

Meet the adorable dogs backstage on Broadway

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Colin Donnell, Sutton Foster, Joshua Henry of "Violet" with their new puppies. Photo: Tamara Beckwith

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This was the season Broadway let the dogs out — the pint-size Pomeranian of “Bullets Over Broadway,” Billie Holiday’s Chihuahua in “Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill,” the doomed mutt of “Of Mice and Men.”

But nowhere are there as many paws at play than backstage at the Roundabout Theatre’s “Violet.” Since performances started in March, one star after another — Sutton Foster, Joshua Henry, Colin Donnell — took in puppies they now bring to work. Between matinees and evening shows Wednesdays and Saturdays, the American Airlines Theatre lobby looks like a marble-floored dog park.

“No one’s complained so far,” says company manager Carly Allen. “Most of the cast and crew like the dogs around.”

Like Violet, the scarred young woman who changes the lives of two soldiers she meets, Foster got the ball rolling. “Violet” hadn’t yet started previews when she suffered a terrible loss: Linus, the 8-year-old Shih Tzu who accompanied her everywhere — to “Shrek,” “Anything Goes,” the set of TV’s “Bunheads” — died of a rare lung disease. “I knew, eventually, someday, I’d get another dog,” she says.

She asked her friend, animal wrangler Bill Berloni, to keep his eyes open, in case a “special dog” needed a home. Before she knew it, she and her fiancé, Ted Griffin, were at New Jersey’s Pet ResQ meeting a 7-month-old dachshund-terrier mix from Texas named Mabel.

Driving home, they stopped, turned around — and went back to get her.

“It was a crazy time to bring in a dog, before previews,” the Tony winner concedes. “But it was nice to have something else to obsess over.” Soon Mabel, her crate and her toys were comfortably ensconced in Foster’s dressing room.

Her strapping male co-stars turned to putty in Mabel’s paws. Henry surprised himself: Though he and his wife had contacted a breeder about a mini-Australian labradoodle months before, he really didn’t want a dog at the time. How could he train a puppy and do eight shows a week?

“I’d ask Sutton a lot of questions, which helped my mind-set,” he says. “And Mabel’s just so cute!”

Three months ago, 8-week-old Ruby the labradoodle bounded into his life, and he hasn’t been the same. “Our dogs — that’s pretty much all we talk about,” he says, happily. “At the stage door, people go, ‘You were great! Is Ruby here?’ — because I’ve posted photos of her on Facebook and Twitter.”

It was only a matter of time before Donnell followed suit. He and his girlfriend, actress Patti Murin, knew they wanted to adopt a dog. They just didn't know when — until they met Ruby in Henry's dressing room.

"I could see from their eyes," Henry says, laughing. "They were gonna get a dog real soon!"

That week, the couple scoured Petfinder. And there was a photo of Milo: a big-eyed Chihuahua-dachshund mix who'd washed up in a Tennessee shelter.

Days later, they were in a hotel parking lot in Parsippany, NJ, at 4:30 in the morning waiting for a doggie transport to arrive, with Milo and other adoptees in tow.

That was three weeks ago. Donnell and his 6-pounder have hardly parted since.

"It's been so lovely seeing how happy Sutton is with Mabel," he says. "Now that I have Milo, I know why!"

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