

# Onion!

*Sarah Barlow and Aron Paramor are new to dog ownership, but you'd never guess from their article below. When Sarah contacted me about her impressive mini bull, she wasn't kidding. Onion is Sarah and Aron's first dog, though likely not their last! She is a Tsornin miniature bull terrier, bred by Alex Abrahams, who holds regular clicker-training classes for bull terriers in Birmingham. Below is an article about how through Onion's clicker training, she became a film star!*

## Faking It — Training a Bull Terrier for the Silver Screen

### The Brief

Onion, our 18-month-old miniature bull terrier, had been offered a small part in a film, and we had three weeks to transform her into a convincing movie star! The director knew that Onion was a pet dog, and not screen-trained, but as lead actors such as Ewan McGregor, Sophie Okonedo and Dame Eileen Atkins had waived their usual fees to appear in this low-budget British movie, we wanted to ensure that Onion's contribution was as professional as possible.

We were confident she'd be undaunted by the film set and by meeting strangers — the breeder delivered us a happy, well-socialised dog who has never been afraid of anyone or anything, and has never shown the slightest aggression. She would be her delightful, irrepressible self. She's certainly not shy of the limelight — in fact she adores an audience: she elicited a round of applause in the ring at Crufts 2005 for her 'spirited' behaviour; and when she 'line-danced' in the famous bull terrier display team she loved every lively, crazy minute of it.

In the film, Onion would be required to approach an actor who had his trousers round his ankles and sniff around him. Simple, you might think. But given that the film was being shot on London's Hampstead Heath (a paradise of canine temptations), that the set would be filled with lots of people every one of whom Onion would want to greet and play with, and that there would be all manner of film equipment to investigate, there was more than a possibility that she might be distracted. Could we hope to become credible dog wranglers for the day and get Onion to do what was expected of her?



Was Onion ready for her big day?

### Trick and Treat

Thankfully, we had a formidable weapon in our armoury — the clicker! When Onion had arrived in our house aged three months old, she knew much more than we did about training. We had never owned a dog — let alone an independent-minded bull terrier. If we had followed the unsolicited advice of well-meaning strangers in her first few months, we would have beaten her with a belt (this being the only way to 'show her who's boss' according to a seemingly mild-mannered old gent), used a choke chain, sprayed her with water, put a knee in her chest and regularly banged her over the head with a food bowl. Luckily though, from a tiny puppy Onion had learnt that a click meant a treat, and she was prepared to do almost anything for a click!

When Onion was little, we set ourselves what appeared to be an impossible task — teaching her to bark on command. To our astonishment, very soon she was 'speaking' when asked to! Any doubts we might have had about the efficacy of the clicker and reward-based training were dispelled. Now, to the great delight of the neighbourhood children, she can also 'whisper', spin round in circles, jump high in the air, roll a ball with her nose, and walk backwards. Perhaps we could have taught her to do all of these things by judicious use of a belt or ear pinching, but neither of us can imagine how. Onion can be a stubborn little minx, but she responds well to the non-confrontational approach of positive reinforcement — to the click (an 'audible tick', which translates as 'good girl, here's some dried liver') rather than the clack. So Onion was clearly more than capable of learning to sniff an actor on a film set, but the question was, were we up to training her in three weeks?

### Week One

#### The experimentation began.

Sniffing was what we'd been asked for, so audible, visible sniffing was what we aimed to achieve. We began by hiding tripe stick under bits of material in the house, but Onion found it simpler to chew the stick through the fabric rather than waste time sniffing about. This was deemed unlikely to please the film's wardrobe people, so we decided to hide a toy instead. The concealed Kong elicited frenzied sniffing, earning her lots of clicks and delicious treats and fulsome praise. But a Kong is not easily disguised on set, especially in someone's trousers, so we had somehow to wear Onion back on to the treats. We made a deal. If she sniffed where we had hidden one boring dog



Indoors, the sniffing was coming along nicely.

biscuit, but left the biscuit alone, she would get two pieces of tripe stick (Onion's version of caviar) as a reward. It worked! By the end of week one, she was sniffing reliably whatever we hid, so we were able to progress to the great outdoors where there were more distractions.

