Patrick Stewart (1940-2026): a classical actor animated by his socialist convictions

Paul Bond
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Grief at the recent death of actor Patrick Stewart, aged 86, was widespread. His great talent was rightly celebrated, but the personal respect he was afforded by millions internationally speaks to wider issues.

Proud of his working-class background, Stewart used his celebrity status to speak out against discrimination and domestic violence. His continued open identification of himself as an "absolute fundamental, emotional socialist" (he was a lifelong Labour Party supporter) made him appealing to a younger audience being radicalised by their own experience. He always came over as a fundamentally decent person and this quality infused his best-known roles.

A distinguished classical actor, Stewart became globally recognised in the high-profile *Star Trek* and *X-Men* franchises. It is significant that both the parts for which he is best known, Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Professor Charles Xavier, are authoritative but humane and moral leaders committed to equality and fighting injustice.

Their appeal to him is clear, and so too is their appeal to audiences. These figures embodied a striving for fairness, for something better in contrast to the official venality and corruption experienced by audiences the world over. Stewart responded with performances of seriousness and depth that made them more attractive. The abiding fan loyalty was a response to something honest.

Stewart was born in a West Yorkshire mill town in 1940, the third child of Alfred, a postman and labourer, and Gladys, a textile worker. Stewart talked of the domestic violence he witnessed at home, which led him to advocate for the victims of domestic abuse.

He was also open about his emotional conflict at seeing his mother hurt by a man he "respected, admired and feared." Stewart's domestic life was shaped by the experiences of a working class emerging from the trauma of war—Alfred suffered traumatic stress from his wartime experiences—and seeking some reorganisation of society within the reformist framework of the Labour Party. Stewart took his own point of departure politically from the 1945 post war Labour government—associating Labour with the nationalisations, welfare reforms, establishing of the National Health Service and council house building which it carried out to placate radicalised workers returning from the frontlines and stem class antagonisms dangerous to British imperialism.

Stewart described his father as "a superstar" in the army who now found himself "nobody" in civilian life. At the same time, he said, Alfred was "a very strong trade unionist and those fundamental issues of Labour were ingrained into me."

Patrick skipped the 11-plus exam that might have taken him to grammar school. Although he doubted he would have passed, he was grateful for the circumstances that led him to a secondary modern school and the teaching of Cecil Dormand. Stewart was scrupulous in crediting the individuals who supported and guided him, but he was a product of an educational system fought for and won by the working class in a post-war overhaul of social provision and welfare.

Stewart acknowledged Dormand for recognising his imaginative escape from things at home. Dormand introduced the 12-year-old Stewart to Shakespeare: "I barely understood a word, but I loved the feel of the words and sounds in my mouth."

Dormand also cast Stewart in his first performance, in a production largely cast with teachers. "I felt fearless," said Stewart, "and entirely at home. I felt safe on stage and I always have since."

It was Dormand who enabled Stewart to develop his theatrical talents beyond amateur dramatics. Dormand called Stewart to meet "another influencer of my youth," Yorkshire's county drama adviser Gerald Tyler. They got Stewart sent on an eight-day residential drama course in Mytholmroyd, where he received his first acting lessons. He became friends there with Brian Blessed.

Stewart later learned that Dormand probably paid for him to go on the course. He also encouraged Stewart's older brother to go to technical college and restored some of Alfred Stewart's dignity by encouraging him to head the school's PTA. Years later, as chancellor of the University of Huddersfield, Stewart acknowledged his debt with an honorary doctorate for Dormand.

Stewart left school at 15, selling furniture and working in local journalism, but he and Blessed both secured grants to study at Bristol Old Vic drama school. It indicates the class shift his career represents that Stewart's drama school grant was the first one given by West Riding Council to someone who was not an Oxford or Cambridge graduate.

He worked steadily in rep before joining the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 1966, where he remained until 1982 and returned triumphantly in 2006. He worked in theatre when he could throughout his career.

Stewart had lost his hair by the age of 20. He was told that this would affect casting and he would never be a leading man. This was hardly true—the year before joining the RSC, he had played the title character in Brecht's *Life of Galileo* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* in rep—but he was a compelling supporting player before those parts did materialise with the national company.

Physically imposing, and with a richly sensuous voice, he established himself as a core company member, gradually moving up through the major supporting parts—including an award-winning Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*—to some leading roles each season.

His first Broadway experience came in Peter Brook's celebrated *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970). Through the 1970s, he combined RSC work with television and forays to the US.

This was a period of serious television drama, and Stewart's generation of classical actors both enriched it and benefited from it. In the BBC's 13-part historical drama *Fall of Eagles* (1974) he played a rather humourless Lenin, including in an episode written by Trevor Griffiths about the 1903 split in the RSDLP.

His continued self-identification as a socialist will have had some influence on his choice of work. He played Shakespeare in *Bingo* by Edward Bond, another of that generation of radical playwrights.

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He also appeared in Griffiths's *Occupations*, playing communist sent to Turin during the workers' occupations of the Fiat factories. The play concerns arguments between Kabak and Antonio Gramsci (Ben Kingsley in that production) on tensions between the need for discipline in a revolutionary movement and the inspiration for the revolutionary moment. Griffiths called it "a sort of Jacobinical response" to the failure of 1968 in France.

