

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Steve Spiro's Inspirational One-Man Show *UK Underdog* Benefits Animal Rescue, Anti-Bullying Groups

Steve Spiro went from being a sickly bullied 13-year old growing up near London to becoming a successful actor, martial artist and even an animal rights activist.

He tells his story in a new one-man show, *UK Underdog*, presented by Shelter Transport Animal Rescue Team (START) in association with Pacific Resident Theatre (PRT), now through Oct. 28 at the Zephyr Theatre, 7456 Melrose Ave., L.A.

Suffering from glandular fever, "I lost weight and confidence and was picked on and missed a lot of school," Spiro says. "There was a lot of name calling, ear punching and getting shot with pea shooters.

"I was despondent," says Spiro when a friend dragged him to a kung fu class he was taking. "I didn't like it. But I kept coming back."

As Spiro recounts, after his nemesis Jay punched him in the face and later learned that he had been studying martial arts; he challenged him to spar.

"I did well and we even became friends," says Spiro. "He's been through some hard times, but we're still friends and he's doing okay."

In addition to Jay, Spiro plays 18 different characters—including his bullies, dad, grandmothers and teacher—to tell how he was harassed, took up martial arts, went to college, was involved in street fighting, came to America and returned to England.

"There are a lot of twists and turns in the show," says Spiro, who also covers the travails of going to acting school and working as a stunt man.

The play was developed from a 20-minute monologue Spiro first wrote 20 years ago for acting teacher Larry Moss. "He said write more, so now with the help of director Ann Bronston, he has developed an 85 minute show with the message "that if you get knocked down you get back up. I was not coordinated and always the worst in the class, but I kept showing up and doing it."

Spiro co-founded START with friends in 2011.

"I never grew up with animals, but my wife had two dogs when I met her and they were so happy to see me in the morning," he said. "I saw the joy that animals brought to people, but I also saw how animals were being abused and killed at shelters. We've saved more than 10,000 dogs and cats now, and fund spaying and neutering for people who can't afford it."



Steve Spiro
Photo by Sue Eigenbrodt

START board member Ellen Lavinthal, a 25-year Beverly Hills resident and long active in animal rescue, has hosted meetings at her home for the nonprofit that transports dogs from high-kill shelters in L.A. to new lives in Oregon, Washington and Canada (www.startrescue.org). "They don't have the overcrowding problems we have here," says Lavinthal, "where 60 percent of animals never see their way out."

The organization transports approximately 150 dogs a month in a \$150,000 retrofitted, air-conditioned truck that can accommodate crates.

Lavinthal first met Spiro 12 years ago when he called her about an animal hoarding situation he learned of "and knew I was heavily involved in the rescue community. I got to know Steve and realized he was the kind of person to get things done. That was the beginning of a working relationship and friendship."

Lavinthal says she's proud to be part of an organization "that's conservative with its money and you see where every dollar is spent."

START also helps underfunded rescuers with their animals' medical bills.

The play first ran at PRT in Venice where Spiro is a member of the company and Lavinthal saw it. "I was so impressed by his talent and the compelling story he has to tell," she says.

Proceeds from Zephyr performances will benefit START Rescue and select animal charities and anti-bullying groups.

Performances are 8 p.m., Thursday-Saturday and 2 p.m. on Sunday.

Tickets are \$25 and available by calling 323-960-7788 or online at www.plays411.com/ukunderdog.

—Steve Simmons