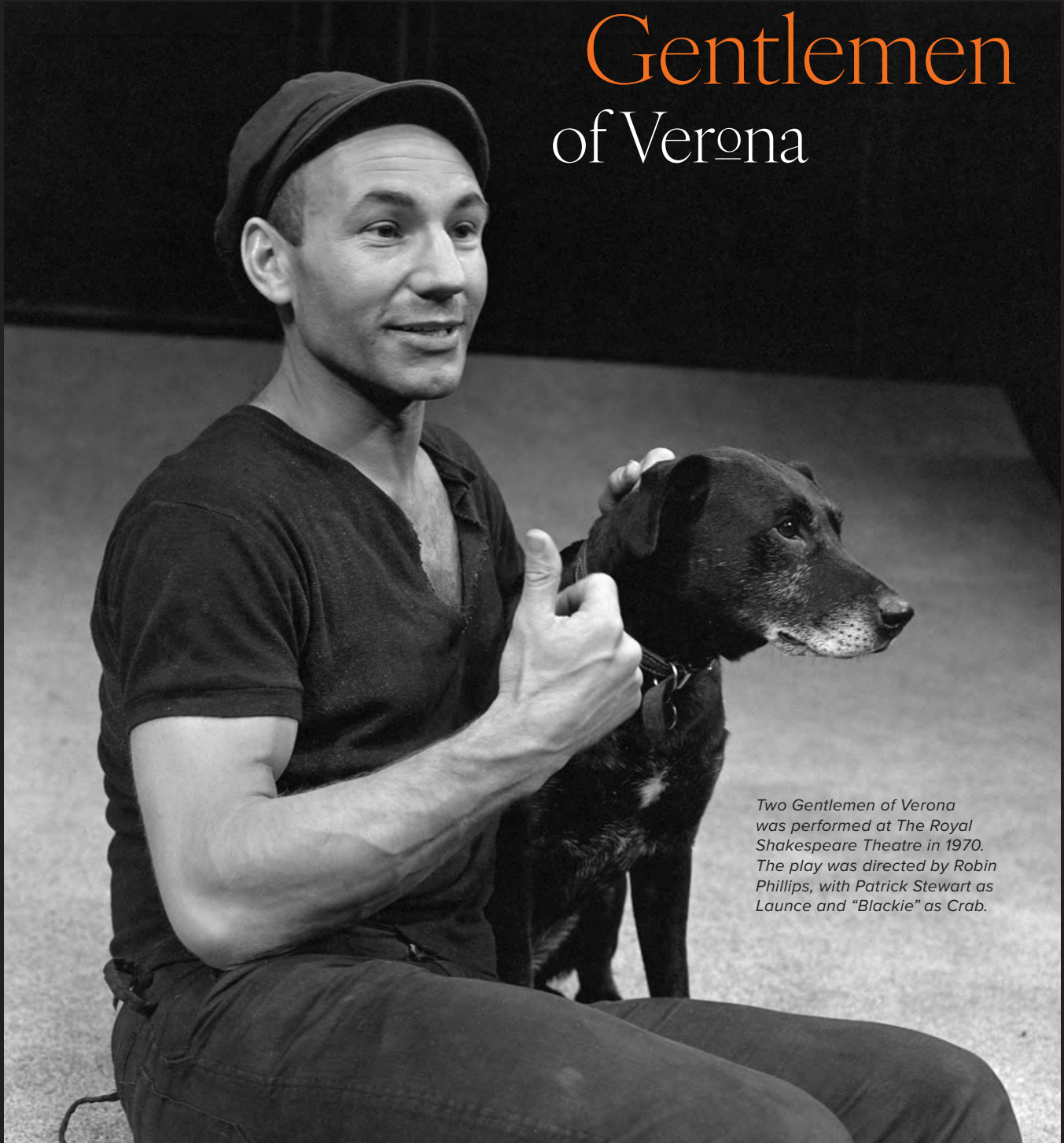


The Other Two

Gentlemen of Verona



Two Gentlemen of Verona was performed at The Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1970. The play was directed by Robin Phillips, with Patrick Stewart as Launce and "Blackie" as Crab.

