



Tracy and Kenneth Tynan, 1953 © Elsbeth R. Juda/V&A Images

Tracy Tynan

WEAR AND TEAR

The threads of my life

320pp. Duckworth Overlook.

£18.99 (US \$26).

Raising whirlwinds

HERMIONE HOBY

Kenneth Peacock Tynan liked to steal the show. Writing in the 1950s and 60s as a theatre critic first for the *Observer* and then the *New Yorker*, he worked under the maxim “rouse tempers, goad and lacerate, raise whirlwinds”. Long before he published a sentence, however, he attracted attention through the spectacle of his attire. Clothes, in fact, seem to have been an even more cherished form of expression for him than words. His wardrobe included “a cape lined in blood-red satin”, “a suit of purple doeskin flannel” and one bottle green number, purportedly tailored from billiard table baize. His marriage to the writer Elaine Dundy was founded on an admiration for each other’s outfits (in 1957 they were photographed for the *Daily Mail* in “matching faux-leopard-skin pants, white shirts, and string ties” on a “faux-zebra-skin chaise longue”) and, predictably, their union was neither stable nor lasting. How could the offspring of such a vain and committedly outrageous pair compete? She couldn’t. Their daughter, the

costume designer Tracy Tynan, emerges as a forlorn, staid little child in the first half of this memoir, through whose pages her flamboyant parents crash and tear. They are a couple who “seemed to revel in humiliation in front of each other and in public, trying their best to be the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald of the ’50s”, exhausting their many fabulous, famous friends with “epic fights”. They seem to have exhausted, too, their only daughter, who here recounts a lifetime of inappropriate scene-stealing.

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There is an indelible image of her mother, showing up in a doorway, “completely naked, clutching a bottle of champagne”, stunning the au pair, the au pair’s boyfriend and tiny, mortified Tracy into momentary silence. Her father’s fragrance, however, found more public forms. In 1965 he gleefully claimed the honour of becoming the first man to say “fuck” on British television. And with this, Tracy the schoolgirl “became the daughter of the man who had said ‘fuck’ on the BBC”. Mary Whitehouse, the much-mocked self-appointed guardian of the nation’s morals,

declared that he should be spanked. Which, the author notes in a rare moment of dry humour, “must have appeared ironic to those who knew my father and his S and M predilections”. Tracy describes how he would take blithe pleasure in recounting his sexual escapades to her while she was still a teenager and how, “longing” as she was “for unconditional love and approval from him”, she would listen, politely enduring the details. The best “father–daughter” moment she can recall is snorting cocaine with him at her twenty-first birthday party, a celebration Tynan senior has co-opted as a display of social capital, “a testament to his ability to attract A-list celebrities into his life”. Despite this outrageous takeover of her party, she’s proud to have been the one to supply the drug, to have introduced him to something new.

Tynan tells her life story in chapters pegged to items of clothing, beginning with “the lemon yellow underpants” she wore aged six and remembers with shame. (She was scolded for dropping them as a dare, mooning her friends from the doorstep of her posh London home.) Sometimes this structure feels awkwardly enforced; not every item of clothing yields a substantial story. “The Apple-Green Shoes”, however, are among the most significant. Bought with her first instalment of a clothing allowance, these constitute “the moment when my sense of style was firmly established”. “In a world where [al]most everything felt out of control, having control over the clothes I wore filled a hole.”

By the early 1970s, the author finds herself living in Los Angeles and finally finding not just a sense of control, but

selfhood, through style: a young woman with pink streaks in her hair, she delights in sporting zippered jumpsuits in shades of periwinkle and raspberry. But then, “just as I felt I was coming into my own, my father and his family . . . decided to move to L.A.”. Soon after, we encounter the most poignant item of clothing: “a two-piece white polyester outfit”, which her father presents to her as a “Pierrot costume” and which she identifies, correctly and miserably, as a clown costume. “I was floored. Was this how he imagined me? A comic yet pathetic persona swathed in white? . . . He had given me the costume of a sad clown and wanted me to wear it.”

Eventually, though, Tracy Tynan begins to build, albeit tentatively, a durable and glamorous career as a costume designer – no longer a sad clown. Or at least, not so visibly: the most vivid presences in this book remain those of her peacocking father and exhibitionist mother. This should be her story, yet it can’t help being theirs. “I had learned how to stuff unpleasant feelings down into the deepest reaches of my body and psyche. This was my unconscious survival technique, which a therapist much later would tell me was called ‘splitting off’, a behavior common among children of alcoholics”, she writes. It’s an exploration of these unpleasant feelings that we long for.

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