It's a hard-knock *Life*

'Never work with children or animals,' said comedian WC Fields – advice believed to be especially true of the entertainment business – yet the hit musical *Annie* requires a bunch of kids and a dog. **Keith Bain** asked the show's resident director, Anton Luitingh, to put matters into perspective.

Our Annie is a redhead – but with a twist. There's none of that old-school, short, curly-haired cartoonish Annie everyone remembers. She wears plaits and is a grittier, gutsier-looking Annie, not that sweet, dimply, cutesy stereotype. This production hooks into the darker side of life during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the story's set.

The musical is based on a comic strip that satirised the political and social climate of the times. In 2016, it's interesting to note that some of the realities of Depression-era America reflected in the show seem to be relevant to America today. It dawned on me that the Daddy Warbucks character is rather like Donald Trump.

Yet, in the midst of all that doom and gloom, there's an optimistic little girl who steals the show by saying, 'Let's not be cynical. Let's be positive about the future.' She has hope that we can get through tomorrow (and not have Donald Trump as our leader). She does that by making Warbucks see the light.

It was vital to find child actors who could merge with the world created by the more experienced adult performers, rather than have scenes where the children come on, and the audience goes, 'Oh, cute, here come the kids!' These children – seven per performance, aged between nine and 15 – hold their own with the adults.

We auditioned around 150 children in Cape Town, and as many as 200 in Jo'burg. When the London director came in, he said that the children who auditioned in Cape Town, in particular, were on a par with – if not better than – the West End kids.

A child will walk into an audition and we'll all say, 'There she is – that's Annie. She has that spark.' On top of skill and talent, the actresses who play Annie require the personality to be credible as this red-haired bundle of optimism. There's a lot of hope in Annie. In a gloomy world, she lives this fairytale life in her head, believing she will find her parents one day, and that – come what may – tomorrow will bring a ➔

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better life for everyone. We needed young actresses who genuinely embodied that – it's not something that gets plastered on externally. Annie needs to be bubbly, sparkly and have that X-factor. But she must also be convincing as an orphan, so the audience believes that she does, in fact, live a hard life.

Because of the scale of the production and the professional manner in which rehearsals are run, the kids realise quite quickly that they're involved in something big. It's a huge responsibility, and they understand that. But they're still children, of course, so they bring their childhood issues with them. It's not unusual to find someone sitting in a corner after their blood-sugar levels have dropped.

Having worked on a number of shows with children, most recently *The Sound of Music*, I've learnt that the best approach is to treat them like adults. Be nurturing, not condescending. If you show them the right kind of patience, you get wonderful results. They step up to the mark and behave like real little professionals – we've been blown away by what they can contribute.

And if this is what these kids are like now, imagine what they'll be like by the time they're 20. They're going to be phenomenal talents.

Often, the mothers are more of a headache than the kids. We've learned how to find a decent balance between keeping the parents involved and excited, and keeping them as far away from the rehearsal room as possible.

We've definitely had more issues with dogs than with the kids.

As much as they expect to see a red-headed orphan girl in this show, audiences also expect to see a dog. There's no getting around it. But just getting the dog on stage has involved running all kinds of circles around courts and magistrates. There's apparently more paperwork involved in getting a dog on stage than there is getting a child there – it's flabbergasting. ➔

pictures: matt crockett, lucy woolley, christiaan kotze, lisa hnatowitz

One problem is that well-trained animals command high fees because they often appear in movies and commercials. This is a theatre dog that does eight shows per week. We can't do a number of takes before the cameras roll. There is only one chance during each performance to get it right.

I refer to the show's hound as 'the Dulux dog'. I think it's a bearded collie. To be honest, at this stage (one week before opening), whatever dog we can get to obey the rules of the stage and do what it needs to do will do. And the dog must look like something the audience will believe is a 'pavement special', not a pedigree.

There's a scene where a lieutenant takes the dog away from Annie and tells her to call the dog to test whether or not it's really hers. The dog is meant to comply, but only a really disciplined animal will run back to her every night on stage when she calls. We've used every trick in the book, from biltong to love and attention. Still, sometimes the dog has different ideas about where it wants to run.

One of our Annies is really tiny, so the dog overwhelms her physically – when he jumps up onto her, he's twice her size. She's had quite a time singing 'Tomorrow' while the dog pulls her around the stage.

There's something incredible about seeing a child and an animal on stage (when they're behaving the way they're supposed to be behaving). But a lot of work goes into creating those moments of doggie magic. Audiences wonder how well we've trained the dog, and we wonder whether the dog will be distracted by the 2 000 people in the auditorium. With a dog, anything can happen. Will it relieve itself on stage? Will it bark its way through 'Tomorrow'? That sense of 'anything could happen' is exciting for an audience, but it's rather nerve-wracking for us.

It's quite special that the leading lady in this show is an 11-year-old girl. She's hardly ever off the stage. She can hold the attention of 2 000 people as she stands in the middle of the massive stage, holding a dog in one hand as she belts out 'Tomorrow' – a really tough song. That song has a long history. It comes with loads of expectations, so it's a big test for the actress – she needs to win the audience over with her rendition. Part of the rehearsal process is steadily to give her enough confidence to pull it off by the time opening night comes.

***Annie* plays at the Artscape Opera House, Cape Town, from 2 December – 8 January. Tickets are available at Computicket.** ■