

HT wknd

Patrick Stewart

A hearty Stew

He's been storyteller to generations, on stage and screen. Had starring roles in Star Trek and X-Men, in retellings of Shakespearean plays, Roman lore and the sci-fi classic Dune. What did it take to be so many things to so many people? Stewart, 83, breaks it down in an exclusive interview, and in his new memoir, Making It So

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Patrick Stewart is the sort of actor for whom words such as "studied", "historic", "prodigious" and "legion" were made.

To wit: He has gathered legions of fans across generations, with his studied acting in historic roles. This isn't hyperbole. Even non-Trekkies know of Captain Jean-Luc Picard, the morally upright captain of the starship Enterprise; and, you needn't be a Trekkie to know of the wheelchair-using Professor Charles Xavier, under whose tutelage millennial mutants attained responsible adulthood in the X-Men films.

A previous generation knew him as the soldier Sejanus, in the 1970s British series, I, Claudius, about the life of the titular 1st century CE Roman emperor. Before that, in the 1960s, Stewart was a young actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company, performing alongside Vivien Leigh, who had by then won an Oscar for her portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara in Gone with the Wind (1939).

In his new memoir, Making It So (Simon & Schuster; October 2023), Stewart takes the reader through this journey, detailing what it took to achieve his prodigious skill. The narrative is clear and precise, much like the man.

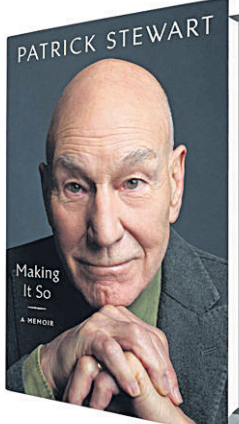
At least a few times in this conversation, for instance, Stewart brings up anecdotes he has described in the book. And while it is a peculiar pleasure to hear the stories straight from him, there is in them a touch of the well-rehearsed. The man is an actor, after all, and has told his life story in the book. What more could he reveal?

Well, for one thing, it turns out that the 83-year-old thespian can also hold a note. (More on that in a bit.)

He is disarmingly candid too. At one point in the book, he describes meeting Sting on the sets of David Lynch's Dune (1984), and not knowing who he was. He points out that he knew "next to nothing" about Star Trek when he was called in to be part of...The Next Generation (1987-94), even though the highly popular Star Trek: The Original Series with William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy was about two decades old by this point.

"It will not surprise you to learn that the guy who thought that Sting played a double bass in a policeman's band knew next to nothing of Star Trek," Stewart says.

"When Steve (Dontanville, an American agent who represented Stewart) explained that Gene Roddenberry, the creator of this legendary science-fiction programme, was developing a new version of the show, for which I was evidently being considered for a part, I realised that it sounded vaguely familiar. I recalled that in my kids' younger years, when I came home for tea between performances of a matinee and an evening show, I'd find Dan and Sophie sitting in front of the television watching a programme with guys in coloured long-sleeved shirts. It was called Star Walk or Star Track, some-



thing like that, and I was aware that the kids were rapt and did not want to be pestered by Dad until the episode had ended."

By the time he auditioned for...The Next Generation, Stewart had already acted in a few science-fiction movies, including the memorable Dune and the not-so-memorable Lifeorce (1985; a sci-fi horror work). At the time, Stewart was in his mid-40s — middle aged, and as he put it, "mired in this mix of ambition and existential funk".

The newer series, with Stewart playing Jean-Luc Picard, defied expectations, running for seven seasons. In fact, so enduring has the appeal of Roddenberry's world been that, from 2020 to 2023, Stewart returned as Picard, in a streaming series of that name centred on his character.

At the start of our conversation, the actor clarifies that he will only speak of his work in relation to his memoir, out of deference for the ongoing SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) strike. The strike by the American labour union of writers and actors ran parallel to the WGA (Writers Guild of America) one, which concluded successfully earlier this month. As with WGA, SAG-AFTRA members have sought better wages and compensation.

It is not surprising that Stewart, who grew up in Yorkshire and describes himself as coming from "trade union stock", should extend his solidarity.

The actor refers to his politics early on in his memoir, describing how, as a boy of five, he campaigned for the local Labour Party candidate William Paling during the 1945 post-World War 2 election. He still remembers the ditty he sang while campaigning then. "Mr Paling is a man / And we'll have him if we can. / If he'll only put his shoulder to the wheel," Stewart sings, ending with a large smile.

"My social inclinations were already showing themselves in 1945," he says. Having been raised in a region with a rich history of trade unions in its textile and mining industries, he joined his own theatre repertory's union as a young stage actor.

"My first payment, in 1960, was £5.20. I was content with it at that time and thought I could make that work. But as I got a little older and more responsible, I felt that it was taking advantage of me and my background and not paying me what I deserve to be paid or giving my union the respect that was required," Stewart says. "And that is very much what has been happening today with the Writers Guild of America and the Screen Actors Guild and AFTRA."

It is his passionate belief, he adds, that we should live in an equal and just society. "And this is not the case. There are prejudices leaning in one direction or another, and that's partly what the writers' strike and the actors' strike has been about, and they will be resolved. The writers' one has been resolved very well, and I admire their determination and their enthusiasm for making the lives of their members better and better. It's the way we all ought to live."

The legions are listening, and hopefully in agreement. Let's make it so.



It will not surprise you to learn that the guy who thought that Sting played... in a policeman's band knew next to nothing of Star Trek.

PATRICK STEWART, on not knowing who Sting was in the 1980s, and thinking that the sci-fi show was called Star Walk or Star Track

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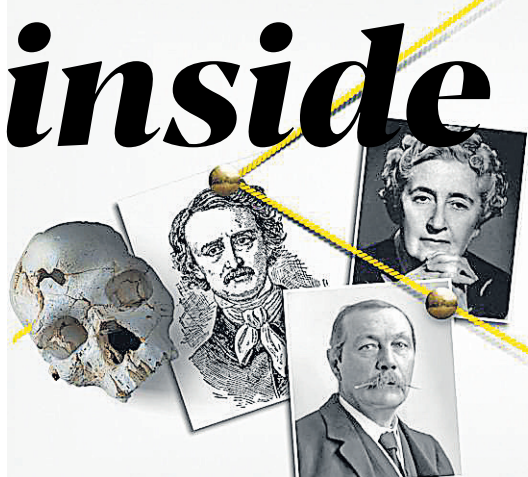
Patrick Stewart, 83, grew up in Yorkshire, the son of a veteran of both world wars. He was political from an early age, campaigning for a local Labour Party candidate at age five, in 1945, and joining his first theatre repertory's union too.
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Stewart began his acting career in the 1960s, touring with the Royal Shakespeare Company and performing alongside Vivien Leigh. On TV, he played a Roman soldier in I, Claudius, a 1970s British series about a 1st century CE Roman emperor.
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His big break, of course, was the role of Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the starship Enterprise, in the TV series Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987-94). By the turn of the century, now in his 60s, he would storm screens before an entirely new generation, as Professor Charles Xavier in the X-Men films. He recently made a return as Picard too, in a show of that name that ran from 2020 to 2023.

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