

**TOE DOGS, ELBOW CATS, AND
PICTURE BOOKS: COMBINING LITERATURE,
LOVE OF ANIMALS, AND THEATRE IN THE
PUBLIC LIBRARY VENUE**

by Lori Caskey Sigety



ast year, my manager and I engaged in several fun conversations about the differences between cats and dogs. Although we adore both felines and canines, she is the proud parent of a greyhound and I live with two cats.

Somehow our creative sessions merged into an idea of writing a play about cats and dogs. Although the concept of canine and feline rivalry has been used many times before, we wanted to put our own twist on the idea. We wanted the show to be big, fun and silly but with a message. We also wanted kids to associate the fun program with the library.

We opted for puppets (puppy and kitten puppets), life-size costume characters, and a snare drum with brushes and a cymbal to create a jazzy, poetic feel. The play was set in rhyme, and the fourth wall was broken before the show even started. Two student shelvers stayed out in the audience for crowd control. They

passed out ears to the audience members, who chose either pink cat ears or brown dog ears. Audience members sat on the cat side or the dog side of the room, as the crowd was split up into two sections. One shelver sat on the cat side, and the other sat on the dog side to lead the audience.

As soon as the audience members sat down, they became part of the play. The entire show was held in the children's area at the Centre Township Branch Library, so kids could be exposed to the wonderful children's materials offered.

Our award-winning Publicity and Marketing Department promoted the play. In fact, the *South Bend Tribune* covered the play and wrote a nice article. According to Hennen (2003, p. 46), the St. Joseph County Public Library served 172,627 people in 2003. To our delight, 150 out of the population served attended the show!

Toe Dogs and Elbow Cats: A Participation Puppet Play

Written by Dana Labrum and Lori Caskey Sigety

Cast:

Woof the Toe Dog (Life-size puppet)
Meow the ElbowCat (Life-size puppet)
Elbowtoe Jo (or Joe) (Narrator)
Toe Puppies and Elbow Kittens (puppets)
Toe Dogs (audience)
Elbow Cats (audience)

Introduction: A Poetic Overture

Elbowtoe Jo: Okay, toedogs and toepups, elbowkittens and cats, we're gonna snap, or you can clap, or you can tap.... (Audience follows along) This is our theme poem called "The Elbowtoe Show." Can you keep the time while we talk and rhyme?

Elbowtoe Jo: Here we go: "The Elbowtoe Show!" (Puppets start dancing)
(Optional: Poem can be passed out, and everyone can rhyme along!)

“The Elbowtoe Show”

Puppies and kittens,
Doggies and cats,
Woof in the Backyard
Meow in the alley-Scat!

Scat Scat Meow the cat
Woof-woof the hound
Toedogs and Elbowcats
avoid the nasty pound!

They sleep the days away
and slink out at night
they meet at the Square
and all they do is fight!

(Let's repeat one more time...)

It's the Elbowtoe Show
the Elbowtoe Show
welcome to your
Elbowtoe Show!

(Elbowtoe Jo turns to Woof, Meow, and Puppets:)

Elbowtoe Jo: Now! Woof the Toedog! Meow the cat! Toepups and Elbowkitties on stage! SCAT! (They freeze and look indignantly at Elbowtoe Jo). Uh, please? (They shake their heads). Pretty please? (They shake heads again). Uh, Biscuits and catnip later? (They shrug and hide).

Great! Thank you.

Elbowtoe Jo: I guess it's better to be kind than catty; otherwise you might end up in the doghouse. Anyway, Speaking of good manners let me introduce myself. My name is Elbowtoe Jo. I'm part canine (that's dog) and part feline (that's cat). I love both cats and dogs. But the cats and dogs in the backyards and alleys just don't like each other at all! And it is causing quite a commotion here in this place called Neck of the Woods. The Toe Dogs and Elbow Cats also call this place “The Square.” I wonder if it's because they are always squaring off and getting into spats. Sometimes I get so sick of it I call it the “Pain in the Neck of the Woods.”

Elbowtoe Jo: Anyway, it's nice to meet all of you. For me to tell this story, I need your help. Without you, there wouldn't be much of a story. So I'm glad you're here. I'll need your help with sound effects, or making sounds, if you will.

How about this, whenever you hear “when the full moon rose and was in sight” we howl, okay? Let's try it. “When the full moon rose and was in sight”. (Everyone howls) Good.

