



Presenting some wonder dogs
of the silver screen

Description

Pooch heroes from the golden years of Hollywood

By **Byron Toben**

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In my last article, reviewing the terrific Segal Centre's world premiere of *SuperDogs: The Musical*, I included my off-hand memory of famous cartoon strip dogs. More apropos would have been live dogs as appeared on film.



Rin Tin Tin postcard – Image: [James Brown](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Four immediately popped into my mind – **Rin Tin Tin** (a German Shepherd), **Lassie** (a Collie), **Spike** (a Mastiff/Labrador retriever cross breed) and **Toto** (a Cairn Terrier).

Rin Tin Tin was found near death on a World War I battleground in France by an American soldier, **Len Duncan**, who named him Rinty and nursed him back to health before bringing him to his California home, where he trained him to appear in silent films. The dog became a worldwide success, appearing in 27 films. The profitability of those films saved the then struggling Warner Brothers studio. Rinty died in 1932, but his son Rin Tin Tin Jr. carried on in 15 more films and TV shows.

Lassie (originally named Pal) was cast in the 1943 MGM film version of **Lassie Come Home**, the popular 1940 novel by Eric Knight. This led to a 1945 sequel and five other films starring Pal as Lassie. A male dog, Pal had been hired as a standby stunt dog for the less agile female collie who had been selected but was promoted to the lead as shooting progressed.



Pal in his first screen appearance as Lassie in MGM's *Lassie Come Home* (1943) – Image: MGM

Spike, a male dog, was rescued from a shelter as a pup by **Frank Weatherwax**, an animal trainer, and became his pet as well as his pupil. He appeared in 11 films, most notably (although uncredited) in the 1957 Disney ***Old Yeller***, based on the 1956 novel of the same name by Fred Gipson. He appeared in ten other films as well as a 1967 Disney TV anthology series.

Toto, a female dog, became most famous as the pet who unmasked ***The Wizard of Oz*** in the 1939 MGM movie based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 book. She became a pet of **Judy Garland** who had starred as Dorothy in that musical movie, thus bearing the closest relationship of these four canines to *SuperDogs: The Musical*, although tearing down the curtain exposing loud-mouthed snake oil salesmen is not in their list of stunts. Many have referred to Toto vis a vis dealing with a certain USA political figure.



"I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too!" scene from *The Wizard of Oz* – Image: MGM

Toto appeared in several other movies, none so famous as the now-iconic *Wizard of Oz*.

As with my comic strip list, WestmountMag viewers are invited to add any other live dog movie actors they favour.

Feature image: *Spike* in scene from *Old Yeller*, Walt Disney productions

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Byron Toben, a past president of The Montreal Press Club, has been WestmountMag.ca's theatre reviewer since July 2015. Previously, he wrote for since terminated web sites Rover Arts and Charlebois Post, print weekly The Downtowner and print monthly The Senior Times. He also is an expert consultant on U.S. work permits for Canadians.

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