

# Animal Magnetism

If you're itching to play an animal, SARAH JESSICA PARKER, ROGER BART and SVETLANA EFREMOVA can take you through the paces

**A**s HBO's critically lauded, cheerfully libidinous television series *Sex and the City* enters another new season, the show's unlikely leading lady, Sarah Jessica Parker, continues her reign as TV's iconic, on-the-prowl, urban vixen. For theatregoers, though, the winsome, frizz-haired comedienne is just as likely to bring to mind a different kind of animal: a limpid-eyed, stray mutt with a heart of gold. It was Parker's irresistible turn in the title role of A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia*, the comedy that debuted in 1995 at the Manhattan Theatre Club and went on to become the nation's most-produced play of 1996, that set a new standard of charm and believability

By Jim O'Quinn,  
Shazia Ahmad and Celia Wren

for actors playing animals—as playwright Gurney will be the first to tell you. His dedication in the published edition of *Sylvia* is “to Sarah Jessica Parker, with love and amazement.”

Playing animals? Is it a skill the average actor needs to cultivate? In fact, a surprising number of plays, old and new, require the human impersonation of animals, sometimes in leading roles—besides theatre for youth and the obvious transformations of *The Lion King* or *Cats*, think of the Rus-

sian classic *Heart of a Dog* by Bulgakov, or Edward Albee's reptile-populated *Seascape*. Lee Blessing recently made a retriever a central figure in his solo show about partisan politics, *Chesapeake* (Mark-Linn Baker made the canine scrappily memorable), and José Rivera paralleled the relationship of the human lovers in his new play *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot* with an erotic verbal *pas de deux* between a cat and a coyote.

What's special about playing an animal on stage and how does an actor prepare for it? *American Theatre* decided to ask those questions to the standard-bearer herself, Ms. Parker, and two other actors whose impersonations of domestic animals garnered unusual attention: Roger Bart, who faced down the Red Baron and earned a Tony award for playing Snoopy in the recent Broadway revival of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*; and Svetlana Efremova, who earned glowing notices (“langorously seductive,” “about as sexy as a cat can be”) as the Cat in South Coast Repertory of California's production of Rivera's *Salvador Dali* earlier this year.

**“I APPROACHED IT LIKE ANY OTHER PART,”** Parker says of her role as Sylvia, a pooch who invades the life of a Manhattan couple and precipitates a marital crisis. “I hadn't ever seen a production with an actor playing an animal. The tricky part was straddling dog and human. We wanted to have a lot of the physical characteristics of a dog, but we also wanted to show Sylvia as a woman who was a potential threat to a marriage.”

Toward that end, director John Tillinger and costume designer Jane Greenwood agreed to minimize the canine look. “When we did the read-through,” Parker says, “I wore baggy overalls,

USE YOUR WILL • LEARN TO ACT



ACTING  
SCHOOL

PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

## ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

### 2000 ACTING PROGRAMS

ACTING CLASSES IN THE TECHNIQUE DEVELOPED BY

**DAVID MAMET** and  
**WILLIAM H. MACY**

#### SPRING PART-TIME PROGRAM

- Begins February, 2000
- 10-Week Session
- Script analysis and repetition

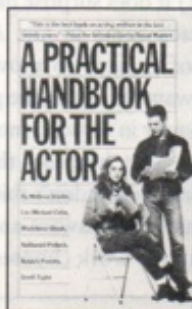
#### 6-WEEK SUMMER INTENSIVE IN NYC

- Begins end of June 2000
- Full conservatory training including voice and movement
- Script analysis/performance technique

#### FULL-TIME 2-YEAR PROGRAM

- Begins Sept., 2000 -- Interview Now
- Full Conservatory Training
- On-Camera Classes
- Students perform at the Atlantic Theater

CALL FOR MORE INFO: **212-691-5919**



\* **INTERVIEW NOW! LIMITED SPACE AVAILABLE** \*  
ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY • 453 West 16th St., New York, NY 10011  
www.atlantictheater.com





KEVIN HOWARD

Wise spirit: Svetlana Efremova as the Cat in South Coast Repertory's *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot*.



