

**RUFF!**  
**a play for grades K-3**  
by Jenifer Nii



RUFF! by Jenifer Nii received its world premiere August 6-October 9, 2015 as Plan-B Theatre Company's third annual Free Elementary School Tour, funded in part by an ArtWorks grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Directed and designed by Jerry Rapier, artwork by Kirt Bateman, featuring Tyson Baker as Axel and Latoya Rhodes as Buddy. RUFF! opened the inaugural Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival.

*For production rights visit [leicesterbaytheatricals.com/ruff-by-jenifer-nii-tya/](http://leicesterbaytheatricals.com/ruff-by-jenifer-nii-tya/)*

TIME

Now

SETTING

An animal shelter

SCENE ONE

(AXEL and BUDDY, kennelmates at a local animal shelter. AXEL is musclebound and very, very tough. He might be a German Shepherd, a Rottweiler, Pit bull, or other breed others may find scary. HE knows the routine of shelter life, this being his fourth time as an "inmate". BUDDY is cowering in the back, paws covering ears, eyes clamped shut. SHE might be a Labrador, Golden Retriever, or other breed others often perceive as friendly and adoptable. Two dog tricks were demonstrated in a pre-show introduction—The Bark\* and The Play Bow\*\*—the actors invited the entire audience to join in when those moments arrived.)

AXEL: (Snarling, barking, and pacing. Loud. To audience, who are potential adopters)

What are you looking at? Huh? You want a piece of me? (Mean series of barks and lunges) You think this is some kind of show? I'm just a piece of meat in a cage? You better back away, lady, and take those kids with you. Cuz I will SHOW you just what kind of dog I am. Go! (Snarls. Tracks the unseen woman and her children as they scurry away. When they are gone, AXEL begins to relax. Turns and notices BUDDY, who is now watching out of the corner o HER eye.) What?!

BUDDY: Nothing.

AXEL: That's right. (Looks BUDDY over) I don't know you. When they put you in here?

BUDDY: You were sleeping.

AXEL: What happened to the other one?

BUDDY: What other one?

AXEL: Little thing. All spots and ears.

BUDDY: All I saw are bigs.

AXEL: (Motions to the area where BUDDY is crouched) That's my floor. You don't touch my floor. (BUDDY looks, is confused) You deaf? MOVE. (BUDDY squishes a few feet to the side, which is as far as SHE can go in the cramped space. AXEL traces a line dividing up the space, one area very large, one very small. About the larger space) This is mine. (About the small space, an area where BUDDY currently is not in) That is yours. (BUDDY looks, AXEL glares. SHE moves) Stay out of my space.

BUDDY: OK.

AXEL: You're new.

BUDDY: Yes.

AXEL: (Sniffs): You smell new. (BUDDY confused, sniffs. AXEL rolls HIS eyes) Look at you. Wide-eyed and scared like a little bitty puppy.

BUDDY: (Soft) I'm—I'm not—

AXEL: (Leans in) I. Can't. Hear. You.\* (To the other dogs in nearby kennels) QUIET! All a ya! Breakin' in a newbie here! (The noise doesn't stop. In a deep, snarling voice) HEY! (Noise stops) Thank you. (To BUDDY) You were saying?

BUDDY: I'm...Buddy. My word is "Buddy."

AXEL: That so? Your mommy call you that?

BUDDY: My person. Her word is "Nana."

AXEL: (Scoffs) "Nana."

BUDDY: Others also called her "Grandma Betty." But to me she said "Nana."

AXEL: (Uncomfortable with BUDDY'S affection for HER person, envy manifests as anger. HE turns quickly, addressing unseen shelter workers) You stick me with THIS? Time and time and more time I'm here and this is what I get? "My word is Buddy." "My word is Lucky." Dash, and Spot, and Gertie Two-Shoes. I can't— This is— (Turns and points at BUDDY) Look at this! (BUDDY attempts a small, small smile then bursts into a full-on tail wag. AXEL stares in disbelief, then turns toward the kennel door, shouting) Why can't you just leave me alone? (BUDDY wags on, which sparks more annoyance on AXEL's part) Oh, will you stop that?

BUDDY: I can't.

AXEL: (Mocking) Try.

BUDDY: (Beat) What is this place?