### Week Two

For the next seven days we stood in the park looking shifty, hiding treats in our trouser turn-ups or socks and bidding Onion find them. She sniffed in an exaggerated fashion, and we enthusiastically rewarded her efforts. We also practised for the shot of Onion approaching the actor. This, we concluded, would be easy. The camera people could get a good long-shot of Onion running a straight line if we held her collar until her favourite red ball had rolled a distance away and then let her follow it. She ran straight as an arrow every time.



Paying close attention to the clicker outside is a good start!

In case any licking was required on the day, we carried out detailed analysis of the properties of spreads — what would make her lick the actor's legs if this were required? Could we ask a leading actor to smear his knees with honey? We never did quite decide.

### Week Three

For the final week, we recruited friends and neighbours to the cause. Onion soon cottoned on that if she was sent over to see anyone she would get a click and a very tasty treat for sniffing round their ankles! The training was paying off!

The evening before filming, we suddenly wondered if the semi-clad actor might be lying down in the scene — we had to hope not, as Onion would undoubtedly be more interested in sniffing his bare bum than any treat-stuffed trousers.

### The Moment of Truth

The day of filming dawned — a beautiful, fiercely hot August day. We arrived with a clean, lightly oiled dog, a crate, and a cool-bag containing chicken strips, sausages, prawns, tripe sticks, Marmite, peanut butter, honey, yoghurt, ice cubes and a large bottle of water. We met actor Tom Hardy who had appeared in *Layer Cake*, *Band of Brothers* and *Star Trek: Nemesis* and would now share a scene with Onion. He would be the-man-with-his-

trousers-round-his-ankles. The writer explained that in this part of the film, Tom Hardy's character is first rejected by a girl and then sniffed at and rejected by Onion!

Onion's scene was one of the last to be shot. They would film a whole seduction scene between Tom Hardy and Sophie Okonedo (star of *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Hotel Rwanda*), culminating in Okonedo's departure and Onion's arrival. They were running out of light, so there would be no time for a rehearsal. So, no separate shots of Onion running along, and no trial runs, just one long scene shot in a single take. Also, we realised, no opportunity to fill Hardy's trousers with treats, as he would be wearing them at the start of the scene and take them down only halfway through. With seconds to go, we hurriedly scattered treats around Hardy's feet. We held the exuberant Onion out of shot, praying she wouldn't bark with the joy of it all. Cameras rolled, Hardy and Okonedo played out their scene, then the



Tom Hardy and Onion just after filming the 'sniffing scene'.

director waved his arm and Onion was released. She shot away, looking as though she would head straight past Hardy. When we thought all was lost, she turned (the whiff of tripe-stick on the evening breeze?) and went to investigate this strange semi-naked man. Before she could embark on the famous sniffing, Hardy made a swift movement to pull up his trousers and she backed off, but wouldn't leave him alone. In character, he tried to shoo her away, and they began dancing round each other like boxers in a ring. Finally, Hardy ran out of shot, with Onion in hot pursuit. "Cut!" Lots of laughter and applause all round. The scene hadn't turned out quite as expected — Hardy had lost the girl but found a dog. So pleased were the writer and

director with this improvised change in the ending, that they quickly set up another shot — Tom Hardy and Onion sitting on a bench together as the light faded away. Onion had done it! Plus, she had had a wonderful time on the heath being petted and played with by writer, director, actors and half of the crew! And we had enjoyed being dog wranglers for one day.

So look out for *Scenes of a Sexual Nature*, due in cinemas early in 2006, and when you see that miniature bull terrier on the big screen, you'll know that those moments are the culmination of three weeks of clicker training! In the end, our lovely Onion did us proud and confidently held her own with major British movie stars!