In 1976, Stewart played Sejanus in the extraordinary *I, Claudius* (also starring Blessed in his best serious work), a career-defining series for many great actors, including Derek Jacobi and John Hurt. It was an almost theatrical production, with many of the cast having RSC experience.

There were similarly impressive casts in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) and *Smiley's People* (1982), adapted from John le Carré's novels. The first was a masterpiece of understated performances, led by Alec Guinness as spymaster George Smiley. Stewart had the thankless task of playing Smiley's KGB counterpart Karla, a mute role that was central to Smiley's crisis. Stewart brought the presence and depth Karla needed to be a critical character rather than just a vague nemesis.

Other film and television work showed that the quality of work available was becoming more variable, with Stewart taking minor roles in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), David Lynch's *Dune* (1984), Tobe Hooper's *Lifeforce* (1985) and Trevor Nunn's *Lady Jane* (1986), scripted by David Edgar. The options were changing for classical actors.

After a performance in the early 1970s, Stewart was invited by University of California professor of English Homer Swander to talk to students about the play. Stewart was reluctant—"I don't do that kind of thing. How I work is my business," he said—but he agreed, making the first of many visits to Swander's students in Britain and America.

Stewart expressed gratitude to Swander for the opportunity to examine the actor's working processes and illuminate "aspects of Shakespeare in performance that I had never contemplated before." It led to a US college tour by Stewart and other RSC actors, an educational outreach programme that continues.

It had a more practical impact, too. In 1986, Stewart was assisting another US Shakespeare lecture. In the audience was producer Robert Justman, then working on plans for a revival of the *Star Trek* franchise with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (*TNG*). Justman claims he turned to his wife and announced, "We've found the captain." Stewart played Picard for seven years on that series and for a total of 36 years across four films and a reprise series *Star Trek: Picard*, that ran from 2020-2023.

Stewart was not keen on television work, much less science fiction. Rehearsing a television *Hamlet* in 1980 he had asked *Doctor Who* star Lalla Ward "Why don't you do proper stuff like theatre… why would you want to do science fiction?"

It took some time for him to relax with the material and get used to the demanding television schedule, but he brought a discipline to it that was unusual. Co-star (and later, director) Jonathan Frakes, who had worked on shows where casts would turn up without having even read the script, said Stewart set "a high bar for preparation."

The *TNG* cast come across as a close and professional unit. Stewart made them up their game. At the same time, Stewart came to approach Picard more seriously, treating him, he said, "as if he were a character in *Henry IV*." It gave his performance a depth beyond the show's parameters, elevating also what happened around him.

Like Xavier later, Picard's appeal lay in his moral complexity and uprightness. Picard was striving for galactic understanding and respect. Xavier was sheltering the victims of discrimination. These progressive sentiments and aspirations were embodied by Stewart.

Interviewed by Time magazine in 2017, he was asked:

"Science fiction has a habit of portraying the world as bleak and hopeless. But the two major sci-fi characters you've played, Charles Xavier and Jean-Luc Picard, both believe in a better future for humanity, or mutants. Do you think we're on the right path? Are you also optimistic about humanity's future?"

He replied:

"I always have been. Always. Even at the most dismaying of times. I grew up in a quite poor working class home with working class parents. My grandparents were the same, my great-grandmother could not write her name, she simply made a cross on her wedding certificate. I've been a witness to unfairness in society all my life. To the conditions under which my mother worked all her life, working in an industrial weaving shed in the north of England. And it has been this feature of unfairness that has motivated me in all of my political thinking."

Stewart continued to return to the theatre in his breaks, for example in a fine *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with Billie Whitelaw in 1987. He knew *TNG* was making him wealthy, calculating that he earned more from the *TNG* break than from the 10-week run of *Virginia Woolf*. He recognised that this gave him some status, and it reflects well that he used this to speak out rather than complacently accepting the privilege.

He also developed a fine sense of the ridiculousness of his franchise personae, giving well-judged self-mocking turns in various comedies such as Ricky Gervais' *Extras* for the BBC and an advert for Yorkshire Tea.

But there is a sense of a gap in his theatrical career. He missed many of the Shakespearean leads, although his return to the RSC in 2006 saw some of the major roles, including Prospero and finally playing Antony.

The yearning for theatre led him to create an award-winning one-man production of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. He later forged a close theatrical partnership with his good friend Ian McKellen, an RSC contemporary although they never appeared together there.

McKellen had been most critical of Stewart's turn to franchise work—ironically, given McKellen's own enthusiastic embrace of it and his performances in the *X-Men* franchise as Xavier's nemesis, Magneto. But they also collaborated on celebrated productions of *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*, reprising the John Gielgud/Ralph Richardson double-act.

In a period when the quality of work on offer for fine classical actors was changing, Patrick Stewart brought his considerable talents to all his work. It is a mark of his qualities that the seriousness he brought to his every performance elevated every vehicle for his talents beyond their intrinsic merits.

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