AXEL: The "shelter." Used to call it the "pound," which in my opinion is a much better word. (indicating the other dogs) Ima pound you and you and you!

BUDDY: Why are we here?

AXEL: They find us, they catch us, they bring us here.

BUDDY: For how long? How long do we have to stay? Who are those? (Motions to the other dogs)

AXEL: You don't wanna know.

BUDDY: Yes I do.

AXEL: Little ones always go first. Unless they're freaky like Norman there. (Motions to another kennel) Been spinning like that since he got here. All day long, spinning and yelling, spinning and yelling. (Acts out what Norman looks like. To NORMAN) Hey! Norm!  
NOOOOOORRRRRMMMMMAAAANNNN! (No response. To BUDDY) I have no idea how his whole head don't go flyin' right off. Not that he'd know the difference. Mostly, though, the littles go first, then the pretty ones.

BUDDY: Go where?

AXEL: Away. (BUDDY shrinks. AXEL whirls around as more potential adopters walk by) What're YOU looking at? That's right, stick your bony fingers in here, I dare ya. Tasty people fingers for me! (Snaps HIS jaws) Move along! Go! (Barks and lunges. Turns to BUDDY) You gonna help me out here? (Wide-eyed BUDDY doesn't move. AXEL goes over and picks HER up) Stand up. Get that tail out from under you and be a dog! (BUDDY stands, but in the smallest way possible. HER tail wags inadvertently) What are you doing? (BUDDY stops mid-wag) You'll cut that out if you know what's good for you. The ones who do that are the ones they take away. Little ones, pretty ones, the ones with broken (makes a wagging motion) tails.

BUDDY: Who are they?

AXEL: The takers.

BUDDY: Take where?

AXEL: "Home." (BUDDY's tail starts wagging furiously. Stop it! (BUDDY does) Trust me. I'm looking out for you.

BUDDY: Home is where Nana is!

AXEL: No, it's not. I been there.

BUDDY: It is! They called it an "old folks' home" where Nana is.

AXEL: Then why aren't you "home" with her? (Suddenly, lights go out. AXEL breathes) Finally. Lights out! Take THAT, takers! We survive another day! (Arms raised in triumph, leading to a stretch, leading to three circles and then laying down. BUDDY is frozen. AXEL yawns loudly, a signal to BUDDY, which BUDDY completely misses. AXEL watches) Hey. (BUDDY doesn't respond) Heeeeeyyyy ... (No response) Buuuuudddddddyyy ... (BUDDY finally snaps out of it) Gonna stand there all night?

BUDDY: It's night?

AXEL: Lights out, aren't they? Takers are gone, and except for the howlers it quiets down some.

BUDDY: This is not night time.

AXEL: Hate to break it to ya, Princess, but this is as close as we get. Sleep when you can.  
(BUDDY begins to pace. AXEL tries to ignore it, shifting around and trying to get comfortable.  
It becomes too annoying) What?! Stop it! What are you doing?

BUDDY: I do my business before sleep.

AXEL: So?

BUDDY: So I have to do my business.

AXEL: So?

BUDDY: The door is closed.

AXEL: That's right.

BUDDY: I can't do my business outside because the door is closed.

AXEL: Well, the people don't come back until the lights go on, so either zip it and hold it, or zip it and go.

BUDDY: But—

AXEL: (Motions to a far corner) There, OK? Go there! What's the matter with you?

BUDDY: We do no business inside!

AXEL: Take a whiff please. (BUDDY smells and recoils) You cannot tell me you didn't smell it from the very first second your paws hit the ground.

BUDDY: My nose was scared!

AXEL: You'll get used to it.

BUDDY: I'm not supposed to!

AXEL: Fine. Smell it. Love it. It's bizzzz--ilicious. I am going to sleep.

BUDDY: This is terrible. (Panic rises) It's not right. This is not right. We're not supposed to live like this.

AXEL: You get used to it.

BUDDY: I don't want to! I don't want to stay here! I want Nana! NAAAANNNNAAA!

AXEL: Quiet!

BUDDY: Nana will wake up and see that I'm gone. Nana didn't bring me here. She didn't know so when she wakes up and sees she'll come find me and we'll go back to her old folks' home.

