

## THE ARCHIVE

# Critical mess: growing up amid Kenneth Tynan's 'crazy tango'

The daughter of the renowned but troubled late theatre critic and the novelist Elaine Dundy, Tracy Tynan's childhood environment was one of alcohol-fuelled, real-life drama, as **Nick Smurthwaite** discovers



KEN LOCKER



Clockwise from left: Kenneth Tynan and Elaine Dundy on their wedding day in 1951; Tracy Tynan as a toddler with her father, and with her mother in the late 1960s

**A**ny theatre buff or practitioner who was around in the 1950s and 1960s was in thrall to the critic Kenneth Tynan, whose outspoken first-night opinions carried more weight than any critic before or since.

Despite his distinction as a writer – many considered him the most influential critic of the 20th century – and his later, fruitful association with Olivier's National Theatre, Tynan is mostly remembered these days for supposedly being the first man to say 'fuck' on British television, and for producing the infamous sex revue *Oh! Calcutta!* in 1969.

Thanks to his daughter Tracy, now there is something else he'll be remembered for – being a terrible parent.

Now a stylish 60-something, Tracy Tynan has made her authorial debut with the memoir, *Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life*, in which she reminisces about her rollercoaster childhood with parents who didn't get on, while cleverly using her preoccupation with clothes and accessories to link the various stages of her life.

"In a world where most everything else felt out of control, having control over the clothes I wore filled a hole," she writes.

Tynan's mother was the novelist Elaine Dundy, author of the cult classic *The Dud*

**'Hungover, the Tynans would fight like cat and dog, throwing crockery and threatening murder'**

*Avocado* in 1958. Like her husband, she was a party animal and they would spend as much time as possible socialising with London's cultural elite. At home, with matching hangovers, they fought like cat and dog, throwing crockery, threatening to kill one another and drinking themselves into oblivion.

"They were completely caught up in their own drama," Tracy recalls. "They were together for 13 years, locked into this crazy tango."

Unhappily for Tracy, so was she. Rather like Saffy in BBC TV series *Absolutely Fabulous*, she attempted to deal with the craziness by rising above it. There is a funny-sad description in the book of the child Tracy answering the door to her mother's best friend, the writer Sally Belfrage, amid scenes of domestic mayhem. "I'll kill you, you bitch," screams Tynan from within. Tracy calmly greets the caller: "Hello, how nice to see you. Do come in."

The Tynans were also unhealthily obsessed with celebrity and getting to know anyone who

was anyone in the performing arts world. At one point, Dundy insisted her daughter should curtsy to the great and the good when they were invited round for drinks.

She writes: "Our flat welcomed a constant parade of famous actors, writers, directors and musicians. I knew these people were important because my parents made sure I knew. 'Larry Olivier is coming over for a drink,' my father would announce, barely containing his excitement, stuttering as he often did when excited. 'Marlene said she might stop by,' my mother would add proudly.

"For many years I knew only that these people were essential to my parents and somehow connected to their work. I now realise that they were the original celebrity hounds. They relentlessly and unabashedly pursued famous people. They thought that if they were around famous people they, too, would become famous."

While there is nothing unusual about a love-hate relationship between child and parent, Tracy also had to deal with the slow realisation that her mother was a drug-dependent alcoholic, while her father was hooked on sadomasochistic sex games.

It took her years of therapy and meditation, as well as the love of a good man, the American film director Jim McBride, to deal with her past. It begs the question: why did she want to revisit it?

She says: "You do constantly ask yourself, 'Why am I revisiting this unhappy time again and again?' But there is an element of catharsis and understanding in writing it all down. My parents were flawed people who both had flawed upbringings themselves. They did the best they could. They simply didn't have the skills to make it work.

"There was a deep insecurity in my father. He was a very complicated person, generous

and selfish by turns. He had a way of saying or doing things that he thought would reassure me but often had the opposite effect.

"Once when I was a teenager he said to me: 'It doesn't matter if you're not beautiful.' I think it was his backhanded way of saying looks didn't matter, yet his life was filled with beautiful, glamorous people, a testimony to the precise opposite. Despite his facility with words he seemed unable to find the right ones to inspire confidence."

With McBride, Tracy has two grown-up children. Her half-sister Roxana is married to McBride's son, Jesse, by his first marriage. How did the experience of growing up with her parents affect her own parenting skills?

"I had no blueprint of how to be a good parent so I was anxious not to make the same mistakes they had. I feel very fortunate. I'm very close to my kids. They accept that I'm flawed, like everyone. I just wanted to be a good-enough mother. It is amazing that we have managed to coalesce together given the disparate elements of our family."

Though she blames ageism for the demise of her career as a costume designer in the US film industry, Tracy owns that "I probably wasn't as focused as I might have been. I did have two kids to consider, after all."

**Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life** is published by Duckworth Overlook

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