

“I didn’t have affairs. I just went from one to the next, with a bit of overlapping”

Felicity Kendal

The Good Life actress at 72

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I'm full of reservations as I arrive at Felicity Kendal's home in a leafy nook of Chelsea. You see, Felicity and I are pals, so interviewing her might be a bit, well, awkward. I wouldn't want to overstate our friendship. We met over a tape machine seven years ago and have stayed in touch. We hook up for coffees, or glasses of wine, and we've helped each other out, here and there. It's actually rather nice being her friend. She's an old bohemian at heart, and all the things you'd hope for — funny, thoughtful, bright, quirky. I'd rather not mess up our little connection. But how on earth can I be nosy about her divorces and her time with the playwright Tom Stoppard without annoying her? Then there's Botox and her ageing process. Have I really got the insolence to ask sweet Felicity if it's OK to check behind her ears for facelift scars? Of course I have.

Up the stone steps I go, between the stucco pillars, to the shiny white door with polished brass. Kendal greets me with a kiss and a hug. Toned shoulders and arms that lift dumbbells. She works out four times a week, either yoga or cardio followed by weights.

There is an enduring fascination with Kendal. The *Good Life* may have been just 30 episodes, over four series from 1975 to 1978, yet the antics of Tom and Barbara Good (played by Richard Briers and Kendal) escaping the rat race by going self-sufficient in Surbiton continue to catch the nation's imagination. Today, the idea of turning your suburban garden into an eco-farm looks oddly prescient.

Kendal's own house doesn't have chickens or electricity generated from animal waste, sadly. It is gorgeous, though: high ceilings, light walls, bright furnishings. We walk past the sitting room where her man, Michael, sits in a comfy chair, feet up, reading a novel. This is the theatre director Michael Rudman. He's a big, friendly American who recently turned 80. He's Kendal's "boyfriend". Once, he was her

husband, but then she left him for Stoppard in 1991 and they got divorced. Around 1998, Felicity and Michael got back together, but have never bothered to remarry.

The main focus of Kendal's life these days is her large family. She has two "blood" grandchildren, but says she has 12 in total because she counts her late sister's children and their children as her own, as well as Rudman's from his first marriage.

I follow her down to the basement kitchen, where a scented candle burns. A cleaner is dusting the banisters and a man is working on the patio. "Ah, Lady Felicity, I see your staff are here," I say.

She laughs. It's an unmistakably familiar, bubbly, naughty burst of laughter that takes me straight to Surbiton in the 1970s. "I don't actually live like this," she protests. "It's usually just me down here, cooking in that galley." She points to an old range cooker behind a partition wall, with pans and plastic colanders hanging overhead. Most houses round here have double dug-out basements to accommodate pools, cinemas and Italian kitchens with integrated appliances, but Kendal's is decidedly unpretentious and homely.

She is not terribly keen on interviews, but I've been invited over because she has a new play to plug. The *Argument* by William Boyd opens in Bath next month — and it is all about infidelity. The break-up and make-up of relationships is certainly something Kendal knows about. Her first marriage to the actor Drewe Henley lasted 11 years, but was wrecked early on, thanks to his philandering and manic depression. She was only 21 when they married and became desperately unhappy. However, she is someone who always looks on the upside. The marriage produced a son, Charley, now 45 and a respected visual effects supervisor. He was nominated for an Oscar for *Prometheus* in 2013.

"It is very easy to think, I regret this and I regret that," she says, "but how do you untangle one thing that >>>



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