That's where I belong. With Nana. Not here. I can wait. I'll just wait and then she'll come and take me home.

AXEL: Oh, if I had a steak for every time I heard THAT one.

BUDDY: NANA WILL WAKE UP!

AXEL: Fantastic! Then sit there and wait! Quietly!

BUDDY: (Shaking) She'll wake up and come for me. (Curls up in a little ball. AXEL watches for a while, then sleeps. After a while, BUDDY can't stay awake any more, and falls asleep.)

SCENE TWO

(BUDDY jumps as the lights suddenly go on. AXEL is slower to wake. Yawns. Sees that BUDDY is still there.)

AXEL: Morning, Sunshine.

BUDDY: Is it?

AXEL: Food will be coming soon. (Looks around) Held it all night, I see.

BUDDY: (Beat): I gotta go. Real bad.

AXEL: After food sometimes they let us out for a little bit. "Play time." It's nice. We can run and stretch and smell all around.

BUDDY: I know what "play time" is.

AXEL: Well good for you, Smarty Paws.

BUDDY: I think I might explode.

AXEL: (Motions away from HIM) Do it that way.

BUDDY: (Looks around) You already did.

AXEL: Yes I did. A fine piece of "business" if I do say so myself.

BUDDY: (Closes HER eyes in defeat) We're really still here. It wasn't a bad dream.

AXEL: Sorry. It's you and me, kid! And a buncha crazy beasts.

BUDDY: How do you do it?

AXEL: Do what?

BUDDY: This.

AXEL: Fourth time around. (BUDDY is in shock) Yup. It's not so bad. Could be worse.

BUDDY: No sir.

AXEL: (Smirks) You really have no idea.

BUDDY: We are sitting next to our own piles waiting for food.

AXEL: Which they feed us. Every day we get something to eat.

BUDDY: Is it good food?

AXEL: It's food.

BUDDY: I have allergies. I cannot have turkey or else I get all itchy and want to chew my feet off.

AXEL: That'd almost be worth watching.

BUDDY: I'm serious! I get red bumps all over my tummy and toes and and it's all I can do just to—

AXEL: (Has had enough) Princess, you have got to stop talking.

BUDDY: //What?

AXEL: //I mean it. I don't want to hear your voice any more today.

BUDDY: I—

AXEL: (Pinches BUDDY'S lips closed. BUDDY squeaks in pain, retreats, confused and hurt. Beat) You know what? I have had it with all you cry-baby rich kids. You and your "I have allergies, businessing outside, Nana will come get me" kind should all get stuck together so you can whine yourselves to death. But don't you start talking about your suffering, Princess. 'Cuz you don't know anything.

BUDDY: What happened to you?

AXEL: I'm fine. I'm not the one crying in a corner.

BUDDY: This is the corner you gave me!

AXEL: And you're OK with that? A real dog would've said, "No way." A REAL dog would've stood up and demanded more. But you're just a little Princess.

BUDDY: Stop calling me that!

AXEL: Princess Whine-a-lot.



BUDDY: I am not!

AXEL: Oooooo, what are you gonna do, Whine-a-lot? Send me to "time out"? BUDDY growls at AXEL, but it is a wimpy one) Come on. You can do better than that. Or didn't your Nana teach you how to be anything besides a precious wittle wady?

BUDDY: (A powerful bark that surprises both HER and AXEL) Don't. You. Talk. About. Her.

AXEL: (Recovers, then smiles) Now doesn't that feel better?

BUDDY: (Beat) Maybe.

AXEL: You got a good bark.

BUDDY: (Hesitantly) OK.

AXEL: We'll toughen you up yet.

BUDDY: I don't know ...

AXEL: You wanna survive, right?

BUDDY: Yeah.

AXEL: Then you do what you gotta do.

BUDDY: I don't feel I should like yelling.

AXEL: You don't always have to go around yelling. You'd look like Norman doing that.

BUDDY: OK.

AXEL: But stand up straight. You see anyone who's anyone, and they're proud. Strong. Not all squishy and crying all the time. Do it. (BUDDY tries it, is stiff and awkward) Not like— Like you can handle anything, and it'd be easy because you're awesome. You're awesome, right?

BUDDY: I guess ...