And I'll give you cues to help you along. Like this (make gesture of listening).

On this side are the toe togs and on the other side are the elbow cats. When the toedogs would say or do something...this side of the audience would become toedogs and make the sounds. When the elbowcats would do something...this side of the audience would do the sound effects. And I'll help you out.

We're keeping the toedogs on one side and the elbowcats on the other so we don't get a real fight. We keep our paws and toes and elbows to ourselves, okay? We'll use sounds and hand movements (called pantomime in the theatre world) to pretend.

Here we go into Scene 1: Showdown at the Neck of the Woods also known as the Square.

Scene 1: Showdown at the Neck of the Woods also known as the Square

Elbowtoe Jo: Toe Dogs from the Backyard would nip (grrrrrr) at the toes of the Elbow Cats from the Alley. And Elbow Cats would swat (making a swat gesture) at the dogs from where the Elbows would be. Right here, you see? (Elbowtoe Jo makes gesture at elbow) That's how they got their names.

They fought all the time at night... especially when the full moon rose and was in sight (owwwwoooooo). (Lights out). (Enter toepups and elbowkittens).

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhhhrrr)
The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hissssss with clawing gestures)

And they did it again...

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhrrrrr)
The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hissssss with clawing gestures)

And they did it one more time...

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhhhrrr)
The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hissssss with clawing gestures)

And when the sunrise came up, the toe dogs and elbow cats would go home to sleep. (Lights on) Can you pretend to sleep? (Make snoring noises) We're drifting into dog biscuit slumber and catnip dreams.

Elbowtoe Jo: Now, we're snoring our way into

Scene 2: Insomnia Alley.

Elbowtoe Jo: It's daytime, you see, so most of the Toe Dogs and Elbow Cats wouldn't dare nip or step or elbow their way into the Neck of the Woods Otherwise known as the Square... alone. You see toe dogs and elbow cats are supposed to be sleeping but you can watch if you're really quiet during this scene. Because during the day it is quiet in the Neck of the Woods otherwise known as the Square.

Toe Dogs and Elbow Cats only dare go into the Square during the daytime in a pair for at night they're all in sight. But alone, they're not so brave and ready to fight.

As you toe dogs and elbow cats slumber and snore (can you all snore?) there was an Elbow Cat named Meow. (Enter Meow) Meow couldn't take your snoring anymore and wandered out of the alley and into the Neck of Woods otherwise known as the Square although Meow either knew it was not safe or was not aware.

Meow stretched and strutted along the Neck of the Woods otherwise known as the Square with her tail and her pride held up high. Meow is a proud Elbow Cat and that Meow would never deny.

Meow the Elbow Cat strutted and purred and rolled around and sat. (Meow sits anywhere in the audience on the Elbow Cat side) Who knew there would be trouble in the Neck of the Woods Otherwise Known as the Square when someone from the Backyard has the same sleepless plight! We now go into

Scene 3: Sleepless in Backyard

Elbowtoe Jo: Okay, Meow the Elbowcat thinks that the Neck of the Woods Otherwise Known as the Square is the cat's meow, so Meow lounges and soaks up the sunshine long before (pause) "when the full moon rose and was in sight". (howl)

Oops. Meow, did we disturb your catnap? We'll try to be quieter next time. Sorry toepups and elbowkittens! Didn't mean to wake you up, too! While Meow is trying to relax, another cannot sleep and visits the Neck of the Woods Otherwise known as the Square.

Woof (enter Woof from the Backyard) also couldn't take your snoring anymore and wandered out of the backyard and into the Neck of Woods Otherwise known as the Square although Woof either knew it was not safe or was not aware.

And Woof accidentally stumbled and tripped over Meow! And they looked at one another. Let's see what happens in

Scene 4: Showdown in the Neck of the Woods also known as the Square

Elbowtoe Jo: Normally, if this would happen at night, with all of the others:

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhhhrrr)

The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hisssss with clawing gestures)

Again...

