



Artist Profile:

Rat Actor, Toby, re-defines The Great White Way

by Mil Scott

I read Mark Haddon's book, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, shortly after its initial publication — long before our first pet rat, Molly, came to us by way of the special delivery that was discovering her under a drive-up mailbox at our local post office. I found it a very interesting read, and of course, after becoming a rat lover, it took on even greater significance (since rats don't exactly abound as the pet of choice for very many main characters in literature).

The story is told from the perspective of 15-year old Christopher Boone, a boy with an autism spectrum disorder, who cannot comprehend the emotions of humans, but who very much likes animals — including, of course, Toby, his pet rat.

When I heard earlier this year that the book had been turned into a Broadway play, I immediately wondered if the production, indeed, included Toby, and if so, what type of onstage presence he might occupy. I finally had these questions answered when Lydia DesRoche (www.sitstaydogtraining.com), trainer of the rat actor who portrays Toby, and a fellow member of the NYC Rat Meetup group, posted the announcement that Toby had been featured in *The New York Times*.

thespian had to be shared with the readers of *TRRQ* as well. I therefore asked Lydia a few questions about her tiny star — whose greatest performance isn't given in the play; rather, her act of converting Lydia to an ardent pet rat lover, has already long since wrapped.

"Having no previous rat experience — and being terrified of them," Lydia explained, "I decided to contact long time rodent rescuer Robert Schapiro from Social Tees Animal Rescue (socialteesnyc.org). I did some research, and decided to get female rats... I did tons of research on rat training and behavior, and learned that rats were not only fabulous tricksters, but they were also [adept at] sniffing out gunpowder residue on the hands of suspects, and in detecting land mines. Still, I cringed when watching videos of them, even if it was a cute little rat jumping into someone's hand.

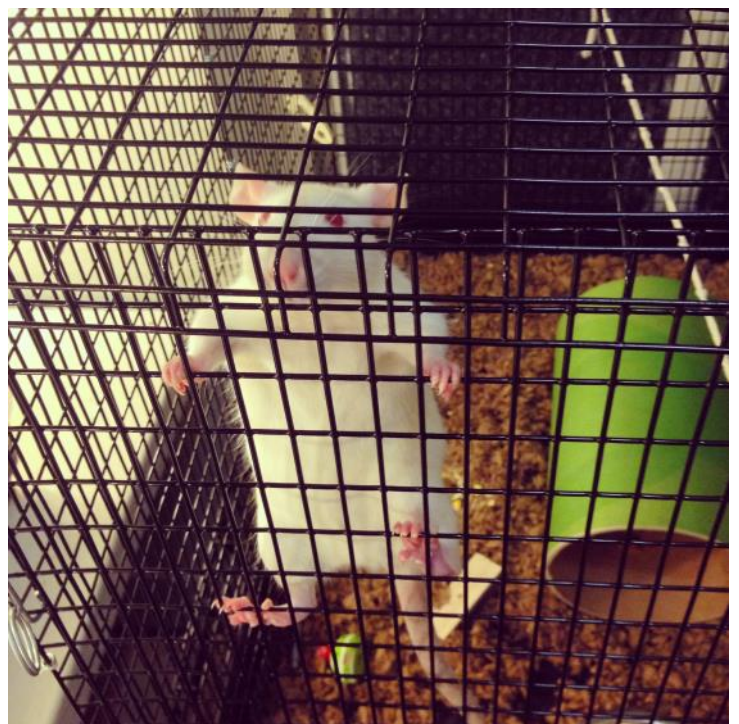
"I hadn't planned to adopt the rat," Lydia continued. "I planned to have a formal working relationship.

"Toby had other ideas."

I asked Lydia to elaborate a bit on the experience of getting to know Toby. She replied, "From the moment she looked at me, she made contact with me in the same way that a dog makes contact with me — when they really need some help communicating with the outside world. It was as if she were saying, 'Hi, you look



Needless to say, I immediately sought out more information, and soon decided this auspicious rodent



like you would be an excellent cultural liaison.’ I observed her carefully, and discovered that she was more motivated by exploring new things than she was by food or affection. One day I came in and reached into the cage so she could climb onto my hand. She was jumping all around, and putting her teeth on me gently. I recoiled, thinking she was attacking me. And then, I realized she was like a dog who was excited that their human had come home. Initially, it was decided that the rats would live at the theater, except on weekends. This photo (below, left) shows why I began to take her home every night.”

Like Marty Mouse, who appears later in this issue, Toby has become another great ambassador for her species — a particularly outstanding feat, given the fact she works in a city where rat loathing abounds. But, as she overcame Lydia’s fears and preconceived notions, so she tirelessly works her magic on others. Many cast, crew and audience members alike have fallen under her spell — with a little help from Lydia.