AXEL: No guesses! You're awesome right?

BUDDY: (Tentatively) Right.

AXEL: You're the awesomest of all who are awesome! Right?

BUDDY: Right.

AXEL: Then come on. Shoulders up. (SHE tries) Higher. (SHE lifts them higher) Lift your head up and be a dawg, dog! (SHE does) Stand tall like you're ready to jump the tallest fence ever.

BUDDY: Yeah.

AXEL: Someone comes up to you, you just picture yourself big as them and twice as smart. You see it, they will too. Got it?

BUDDY: Big as them and twice as smart.

AXEL: Louder!

BUDDY: I don't want to be like Norman!

AXEL: Big as them and twice as smart! You are not Norman! Come on!

BUDDY and AXEL: Big as them and twice as smart!

AXEL: (Beat. Satisfied) That's right.

BUDDY: (Happy. Beat) What's your word? (Beat. AXEL doesn't respond or make eye contact) You know mine is Buddy. What is yours?

AXEL: What's it to you?

BUDDY: I wanna know, is all. I'm big and smart and if you don't tell me I'll start crying. LOUD.

AXEL: First one was Diesel. Then Crusher. Then Viper. Last one I didn't get a word.

BUDDY: Why not?

AXEL: None of us had 'em there. Except Kevin. He was a Grand Champion. The rest of us were all nothing.

BUDDY: But ...

AXEL: Anyway, I wasn't there long.

BUDDY: What happened?

AXEL: Time to hit the road.

BUDDY: Alone?

AXEL: YES, alone! What kind of— Nevermind.

BUDDY: I want to understand.

AXEL: Well you can't, OK?

BUDDY: Try me. (Beat. She is assured and determined) Come on.

AXEL: I got born, looking like this. That's all it takes where I'm from. You show up in the world with this big blocky head and big muscles and people think you're there for one reason-- and it ain't to paint pink polish on my nails, know what I mean? (BUDDY hides her paws) You don't say...You've actually GOT pink polish on! Don't hide those toes from me!

BUDDY: (Softly): It's "Glitter Sunshine". (Faster) Nana wasn't the one who did it, it was "Girl Scouts". I let them because Nana was smile-laughing and I like making her smile-laugh and besides which maybe I also kind of like glitter. Sometimes.

AXEL: People see you, they see glitter toes and "Isn't she cute?". They take one look at me and think they've got a fighter. Something that'll make them look fierce. No matter I'm the one living out on a chain 24/7, no water in summer or cover in winter. THEY feel tough, so it's all good.

"Get up, you weak, good for nothin' dog! You gonna just lay there and take it? (Feigns kicking a dog, the dog buckling in pain) Get up and fight, you worthless...Oh, you just gonna lay there and cry. Then you don't eat. Kevin! Get over here! Kevin knows how to earn his keep. Don'tcha, boy? Winners get fed. You? Get nuthin'."

So you got three choices: fight, die, or bust that chain and take your chances. And if you end up here at least you got a meal and a roof for a while.

Jasper over there? LOOK AT HIM! He has one eye and a broken back from his "Nana". You hear him crying about it? Not on your life. He's been here longer than any of us and is just as mean as all of us combined. That's why he gets his own space. No one messes with him.

BUDDY: He looks a lot like you. (BUDDY realizes they survived the same "real life". Starts to say something, but is interrupted) He—

AXEL: That guy knows what life is all about. THAT guy lived in the real world.

BUDDY: We all live in the real world.

AXEL: There's no old folks' home for dogs like me and Jasper. No use thinkin' about it, 'cuz it's not gonna happen.

BUDDY: It might.

AXEL: Maybe for you, Buddy.

BUDDY: Maybe for both of us. I could help you.

AXEL: (Scoffs): You could help me...

BUDDY: The real world can be hard for everybody. It can hurt for any body, no matter what you look like or sound like or anything.

AXEL: Yeah? (BUDDY nods) So?

BUDDY: So you should be nice because you never know and besides it's nicer to be nice and especially when you're in places that aren't very nice and aren't home and are loud and smelly and called The Pound okay? (AXEL shifts uncomfortably) My Nana didn't wake up like she was supposed to.

AXEL: (Kicks at the ground, uncomfortable but sad for BUDDY) Sorry.