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhhrrrr)
The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hisssss with clawing gestures)

One more time:

The Toe Dogs would howl (howwwwwwl)
Elbow Cats would shriek (raaaaaaawwwwhhrrrr)
The Toe Dogs would nip (grrrrrr)
Elbow Cats would freak (hisssss with clawing gestures)

But wait! Woof is a brave Toedog. Woof held out a paw. And Meow is a brave Elbowcat. Meow held out a paw. And they shook paws. (Triangle note) They sniffed one another. (Butt sniffing optional) And everything is okay. They sat and chased one another and played and soaked up the sun and didn't bother to wait "when the full moon rose and was in sight" (howl)

Woof and Meow howled to their heart's delight. And they woke up all of the toedogs and elbowcats and toepups and elbowkittens for a celebration!

Scene 5: Celebration in the Neck of the Woods Otherwise known as the Square

Elbowtoe Jo: Woof and Meow were so excited that they ran into the backyard and the alley where all the toedogs and elbowcats stayed and invited them to a celebration in the Neck of the Woods Otherwise known as the Square before sunset! There would be dancing and fun with everyone! The Toedogs and Elbowcats are so excited that they meowed with delight (meow) and the dogs barked with joy (bark bark bark).

Please, everyone stand up and join us for dancing! Toedogs and Elbowcats please meet new friends and keep the old! One is Meow and the other Woof!

(Conga drums play. Confetti is thrown. Toedogs and Elbowcats mingle and dance.)

End of Show but Start of a Beautiful Friendship!

Please feel free to try out this play in your own library setting. Also included is a list of picture books to share with little patrons before or after the play, or for a promotional story hour.

The criteria for choosing the following tomes is as follows:

- 1) Would be appropriate for a wide audience range (ages 0-5); keeping various attention spans in mind,
- 2) Available in the St. Joseph County Public Library (it was reviewed and selected by professional library staff for the library),
- 3) Fun and humorous and perfect for story hour and/or the play.

This list is by no means exhaustive. There are many books that would be appropriate. Here is just a sampling of children's literature that would work well in story hour:

Picture Books for Those Who Fancy Felines, Prefer Puppies, or Cannot Decide:

Feiffer, Jules. (1999). Bark, George! New York: HarperCollins.

This is a story about George the puppy learning how to bark like a dog. Eventually George visits the vet to get to the solution. This would be a great Mother's Day read, since George's mom plays a big role in the book.

Florian, Douglas (2003). how wow meow meow it's rhyming cats and dogs. New York: Harcourt.

These hilarious rhymes and fun paintings of cats and dogs would enlighten kids of all ages! This would be great to choose a couple poems to open or close story hour or the play. Older kids would really enjoy this.

Harper, Dan (1998). Telling Time With Big Mama Cat. New York: Hartcourt.

This is one of my favorites. The kids enjoy the clock with movable hands on the front page. The humorous paintings of the cat are well done, and the words and pictures are balanced. The detailed timeline of the day of the life of a cat works well with the illustrations.

Kellogg, Steven (2000). Give the Dog A Bone. New York: SeaStar Books.

A fun version of the classic song with a twist! Instead of rolling home after each verse, various old men cobble home, purr home, hightail it home, etc. Kellogg also uses humor in the story. This book is fun and funny enough for kids to enjoy.

Masurel, Claire and Bob Kolar (2001). A Cat and a Dog. New York: North-South Books.

This is a fun read! This goes back to the rivalry of cats and dogs. There are few words on colorful pages. The cat is in blue and the dog is in a golden brown. The classic tale of enemies becoming friends. This book would be an appropriate read before the play.

Moxley, Sheila (2001). An Alphabet Book of Cats and Dogs. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

This is an eclectic mix of collage and photography with a mix of cats and dogs! The text, which consists of admirable alliterations, complements the illogical illustrations. One of my favorites!

Parr, Todd (2003). Otto goes to the Beach. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.

One of my new favorite canine creatures: Otto. Watching Otto's misadventures unfold at the beach with bright, bold colors, great expression, and large fonts will amuse and entertain! At the very end, Otto and Todd write a love note to the reader! Great for summer reading.

Thomson, Pat (2003). Drat That Fat Cat! New York: Scholastic Press.

This is a story in rhyme about a fat, fat cat that was in search for food. The fat, fat cat eats everything, but it is determined he is not fat enough. I suspect this is a spoof of The Little Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly. This is a fun read, and kids will laugh and enjoy!

REFERENCES

Hennen Jr., Thomas J. (2003, October). Great American Public Libraries: The 2003 HAPLR Rankings. *American Libraries*, 46, 44-48.

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