CAROL ROBERTO

Curse you, Red Baron! Roger Bart as Snoopy in the Broadway revival of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

big boots and a big sweater. Jane added these fantastic round knee-pads. My hair was its own curly self, but I grew my roots out and didn't get it cut so I looked like a shaggy dog."

How did she find her doggy gestures? "You know, when you're playing a dog, why not try anything? Scratching really fast. Resting my head on my owner's lap. I came up with the leg-shaking. There was a lot of movement in the show, and it ran for six months, so I had to be pretty fit."

Like Parker, Roger Bart looked at the lack of literal costuming—"no giant Snoopy head or paws," he recalls with relief—as an advantage. In creating *Charlie Brown's* singing Snoopy, a character he saw as "a kind of rock star for children," Bart borrowed behavior from his own dog, a Dalmatian named George (after the comedian George Jessel). "I'd always loved the delight in George's eyes when he chewed his leg to try to nab a flea between his teeth," the actor recalls. "Also, he took great pleasure in how many circles he would walk in before he'd find the right time to curl up into a ball. And I loved the way he would pretend to be asleep a lot of times and choose not to respond to us."

"So what I tried to do with Snoopy was to take these gestures that I thought were so funny in my dog and use them. When I did the leg-chewing, I'd tell the sound man to turn up the microphone—it's so important that you hear those little noises that say to the audience, 'He's a dog!' Especially since I didn't look like one."

In the Charles Schulz comic strip, Snoopy spoke only in thought balloons, and in the animated versions of *Peanuts*

he was mute—so Bart found it initially difficult to accept his own speaking and singing voice as part of the character. "At one point, I almost said to [director] Michael Mayer, 'Let's cut everything he says.'"

Ultimately, Bart adds, "It liberates you to play an animal, but it also teaches you that animal-like behavior manifests itself in your body and your characterization when you're playing humans, too. The idea of a character seeming like 'a chicken with its head cut off,' or 'sly as a fox' can add a lot to your work."

**SUCH HUMAN PARALLELS WERE THE KEY** to Russian-born actress Svetlana Efremova's interpretation of the Cat in *Salvador Dali*, an animal who serves as companion and guardian angel to a young Army wife named Gabriela. "The Cat is a wise spirit, and I play her as just another woman. Cats are very feminine, and they have this incredibly strong intuition." The feline's feminine side was inadvertently emphasized by Efremova's five-and-a-half-month pregnancy. "It actually created a great little belly for the cat—I had a tummy that showed, which everybody thought was a great idea, because cats, especially domestic ones, are so fat!"

Costumer Meg Neville dressed Efremova in "a long dress in 1940s style and a little tiny hat in the shape of a cat—the dress created such a feline, luxuriously sexy line that I felt as if I were playing her as a movie star, slow and sexy and mysterious." But hers was a cat that also purred and meowed and indulged in distinctively animal behaviors. "In one scene I was kneading—is that what you call it when a cat presses on a



Woman's best friend? Sarah Jessica Parker, left, and Blythe Danner in the Manhattan Theatre Club production of *Sylvia*.

blanket or a surface with her claws? Or I played with a big ball of yarn—the moment Gabriela touched it, I immediately jumped on the floor and started playing with it. So I was going instantly from being a girlfriend to being an animal on all-fours."

Efremova, who teaches acting at California State University-Fullerton and has been in the U.S. for nine years, drew upon memories of a cat she'd known in Russia, but also spent a month babysitting director Juliette Carrillo's cat (a female, naturally) in preparation for the role: "I watched a lot of her manners and made notes."

Is there a downside to playing animals? Not according to these three veterans. "The great thing about playing dogs," Roger Bart sums up, speaking perhaps for the entire theatrical menagerie, "is that they love life, and there's an innocence about them. That's liberating. I wish I was like that." **AT**

"It liberates you to play an animal, but it also teaches you that animal-like behavior manifests itself in your characterization when you're playing humans."