BUDDY: I was very happy loving Nana. Nana was my one. And she didn't wake up even when I gave her morning kisses. They came and took her away and now I have no one.

AXEL: (Nods, understanding for the first time that it is hard to lose something, just as it is never to have had something) There could be another one.

BUDDY: Not like Nana.

AXEL: Different. (BUDDY is shocked at AXEL's optimism. So is AXEL. HE tries to recover with sarcasm) "It's nice to be nice" or whatever.

BUDDY: (Beat, Nods) That'd be good. (They BOTH nod) Home can be a good thing, you know. You can feel safe there, and you can do all kinds of things to make people happy, which is one of the best feelings ever. One of my friends helped his person find stuff, because his person was always losing stuff, so he got taught how to find them and bring them to her. (Acts the following out: eyeglasses and remote control) The things she used so she could see better, and the thing that changed the picture on the box she watched that told stories. There's one that only showed stories about dogs, and we'd all go and watch together, all smashed on his person's bed. That was fun. Sometimes, he'd pretend he couldn't find the changer, so we'd be watching dog stories all day. He was very smart. You might not be THAT smart but I could help you—

AXEL: //Hey!

BUDDY: //I'm sure there's SOMETHING—

AXEL: //You take that back! I am plenty smart!

BUDDY: And THREE times as big.

AXEL: I could totally find stuff.

BUDDY: You bet you could.

AXEL: That's right.

BUDDY: But maybe start with other stuff.

AXEL: Like what?

BUDDY: Stuff that nice people will like so they'll take you home and see that you are good. (AXEL doubts. BUDDY moves closer) Because you ARE good. Deep down. (AXEL blushes) Deeeeeeep deep down.

AXEL: (Expressing gratitude the only way he knows how: shoving. Which bonks BUDDY over. AXEL is wide-eyed and apologetic) Sorry.

BUDDY: (Regaining HER balance) It's OK. Let's start with that, though. You're very very very strong, but most everyone isn't. Especially the little baby people and elderlies. They like us to be strong but also gentle. (AXEL doesn't know the word) Gentle? (AXEL shakes his head. BUDDY thinks. She puts her paw softly on his shoulder, which makes AXEL very uncomfortable. She begins to slowly pet him) This says "I like you."

AXEL: (Points to HIMSELF) THIS says it's creepy.

BUDDY: Tough noogies. Try it. (AXEL sighs, and then gives it a go. He swats and swats, which startles BUDDY) That's close. But pretend you're touching something really neat, something you don't want to break because it's so neat and you might not get another one.

AXEL: Like what?

BUDDY: What do you like?

AXEL: I dunno.

BUDDY: Come on ...

AXEL: I don't know!

BUDDY: Favorite yummy thing to eat.

AXEL: Earthworms. (BUDDY is grossed out) You asked! They're awesome! You find them, and roll around in them (HE does), and—

BUDDY: OK. Gross. But OK. So say you had a whole bunch of earthworms that you wanted to save for later.

AXEL: Which would never happen. "Save for later..."

BUDDY: —that you wanted to keep safe. You'd try not to drop them or squish them or whatever. You'd be careful. Follow?

AXEL: Follow.

BUDDY: "Gentle." (AXEL tries again, is much much better) Good! So when nice people come up to you to maybe take you home, instead of yelling at them and making them cry you could think about being gentle. (BUDDY pets HIS head and HE relaxes, at peace. HIS tail moves just a bit.) What kind of home do you want?

AXEL: I don't know.

BUDDY: Do you like baby people?

AXEL: (HE really does) Maybe.

BUDDY: I don't so much, so you can have the ones with the baby people.

AXEL: I have seen the small ones run and jump and play with toys. They like playing. They are fun.

BUDDY: OK. Baby people it is. And playing. So no elderlies.

AXEL: Ew. No.

BUDDY: I like them, so they are mine.

AXEL: Fine.

BUDDY: So when they come to see you, what do you do?

AXEL: I think about earthworms.

BUDDY: Right. And if you get a good feeling about them, you could look at them and say "hello."

AXEL: (Gruff and too loud) HELLO.

BUDDY: That is totally not your voice.

AXEL: (In HIS real voice) Hello.

