

TRAINING CATS AND DOGS AND CHOOKS

Linda Carr learns there's more than meets the eye when she encounters some local film stars and their handler

Dog trainers take lessons from chickens! It sounds counter intuitive but Becky Faulkner, from We Do Animals, has no hesitation in explaining further:

"Working with chickens is very humbling because dogs will try and figure out what you want, even if you're not clear. They want to engage with you, want to be with you, play the game. Chickens on the other hand will simply go, just leave. They will show you in very quick time exactly what you have trained them to do."





"So you might think you're training a chicken to peck at an object but if your timing is off, what you've actually trained the chicken to do is to hover just above the object. Chickens teach us how to be a better trainer because when we're training, the onus is on the teacher to teach, not the learner to learn."

After a number of years working in the UK as a zoo keeper – where she trained exotic animals for safe medical procedures and educational demonstrations – Becky came for a short stint to Australia and volunteered at wildlife parks, eventually working with the animal trainer for the 1998 movie *Babe 2*.

She enjoyed that experience so much she changed her career focus to animal training for theatre and screen and has been here ever since.

Becky's first theatre gig was with *Legally Blonde: The Musical*.

"That was so wonderful, working with a bulldog. The show toured the Australian east coast and it was the same dog on all shows – eight shows a week. Well,

you know, that's hard on people. It's hard on dogs, too. Part of the preparation is thinking about what the animal is going to experience each week as a whole. So, there's body conditioning."

"There's the mental conditioning too. Perhaps if we're on a night shoot we would do some training or walking at night so we know that the dogs are going to be comfortable. We don't want to just throw them into a situation that could be quite scary for them. We have to prepare them for everything that we're doing, everything they're going to face, the mental and the physical."

Two of Becky's most significant film assignments have been on the hauntingly beautiful Australian film *The Rooster* and television miniseries *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*. Realistic portrayal of the poignant, emotional connection between the character and the animal in such films is achieved through the trainer's obvious deep respect for the animal as an individual with its own needs.

'It's not about doing tricks. There is



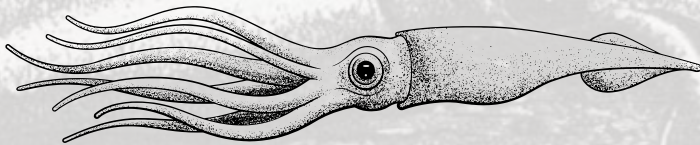
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a science to the training. And getting to know the animal first is hugely important, to create some kind of connection. You make those associations in many ways. The chickens, for example, know that I'm safe to be around. I'm not going to chase or grab them. You could say that we have a relationship.'

The training facility, located just outside Daylesford, is home to eight different varieties of chickens, with far more roosters than any suburban flock could manage. These 19 birds mingle with cats and dogs, not all of whom have had starring roles. Directors will have a certain look they are searching for and this then presents the challenge to find the right 'talent'.

"It all depends on the production. First I need to read the script. I need to know exactly what the dog's going to have to do because it's not just about presenting a dog that looks right. It's about presenting a dog that's going to enjoy – not be scared of – what's going to happen."

Becky uses her experience with the 2024 Australian film *Runt* as an example. "The dog that was the lead character,



Squid, has a really unique look. She is very quirky, a little, scrappy terrier and that's what the director wanted, something that really stood out and looked different. There's a lot of build-up in the film as to why the dog is the way it is. She's a stray and no one loves her. And then, all of a sudden, a beautiful, little girl makes friends. They're connected forever."

In contrast, Becky's involvement in a recently-released Australian supernatural horror film *Bring Her Back* uses the different – and at times dark – connotations that cats can bring to a story. This is a film in which the cat role is very central to the drama and Becky's own pets, Birdie and Moss, portray the one cat. One of them does not like to be held, whereas the other is very snuggly and thus having two cats that look alike enabled a full range of character behaviour.

Becky is thrilled to be hosting Ken Ramirez – a well-known training presenter from the US – to conduct a conference in Daylesford at the end of 2025. A valuable boost for regional tourism.

"It's going to be three epic days of learning about behaviour and training. It's not dog specific. It's about the application of behavioural science. We often miss out in Victoria – and especially in regional Victoria. We don't get a lot so I'm really happy and proud to be bringing him here." **More information on animal training, workshops and the conference can be found at www.wedoanimals.com.au**