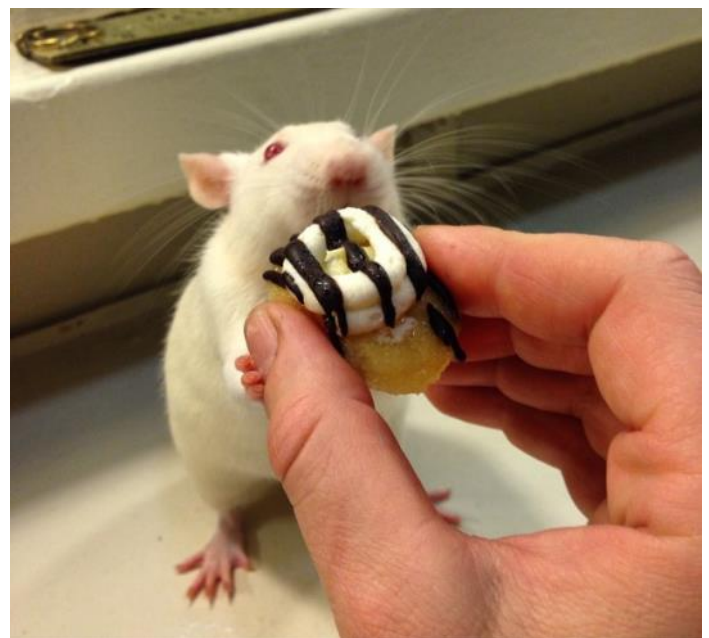
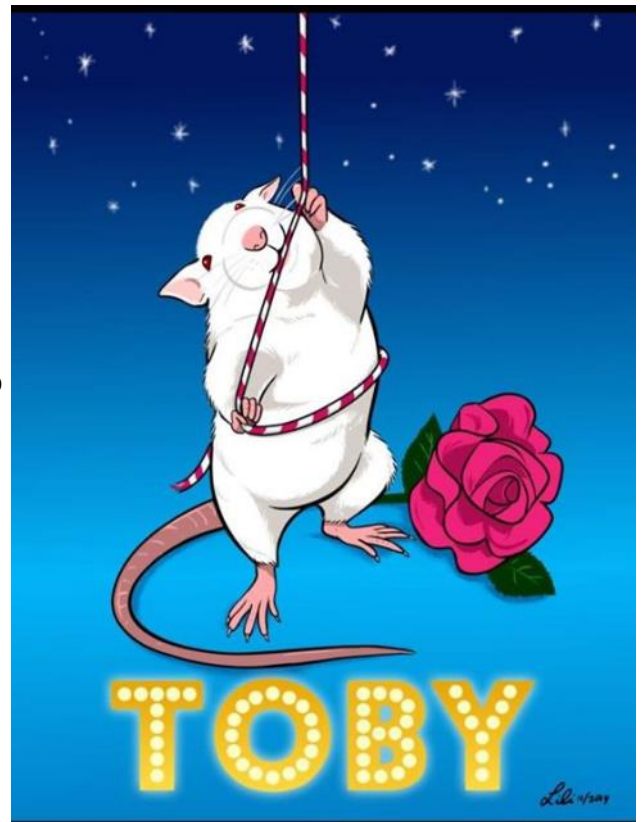
“Since Toby was primarily motivated by new experiences, I would carry her around the theater on my shoulder. People would see her little face peeking out from behind my neck, and want to pet her. In time, they began to extend their hands. She will climb on their hand, up to their shoulder and then down the other hand, usually to go to the next person who has a hand outstretched for her. There are still a few holdouts, who don’t want to make contact with her. But, even they have remarked that she is very cute ‘for a rat.’”



Of course, every busy celebrity needs a little downtime, and Toby is no exception. “A free range rat at home,” Lydia says, “Toby hangs out on the couch, in her bag, or in her cage. She will run over and join me when I play with the puppies; sometimes she likes to cuddle, and other times she likes to keep to herself. Right now I am training her to walk on a couple of plexiglass shelves that my friend made for her. The props department at *Curious Incident* recently made her a couple of cool walkways in our dressing room as well. Toby is always a little cautious when dealing with a new item in her space. In time, I know she will explore them and enjoy them. “

Like many human stars, Toby often receives gifts from her adoring fans. And, as a rat, it’s no surprise that edible delicacies — including a chocolate chip Vienneoise from Maison Kayser, wrapped in a paper and cardboard toy — rank among her favorites.

Others include works of art her own art has inspired — such as the framed copy of her *NY Times* article (shown on the opposite page), cozy fleece pouches to keep her warm, and an adorable wool mouse with a backpack. She’s also been painted by renowned animal artist, Lili Chin (doggiedrawings.net), whose rendering of Toby can be seen at the top of this column (and on t-shirts fans may purchase at www.doggietops.com/collections/841951-custom-designs/products/10905285-custom-t-shirt-toby)



The life of a hardworking stage actor may not always be easy. But, clearly it has its rewards. And, no one makes it look easier (or looks cuter living it) than Toby. Indeed, this small albino is rapidly changing Broadway, making her own mark via “The Great White Way.”