One of them had four legs, a gray muzzle, and wagging tail. And he wasn't destined to be a future Starship captain. By Brian Patrick Duggan

*I am the dog No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog
O, the dog is me, and I am myself.*—Launce in “Two
Gentlemen of Verona”

*The warmest applause went to Crab, a black Lab-
rador type who took his cues as to the manner born,
and stole the scene from his master, Launce (Patrick
Stewart).*—“The Guardian Journal,” July 24, 1970



The Globe Theatre, 1599, a theater in London at the time of William Shakespeare, 1564-1616, an English playwright, poet, and actor

The only dog William Shakespeare wrote into a play is Crab in “Two Gentlemen of Verona.” But, as Patrick Stewart (later Sir) was to find out in his first time on stage with them, canine performers don’t act—they’re just themselves. Onstage dogs are unpredictably hilarious and obstreperous—in other words, just delightful.

“Enter Launce [weeping with his dog, Crab]”

Two Gentlemen is one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays, perhaps even his first, as it lacks the masterfulness of his better-known works. Written about 1592, it tells the story of two young men, Proteus and Valentine, who travel over 100 miles to Milan to complete their education as gentlemen and, after many complications and intrigues, win their loves, Sylvia and Julia. Both men’s clownish but loyal servants often break out of their tomfoolery to speak wisdom and ethics beyond those of their high-born masters. Proteus’s servant, Launce, is accompanied by Crab, his dog of indeterminate breeding.

We are first introduced to Crab’s character when Launce describes the lamentation of his family at his departure for Milan. Because Crab did not weep and

wail as did the rest of his family, Launce calls him “the sourest-natured dog that lives”—launching into the first of two comic monologues about his dog and himself.

But Launce really loves his companion, Crab (likening the qualities of his ideal wife to those of a “water spaniel”). Shakespeare has Launce note how he saved Crab as a whelp from being drowned, along with his littermates (with eyes not yet open). Then he goes on about how he taught Crab manners, or at least tried to. But dogs will be dogs in any century—Crab gets into trouble.

Launce is loyal to his dog and, in

the second monologue about Crab, he enumerates his transgressions, such as killing geese, stealing roast chickens and desserts, urinating on a woman’s petticoat, and under a banquet table (clearly Shakespeare knew dogs).

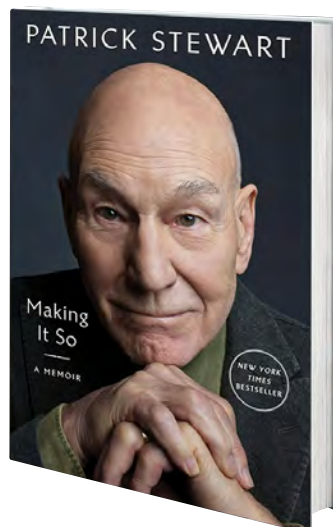
So Launce tells us about taking the blame *and* consequences each time so Crab won’t be harshly punished or worse. This paternal protectiveness gets Launce whipped, his legs locked in the stocks, or his neck and hands bolted in the pillory for public humiliation.

“How many masters would do this for their servant?” he asks.

Sir Patrick and Blackie

Shakespearean actor Patrick Stewart (and also the famed Captain Jean Luc Picard of “Star Trek: The Next Generation”) describes in his engaging 2023 autobiography *Making It So* how he was cast as Launce in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 1970 production of “Two Gentlemen of Verona.” Stewart grew up as a dog lover in Yorkshire, but the life of an aspiring young actor (who might live in a town only for the run of the play) isn’t conducive to having a dog. Stewart was delighted with this unique opportunity.

The play was to be performed in the Bard’s birthplace—Stratford-upon-Avon.





Patrick Stewart with Blackie, 1970

on the grass. Blackie acknowledged the newcomer but quickly returned to his nonchalant bone-chewing. The dog had been picked up by the police nearly two years before but was rescued from a stray's fate at the pound by a kindly woman.

To Stewart, Blackie seemed the perfect Crab. So, with approval from Phillips and the RSC, the well-mannered dog went to live with him and his then wife, Sheila, and their son, Daniel.

At the first cast meeting, Phillips had Stewart introduce Blackie to the ensemble where he was warmly received. Knowing he needed to build a special bond with his canine costar, Stewart insisted Blackie must be called only by his character's name and no one else should interact with Crab. This was especially hard on two dog lovers in the cast, Helen Mirren (playing Julia, and later Dame) and Estelle Kohler (Sylvia), who managed to sneak in scratches and nibbles. Blackie quickly learned Stewart's pocket was his only source of treats.

Deliberately unfettered by collar, leash, or costume, he was given free run of the theater to become at ease with the brilliantly lit set, darkened backstage, and even the 1,200 audience seats. Blackie naturally was the sort of pooch Launce would have had—a savvy, loyal, somewhat impudent, everyman's dog.

Curtain Up!