BUDDY: Good. So then because you are handsome and strong and you look gentle and you said "hello," they stop and look at you. What do you do then?

AXEL: (Thinks.) I have no idea.

BUDDY: Maybe show them you know stuff. All people get googly-eyes when you show them stuff.

AXEL: Like what?

BUDDY: Well, there's the basic: Sit. (BUDDY sits. AXEL sits) Good! But then there's the all sorts of REALLY cool ones.

AXEL: I like "Sit."

BUDDY: Then there's the High Five. (SHE demonstrates. It's hard to do alone, though, so SHE takes HIS paw and high fives. It is clumsy the first time, but then fun.) High Five!

AXEL: High Five! (Beat) People really pick us because we do this.

BUDDY: They go crazy over "high five." But this one—this one is going to make you the star of the show. The Play Bow!\*\* (SHE demonstrates) This one is magic because it works on both people AND dogs. (AXEL tries. HE doesn't get it, and looks ridiculous for the first few, but then nails the "play bow." It's awesome and HE has never had more fun. Revels in it. Beat. More serious.) Now. Look them in the eye and smile.

AXEL: Oh come on.

BUDDY: TRY. (AXEL tries. It's like a creepy grimace) Maybe don't show ALL your teeth but more but like this. With your eyes. You can smile with your eyes. You have pretty eyes.

AXEL: You take that back!

BUDDY: Handsome! You have very handsome, handsome eyes.

AXEL: (Shyly) OK.

BUDDY: You can tell people a lot just with your eyes, you know. Sometimes more than with muscles. (AXEL recoils, but BUDDY presses on) You can show them who you really are, that you are ready to give them your heart if they will just give you a chance. (AXEL is genuinely touched. This is what he's been waiting to hear HIM whole life. Still, HE turns away, doubting whether HE has it in HIM. BUDDY turns HIM forcefully to face HER) Just as big and twice as smart.

AXEL: (Smiles) Paws off, tough girl.

BUDDY: (Assumes a proud, strong pose) That's right. Wouldja look at that. Look what you can do! (Her tail starts to wag, too. SHE assumes the proud posture AXEL taught HER. THEY look at each other. Tails wag in sync) So. When does this place open? We're finding homes today!

END OF PLAY



**The world premiere of RUFF! is available to come to your school, free of charge, August 31-September 11!**

**RUFF!** by Jenifer Nii is the story of Axel (a shelter regular) and Buddy (a shelter novice) who discover together what's possible when dogs and their people learn to see past stereotypes and summon the courage to be the best they can be. **RUFF!** will help students discover what lies behind commonly misunderstood canine behavior. Students will also have the opportunity to interact with therapy dogs courtesy of Intermountain Therapy Animals. The use of therapy dogs, trained to interact with all humans calmly and equally, is to ensure that each human-canine interaction is a positive one. **looking past our initial judgments based on outward appearance.**

**RUFF!** is a wonderful opportunity for students in **grades K-3** to experience an entertaining play that promotes a very positive and salient message about kindness to others. By providing this opportunity to students, schools will have partially fulfilled the responsibility of providing age-appropriate anti-discrimination training as per **Salt Lake City School District policy G-19.**

The relevance of **RUFF!** lies in some of the **research** about the judgments that humans invariably make about others. Starting early with an education about the importance of looking beyond appearance is critical.

- Research shows that adults tend to evaluate the personalities of attractive people more accurately because they take more time getting to know them. Attractiveness is often determined based on symmetry of the face and the presence of average, accessible features. We tend to base our decisions on what is familiar. This extends to our impressions of prospective pets and clothing.
- Facial bias appears in young children. It is incumbent on parents and teachers to start the conversation early about refraining from these snap judgments. Reading books to children where the "ugly duckling" becomes a hero can be helpful, psychologists argue.

**Dogs have been shown to be a positive presence in classrooms across America. They have the potential to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and teach skills. In Indiana, a former child psychologist used a dog in the classroom to teach important life lessons to all ages of student. The lessons included patience, following rules, healthy eating habits, trust, responsibility, and "Judge less, accept more."**

To schedule your **free** assembly, contact Jim Martin at [james.martin@slcschools.org](mailto:james.martin@slcschools.org) (running time 35 minutes)