

Guinea Pig Training Tricks From The Movie Bedtime Stories

The animal trainer who worked with the guinea pigs in the movie Bedtime Stories reveals some of his training methods.

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Guinea Pigs are more laid-back and easy-going.
Photos Courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures
Guinea Pigs are trainable.

When veteran animal trainer Steve Berens of Animals of Distinction was approached about working on Walt Disney Pictures' Bedtime Stories, the script originally called for a hamster in the Bugsy role. But he lobbied for a species substitution. "Hamsters don't really like being handled a lot," he explained. "Guinea pigs are more laid-back and easy-going."

And since the animals were going to be sharing scenes with Adam Sandler and the film's child actors, Jonathan Morgan Heit and Laura Ann Kesling, Berens wanted to ensure the four-legged animal actor was a happy co-star. He got his way.

But Berens found himself in uncharted training territory. His first mission was to confirm that guinea pigs are trainable. He called on a couple resident guinea pigs for the test. "I started prepping them because I had never trained them before," Berens said. "While rats are smart, guinea pigs aren't as bright." However, despite the challenges, Berens found that he would be able to train the animals. Mission one accomplished.

His next step was casting. Berens tapped two previously unknown guinea pigs for the film, Stitches and Thimbles, as well as two understudies. Then the training began. Employing positive training techniques and a method used for garnering good performances from any actor — treats, Berens began the slow process of teaching Stitches and Thimbles the behaviors they'd need to perform in the film.

In the film, Bugsy runs on a makeshift treadmill fashioned from an overturned sander. "Guinea pigs aren't known for speed and agility," Berens said. "But we were able to get them running on that treadmill. You get a little bit of movement and pay that off and eventually they understand." The trainer said it took three weeks to train the behavior.

Next up was a bedtime behavior. The more complex task took Berens twice as long to train and involved Bugsy ringing a bell at bedtime and then tucking himself into bed. To teach the first part of the behavior, the trainer held a treat at the bell — carrots were a favorite — to draw the animals to the desired spot. Each time the guinea pigs successfully grabbed the rope to ring the bell they were rewarded and ultimately caught on.

"From there, we taught the guinea pig to run up into his bed, stick his nose in and crawl under the sheet," Berens said. He's fairly certain that no other guinea pig has ever been taught to tuck itself into bed. Berens is proud to say that only Bugsy's eyes are computer generated. "It's great to show people that these animals can do these things themselves."

Bedtime Stories is an adventure comedy starring Adam Sandler as Skeeter Bronson, a hotel handyman whose life is changed forever when the bedtime stories he tells his niece and nephew start to mysteriously come true. When he tries to help his family by telling one outlandish tale after another, it's the kids' unexpected contributions that turn all of their lives upside down. The film opens nationwide on December 25, 2008.