

FASHION & STYLE BOOKS OF STYLE

Tracy Tynan's Costume Drama

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Tracy Tynan's account of surviving the theatrics of her parents and finding solace and control in clothes.

*“Wear and Tear: The Threads of My Life,” by
Tracy Tynan. Scribner, 320 pp., \$25.*

However tough it may be for a parent to cope with a rebellious, volatile child, it is infinitely tougher for a child to wrangle with a rebellious, volatile parent. The costume designer and writer Tracy Tynan grew up with the double burden of two such parents.

Her father was the outrageous, lacerating British theater critic and writer Kenneth Tynan; her mother was the volatile, sharp-witted American novelist Elaine Dundy (her novel “The Dud Avocado” remains a cult classic).

In 1960, when Tracy (named for the Main Line blueblood Tracy Lord, played by her godmother, Katharine Hepburn, in “The Philadelphia Story”) was 8, she was at home in London, watching television, when her mother teetered toward the room, stark naked, “clutching a

bottle of champagne she was trying to pour into a glass,” and began swaying in the doorway. The au pair, taking in the sight, said in a “singsong matter-of-fact voice” to Tracy’s mother, “Don’t you think you ought to put some clothes on, Mrs. Tynan?”

In “Wear and Tear,” Ms. Tynan’s memoir of her life as the daughter of these bumptious bumper-car parents, she recalls that when they would scream, rage and throw tantrums when she was little, she would wrap herself in her mother’s “silky, soft sealskin coat” to insulate herself from the fracas, even as their drama compelled her. “Watching them was like watching a horror movie, scary but riveting,” she writes.

A parade of movie stars regularly passed through the Tynan household in Mayfair (Laurence Olivier, Marlene Dietrich, Maggie Smith, Orson Welles), and the hosts’ day-to-day theatrics rivaled the performances of their guests.

When the family lived briefly in New York, where Kenneth Tynan reviewed Broadway shows for *The New Yorker*, the glittering throng expanded to include Sidney Lumet and Gloria Vanderbilt, George Plimpton, Norman Mailer, Tennessee Williams, Leonard Bernstein and Mary Martin (on whose lap young Tracy threw up, in a stretch limo, after watching the star perform in “Peter Pan”).

“My parents were the original celebrity hounds,” Ms. Tynan writes. “They relentlessly and unabashedly pursued famous people.”

They behaved no more decorously with their illustrious entourage than with their child. “Both my parents 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,” she recalls.

In the mid-’60s, the couple divorced, and a few years later, Kenneth Tynan married the journalist and writer Kathleen Halton, with whom he had two children, Roxana and Matthew. Meanwhile, Elaine Dundy (“She was always Elaine, never Mother,” Ms. Tynan writes), slalomed from one rehab center to another.

Early on, Ms. Tynan had begun to dress as the distinct persona she aspired to be, finding empowerment in choosing her own wardrobe. “Trying on clothes gave me an opportunity, albeit briefly, to test out different identities,” she explains.

Her defining purchase, made when she was 14, was a pair of expensive apple-green shoes with a bow at the front. “In a world where most everything else felt out of control, having control over the clothes I wore filled a hole,” she writes.

She wore those apple-green shoes proudly for more than two years: They signaled “the beginning of walking on my own two feet, walking away from my parents and toward freedom.”

By that time, she was spending most of her time at boarding school, away from the mayhem of home. Even so, distance and retail therapy could not protect her from

the intermittent buffets of her parents' excesses, whether it was her drunken mother muzzily lurching at her with a carving knife on holiday, or her father causing an international media uproar by swearing on the BBC. After that stunt, she writes, people "assumed I must be both sexually liberated and an easy lay."

In fact, she remained a virgin until she was 20, when, dressed in "a vintage blouse and a long Ossie Clark skirt, cut on the bias and made out of panels of purple and red Liberty-printed fabric, covered in tiny roses," she achieved her deflowering with the help of a trendy magazine editor.

He was shocked to discover it was her first time, what with "your dad and all," he stammered. After, she writes, "I put on my beautiful skirt and wept."

Slowly, Ms. Tynan expanded her wardrobe and her self-assurance, attending Sarah Lawrence, then moving to Los Angeles. By coincidence, her father and his new family moved to Los Angeles a few months later, and before long — and not by coincidence — Elaine Dundy moved to California, too.

Ms. Tynan, who understandably had "mixed feelings" about the proximity, resolutely patched together a separate path for herself. She made a documentary on the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders, "A Great Bunch of Girls," then fell in love with a film director, Jim McBride, who had a young son, Jesse, from a previous marriage. The two of them married, and hours after the wedding, they returned to their hotel to find an urgent message for

her husband: Richard Gere had agreed to act in Mr. McBride's remake of the film "Breathless."

Mr. McBride enlisted his new wife to assist the costume designer J. Allen Highfill, and Ms. Tynan discovered that she had a natural talent for "dressing other people besides myself" — not to mention a knack for navigating big egos. She went on to do costume design for "Choose Me," "The Big Easy" and other movies, and along the way had two children with Mr. McBride, Matthew and Ruby. But she does not end her memoir with the neat seam of her own fulfillment. Instead, she shows how time and chance stitched together and remade the family her parents left in tatters. Kenneth Tynan died of emphysema in 1980, Elaine Dundy died of a heart attack in 2008 and Kathleen Halton Tynan died of cancer in 1995. In the decades after her stepmother's death, Tracy Tynan grew closer to her half-siblings.

Early in the new millennium, her grown-up stepson, Jesse, and her half-sister, Roxana, fell in love and decided to marry. The bride asked her to help her choose a dress ("something more casual than the full-on traditional wedding gown"), and the groom flouted convention by wearing a white suit.

The author wore a sleeveless green-and-orange plaid silk shantung '60s dress for the occasion, with a matching stole. "It felt very mother-of-the-bride, with a twist," she writes. A decade on, the children of that union call Ms. Tynan "Grauntie" — a combination of grandmother and auntie. "They wear everything I buy for them. For now," she writes.

As you read, you marvel at the author's resilience; the girl with the apple-green shoes acceded to a bigger role than she had ever expected, and found that she knew how to dress the part.