



**YORKSHIRE
LAD** O'Toole
is back where
he started,
but as a duke

Old Dog, New Tricks

That indomitable collie **Lassie** is back—and you'll never guess whom she brought with her

By **JOSH TYRANGIEL** ISLE OF MAN

PETER O'TOOLE HAS FACED DOWN some acting challenges in his day. (Lawrence of Arabia springs to mind.) But the movie he is making now is particularly treacherous. "What's the old cliché?" he asks. "Don't act with children and dogs? Well, try children, dogs, horses and hounds, coal miners, a motor car formerly the property of the late George Raft, and a fox. Try acting with that lot, which I did the other day. Verrrry tricky." O'Toole, 72, knew when he signed up for the remake of *Lassie* that there would be a collie, a massive hunt scene in which his character would chase a fox down a coal mine in an old Duesenberg and two 9-year-old co-stars. "I'm not complaining," he says, sitting in his trailer and munching on licorice jujubes, "just amazed. Strange old business, film is. Strange old business."

That anyone would decide to remake *Lassie* is in itself not so odd. Far worse properties have been rehashed, and at least director Charles Sturridge (*Brideshead Revisited*, *Shackleton*) will be classing up the old dog a bit, not only by casting O'Toole, Samantha Morton and Peter Dinklage in major roles but also by taking the story back to its pre-Timmy's-trapped-in-a-well roots. "I never saw the TV show, and I can't recall any of the films," says Sturridge, who hopes to have his movie ready for a Christmas release. "But the original novel"—*Lassie Come-Home*, written by Eric Knight in

1940—"was set in Yorkshire, and it had a certain prewar British integrity about it. In current children's films, you have to be ironic to reach the parents in the audience. It's a profitable formula, but this film won't appeal to one audience over the heads of another. It



PAWS FOR THOUGHT There is only one **Lassie**, but three (male) dogs play her

looks the whole audience in the eye."

The production itself is a little less straightforward. For tax reasons, the Isle of Man is standing in for Yorkshire, while, for reasons clear only to Classic Media, holder of the rights to *Lassie*, everyone on the set is required to stick to the fiction that Lassie

is being played by a single dog named Lassie. Actually, three collies named Carter, Mason and Dakota share the part. "We have the stunt dog, the running dog and the picture dog," trainer Mathilde de Cagny whispers. "We do a little bit of make-up on the picture dog to darken him up. He's lighter than the others, so we had a special dog colorist from Los Angeles come in. She has vegetable dyes that do the trick." No makeup can disguise the fact that all three Lassies are male. "We count on the fur to hide that," says de Cagny. A strange business indeed.

Perhaps because there are three of them, the dogs are not the biggest stars on the set. "The fox is completely breathtaking," says Sturridge. "In your soul you know that a dog can be trained, and you think, Well, no, not a fox. So when you see a fox run and stop exactly where you've told it to stop, you go, For f____'s sake, that is amazing." O'Toole, as the imperious duke who buys Lassie from a struggling coal-mining family and takes the dog away to his Scottish manse, is not as easy to control, but he is a significantly better quote. With little prompting, he tells stories about growing up near the Yorkshire Dales ("We used to pee at the junction of the Ribble and Aire rivers to see whose would go to the Irish Sea and whose would go to the North Sea!"), ignoring the advice of theater directors ("barnstorm führers, the lot") and mocking "gibberish spouting" method actors. "When you're playing Hamlet, and you and Horatio are up on the battlements, Horatio says, 'But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad/Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.' Well, it isn't! You're looking at Charlie the prop man with a fag in his gob. It's pretend, for God's sake!"

O'Toole retired from the theater in 1999 ("Playing a leading role is too exhausting, and I won't shuffle on as an old butler. I won't"), and because of his age and accomplishments, he tends to get typecast in boringly prestigious movie roles, such as Priam in 2004's *Troy*. "I spent the film slithering around in a piece of old chiffon," he says sadly. Sturridge wrote the part of *Lassie's* duke to give O'Toole a chance to let loose again. "I wanted a character who was both exciting to children and at the same time dangerous," says Sturridge. "I had Peter in mind, and it has been great to see him use his anarchic energy again." O'Toole appreciates the opportunity but understands that "the film isn't about me, it's about the dog. Admittedly, the dog isn't all that good an actor, but with the right cuts and perhaps a lamb chop, we'll get the job done." ■