of supporting actor at its most obvious, or at the highest level, background scenery for your dog. The best handler is the one you barely notice; you will see the dog, and it will look glorious, but the handler’s presentation will seem so effortless, it will almost escape notice. This type of presentation is not developed overnight, but through years of training and experience.

The thing that most often plagues owner-handlers is lack of concentration or focus. A dog show is a very high-energy event; there are a multitude of distractions all around you as you prepare to enter the ring. You must develop the ability to clear your mind and calm yourself in order to fully concentrate and enjoy the task before you. Additionally, your dog will be reading your mood. If you are nervous, the dog will be nervous, and the result will be a less than optimal performance.

The phenomenon you are experiencing is stage fright. Everyone who has ever shown a dog has fought this battle. Those who tell you otherwise have probably been showing so long they have forgotten. Every handler makes mistakes in the ring, and so

will you. This is part of the learning process. Your priority must be to arrive at the ring prepared. You and your dog must be in the best physical and mental condition possible, and be ready to execute the performance you have rehearsed in your training sessions.

The next column will cover some pre-show stress relievers, and a few cautionary notes. This will appear during the holiday season, please remember our men and women overseas, and all those who have suffered misfortune in our own country. Happy holidays.