By Sarah Barlow and Aron Paramor

Feature by Sarah Barlow

# Dog in Scenes of a Sexual Nature!



**Bull Terriers aren't all like Morris: some are very clever and remarkably well behaved indeed!**

ONION, AN 18-MONTH-OLD Miniature Bull Terrier, won a role in *Scenes of a Sexual Nature*, a new British movie, when director Ed Blum saw a photograph of her and cast her immediately. Other stars who agreed to waive their usual fees to appear in this low-budget feature film included Ewan McGregor (*Trainspotting*, *Star Wars*), Sophie Okonedo (*Dirty Pretty Things*, *Hotel Rwanda*), and Dame Eileen Atkins (*Goldfingers*, *The Hours*). Onion enjoys the limelight, having won a first at Crufts, and appeared as part of the Bull Terrier display team. This was her film debut!

The movie was shot on London's Hampstead Heath, so, on arrival at 10pm, Onion and her owners, laden with doggie provisions, were taken across the heath to a study spot where the crew were filming. Onion was welcomed on set by the crew and writer Achille Ditta (No Angels), and was accorded full star status as her wardrobe was carefully considered. Would she wear the studied leather collar with matching lead, or the camouflage



set? After some discussion with the director, the stylist chose the pink as being most appropriate for Onion's role. As is common on film sets, there was a period of waiting around before Onion was called for her scene. While the actors took time out under a makeshift awning and refreshed themselves with tea, crisps and chocolate, Onion had special luxury accommodation - not quite her own trailer, but her very own crate furnished with a sheepskin rug. It was a baking hot summer's day, so she also enjoyed a constant supply of water ice and her favourite snacks, kept chilled.

Thus, settling easily into the lifestyle of a canine starlet, she was able to divide her time between brief walks on the heath, snoozes in her crate and relaxing massage sessions to ease any tension.

In between shooting his scenes with Sophie Okonedo, British pin-up actor Tom Hardy (famous for his leading roles in *Lager Cake*, *Band of Brothers* and *Star Trek: Nemesis*) was introduced to his canine co-star. A dog owner himself



he has a Staffie-Lab cross, he seemed delighted to be appearing in a scene with Onion, and played with her off-set.

Finally, the moment came for Onion's starring role! By now it was around 6.30pm on the last day of filming. Time was running out, and it was decided that it would be a one-shot wonder - no rehearsal! If Onion didn't perform, the scene with the dog would have to be cut. The director explained that Tom Hardy and Sophie Okonedo would make out by a tree, then the actress would stomp away, leaving Tom Hardy with his trousers down - literally! Onion was to run past him, and, if possible, to sniff around him. Weeks of training were on the line!

As Sophie Okonedo left the set, a signal was given and Onion was released. It looked as though she might continue straight past Tom Hardy, then, at the last moment, she turned (possibly attracted by the tripe sticks that had been liberally scattered at the actor's feet) and started to interact with him. He hastily pulled up his trousers, and, rather than cut, the director allowed the cameras to keep rolling as Onion and Tom Hardy improvised together in what became

a very funny scene. They chased each other around before both running off into the distance. On the word "cut" the whole crew broke into applause and laughter. Onion had exceeded all expectations.

Director Ed Blum was delighted with her performance, and, after a discussion with writer Achille Ditta, decided that the script should be rewritten to include another last-minute scene between Tom Hardy and Onion. The light was fading fast as the crew set up the shot - of the actor and Onion sitting on a park bench.

In the end, Tom Hardy's character may not have got the girl (Sophie Okonedo), but he did get the dog!

Scenes of a Sexual Nature traces seven relationships during one afternoon on Hampstead Heath. It hopes to have a cinema release early in 2006.

Since her acting debut, Onion has been taken on by an animal agency, so look out for more appearances soon!

A collection of Onion children's books is also planned for this autumn.



