

The Optimist

Dog wins award for movie performance, beating actors including Ethan Hawke

“He’s standing alongside performers who didn’t even need to be bribed with treats,” said film director Ben Leonberg, who also is Indy’s owner.

Today at 7:00 a.m. EST



By [Kyle Melnick](#)

Many people wish they could spend more time with their dogs.

Director Ben Leonberg took that idea to extraordinary lengths, spending three years making the horror movie “[Good Boy](#)” with his dog, Indy, as the protagonist.

Last week, Indy won best performance in a horror or thriller at the Astra Film Awards, beating out five Hollywood stars: [Ethan Hawke](#), [Alison Brie](#), [Sally Hawkins](#), [Sophie Thatcher](#) and [Alfie Williams](#).

“I feel incredibly lucky that I was able to make a movie where I essentially just got to play with my dog,” Leonberg, 38, told The Washington Post.

One scene in the film shows Indy getting caught in a snare. On his back, Indy vigorously shakes his body to try to escape.

In reality, Indy was enjoying a blissful moment while shooting, wiggling during a belly rub from Leonberg.

Through editing and ominous music, Leonberg helped make Indy look frightened and desperate. The suspenseful movie follows Indy as he protects his owner from evil forces only the dog can see.

Indy spent more than 400 days in front of Leonberg’s cameras to eventually take home the prize. The annual contest is judged by journalists, critics, filmmakers and others in the entertainment industry who are members of the [Hollywood Creative Alliance](#).

Indy, an 8-year-old Nova Scotia duck tolling retriever, didn't attend the ceremony but wore a black bow tie over his copper-colored fur in a video acceptance speech. Indy left the talking part to Leonberg.

"Indy is honored to accept this award," Leonberg said, "especially knowing that he's standing alongside performers who didn't even need to be bribed with treats."



Indy the Dog wins Best Performance in a Horror or Thriller Feature

The Astra Awards



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Other actors who won awards at the ceremony included Timothée Chalamet, Michael B. Jordan, Amanda Seyfried and Ariana Grande.

Matthew Weiss, executive vice president of the Astra Film Awards, said he was a bit surprised when he learned the majority of the Hollywood Creative Alliance's roughly 325 members voted for Indy. It wasn't that Weiss didn't enjoy Indy's performance — he voted for Indy himself — but Indy was the first animal to claim an award in the ceremony's nine-year history, Weiss said.

The "fresh" perspective Indy and "Good Boy" brought to the horror genre warranted the honor, Weiss said.

"It's just his innocence about him that kind of connected the audience to him," Weiss said.

When Leonberg and his wife, Kari Fischer, got Indy in 2017, they had no plans of their dog becoming a performer. But Indy was connected to film since he was a puppy; Leonberg named him after the movie character Indiana Jones.

For years — after seeing a dog in the opening scene of the 1982 horror movie "Poltergeist" — Leonberg wanted to make a horror film from a dog's perspective. Leonberg started shooting Indy in short videos to see how he might approach filming the movie.

Leonberg made a short film starring Indy that won an international contest in 2019. Viewers seemed to like Indy, Leonberg said, so he cast his dog in the lead role for “Good Boy.”

In the spring of 2021, Leonberg and Fischer rented a two-bedroom country house near Morristown, New Jersey, where they planned to live and film.

Indy is about 19 inches tall, so Leonberg designed a camera rig to meet his eye level and spent much of filming on the ground or bent over, because the movie is from Indy’s perspective. Leonberg used footage from their lives — such as Indy running between Leonberg’s legs every morning — so Indy’s performance would appear authentic.

Being a smart pup, Indy picked up that he was supposed to do something when Leonberg set up his cameras.

There were early hurdles. Leonberg spent about five months filming outside with a rain machine until Indy nailed the scene. Indy could usually act for a few hours before becoming distracted, so Leonberg aimed to film one shot per day. Some days, even that was difficult.

Leonberg and Fischer, a producer for “Good Boy,” often led Indy to specific spots with a trail of salmon- and beef-flavored kibble.

They also used verbal cues, sometimes quacking like ducks when they wanted Indy to look in their direction. Other times, they raised a treat or a tennis ball in the direction they wanted Indy to turn. They brainstormed words Indy didn’t understand — like “neon sign” — so Indy would tilt his head in confusion.

Sometimes, Indy didn’t need his owners’ help to act like a professional. Once, he was following a kibble trail when he suddenly looked up and raised his ears when he heard a bird outside — a movement that made him look shocked on film.

Leonberg finished filming in the summer of 2024 and created his plotline suspense through editing.

“It doesn’t look like it’s a dog who’s trying to figure out what his parents are doing,” Leonberg said about the finished product. “It looks like a dog who’s really intently vexed by this dark corner where there’s an invisible force.”

Leonberg said if Indy has any supernatural ability, it’s his talent to find tennis balls anywhere — under couches, at parks and in drawers.

“Good Boy” premiered at a film and TV festival in March in Austin, where Indy won the Howl of Fame Award for the best canine performance. But Indy’s stardom reached new heights Jan. 9, when he received the honor from the Astra Film Awards.

Since filming ended, Indy has had more time to enjoy his favorite hobbies in his family's Bozeman, Montana, home: playing fetch and napping.

But his acting career might not be over. Leonberg said he has thought about a "Good Boy" sequel.

What readers are saying

The comments express enthusiasm and admiration for the originality of a dog, Indy, winning an acting award over Hollywood stars. Many commenters appreciate the film's unique perspective and the bond between the dog and the filmmaker. There is a strong interest in seeing the film,... [Show more](#)

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