Opening on July 23, 1970, Launce delivered his lines while Crab stood, sat, or lounged as the mood took him, prompting hilarity and applause (it's a well-known insight that audiences laugh with delight when animals are on stage). Only once did Crab wander off toward the wings, but a treat from Launce's pocket recalled him and earned Blackie/Crab a round of applause.

Serendipitously, when Sir Ian Richardson's dog-despising Proteus would scowl at Blackie/Crab, the dog would often return a low growl, much to the audience's merriment.

Director Robin Phillips wanted to cast a handsomely coated Collie as Crab, but Stewart quickly vetoed that and took charge of canine casting. Convinced that Crab should have the look of a street dog, Stewart traveled to the Canine Defense Association Kennels near Stratford and explained his need to the owner—the loan of a dog to be in a play and live with him

for about five months. Several dogs were considered, but none seemed right.

The owner protested they had no performing dogs, but Stewart clarified he was looking for a dog who had the vibe of a self-assured "loner." In a flash of inspiration, the owner took Stewart out to the backyard, and introduced the actor to Blackie, a gray-muzzled Lab mix lounging

The Other Dog

In Milan, Proteus sends Launce with a "jewel" dog as a gift for Sylvia. However, after marketplace hoodlums steal the "squirrel" (as Launce calls him/her), the well-meaning servant offers Crab instead. Sylvia refuses the "cur" even though, in Launce's opinion, Crab, being ten times larger than a lap dog, makes him clearly the better gift. Angered Proteus sends Launce off to find the little dog—which we never see or hear of again.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona title page: Valentine, Proteus, Launce and his badly behaved dog, Crab



Top: Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo; Inset: Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo



Other Crabs

For over four centuries, Launce's Crab has been played by an Airedale, Bassett Hound, Boxer, Bulldog, Corgi, Doberman, Great Pyrenees, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, English Springer Spaniel, German Shepherd, Labrador, Pug, lurchers and mixed breeds (small, large, shaggy, and sleek), and more—as well as a leashed and collared man on all fours, and a large stuffed dog on a lead. A safe choice for the director as that stuffed dog could be guilty of no onstage indiscretions—but also no live dog charm or actor improvisation.



Clockwise from top left: 1895 production at Daly's Theatre (London) with James Lewis as Launce; The 1996 production at the rebuilt Globe Theatre complex in London, (the first since the theater burned down in 1613), with Jim Bywater as Launce and Dennis as Crab; 1987: Peter Bayliss as Launce with Bramble, Shakespeare at the Open Air Theatre, Regents Park, London

Shakespeare gave Crab no specific actions in the play, so whatever he does on stage is just natural dog behavior—looking around, yawning, drowsing, sniffing, and even licking. All this charms the audience; so maybe it's what the Bard of Avon intended.

Blackie's "finest hour," detailed in *Making It So*, unexpectedly made the play R-rated. Delivering Launce's first monologue, Stewart heard the audience laugh (not intended) and looked over to see Blackie, one leg in air, licking his "large pink erection." Stewart paused for the laughter to subside and continued with his next line, "I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog..." to repeated explosions of audience laughter.

Reviewers loved Blackie, describing his performance a "show stealer," "to the manor born," and "impeccable," and as one wrote, "the amiable beast cooperating with yawns and scratching at appropriate moments." The pair was a hit and Stewart always included Blackie in the curtain calls at the end of the

performances. When the show finally closed in December, cast and crew showered their four-legged thespian with farewell pets and hugs. The following day, Stewart drove his co-star back to the rescue kennel where Blackie took his homecoming in stride.

The Immortal Blackie

Blackie earned six pages in *Making It So* and has a permanent place in the credits and photos of the Royal Shakespeare Company. His memory lives on in another and most special way.

There was one performance when Stewart became aware the audience had shifted their focus from him to Crab, who was sitting at the edge of a small pool on set. Tuning out the actors' dialogue, crowd, smells, and noise, the dog was laser-focused on the water's shimmering reflections of the stage lights. Sir Patrick, as a method actor, declared Crab's intense concentration was "perhaps, the most potent acting lesson I had ever been given—the

powers of concentration are critical for a stage actor, though they must be used selectively. I have locked my eyes in such a fashion a few times in my stage career, and every time, I have said to myself, *Thank you, Crab.*" **FD**

Brian Patrick Duggan is a canine historian and the award-winning author of the newly released Horror Dogs: Man's Best Friend as Movie Monster. Well-published on dog topics, Duggan is the editor for McFarland Publishers' Dogs in Our World Series and the author of Saluki: The Desert Hound and the English Travelers Who Brought It to the West.

www.brianpatrickduggan.net

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