**GOOD BREEDING**

Onion had a great start to life - breeder Alex Abrahams started clicker training her 'virtually from birth, and she loves to learn. Her repertoire of tricks includes barking on-command, rolling a ball, jumping in the air, sitting in a circle, and many other feats unusual for her breed!

Four other members of the litter, who spent the Torrinin months, join Onion in the line-up of the Bull Terrier display team, which performed so memorably at the King & Stone Show of 2004 and 2005. When she and sister, Eka, and brother, Kaseka, went to Crufts in 2005, they came back with four firsts between them. Eka has since gone on to win best of breed at the Welsh Kennel Club Show.

Breeder Alex Abrahams says, 'I'm very proud of the whole litter. They're all made great family pets and they get together regularly to perform and to show. They're a delight and credit to the breed.' Onion and her sister, Heidi, were both named Club Good Citizen silver awards, and are going for gold. Who says a Bull Terrier is untrainable?!

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Column in *Dog World*, October 2005

## Onion does her bit for the breed



Onion shares the limelight with actor Tom Hardy.

A MINIATURE Bull Terrier called Onion appears in two scenes of the forthcoming movie *Scenes of a Sexual Nature*, starring Ewan McGregor.

Onion's owner, actor Aron Paramor, was originally offered a small part in the film but his scene was cut. Onion stayed in the movie - in fact she had been cast for only one scene but following a star performance a second scenario was improvised to include her.

**Very comfortable**

She appeared with young British actor Tom Hardy, who appeared in *Layer Cake* among other screen work, of whom Aron said: "Tom is obviously very comfortable around dogs, and it was he that got the performance out of Onion.

"At one point he had his trousers down and was being chased around by a Bull Terrier. Not everyone would risk that, but Onion's as soft as butter and he seemed to trust her."

The film, set on London's Hampstead Heath, traces seven relationships as they unfold over a day

and is expected to go into cinemas early next year.

The Miniature Bull Terrier is a vulnerable breed but Onion and the rest of her litter seem determined to put themselves and the rest of their breed on the map. Bred by Alex Abrahams, the seven 20-month-old Torrinin puppies are no strangers to success. Between them they bagged four firsts at Crufts this year, BOB at Welsh Kennel Club, two CCs and two Kennel Club Good Citizen Scheme silver awards.

Not content with that, five of them (including Onion) are members of a line-dancing Bull Terrier display team which has been making an appearance at various canine events.

Since her debut role on the silver screen, Onion has been taken on by an animal agent.

Aron said: "Typical, isn't it; I went to drama school for two years and had to work really hard to find an agent.

"Then I get a dog and she waltzes straight into a role on a feature film and has an agent within a week. She'll probably end up getting more work than me!"

Column in *Dog World*, March 2006

## News Onion's spicy new role

**HOT ON** the heels of her part in the Ewan McGregor movie *Scenes of a Sexual Nature*, two-year-old Miniature Bull Terrier Onion has a new role.

She appears in the music video for Norwegian band A-ha's latest single, 'Cosy Prisons'.

The group, famous for 1980s hits 'Take On Me' and 'The Sun Only Shines on TV', chose to shoot the video not in their native Norway but in a disused pumping house in London's East End.

The extravagant urban set included a burnt-out car, lots of white-painted furniture and a piano. A large heater kept everyone warm, as the cavernous underground room was reportedly 'glacial'.

Apart from the band, the video stars a young boy called Dylan, who sits on a step with Onion.



Two tasks were listed on Onion's brief: barking on command and sitting with a stranger. The barking posed no problem - it was one of Onion's first tricks, and on this occasion she was richly rewarded with highly-coveted tripe sticks. Sitting still was always going to be more of a challenge, but Onion seemed fascinated by the sight of '80s pin-up Morten Harket serenading her, and managed to stay put for most of the song despite all the activity of the set.

The single 'Cosy Prisons', taken from A-ha's Analogue album, is due for release on April 17 April. It has already made it on to Capital Radio's playlist.

**Onion - first rubbing shoulders with Ewan McGregor and now starring in a video.**