



EARTH GODDESS
Kendal with Richard Briers in the classic 1970s sitcom *The Good Life*. Below, from top: with her first husband, Drewe Henley, 1967; with Tom Stoppard, 1993; with her second husband, Michael Rudman, 2011



REX, BBC

leads to another? You cannot go back and choose your yesterdays any more than you can choose tomorrow.”

What is her view on infidelity, would she recommend it? “No! I would not recommend infidelity to anybody, ever. It is basically lying — and lying is never a good idea. But we all lie and most of us, at some point or another, are unfaithful to a partner. It equals unhappiness, mostly. It brought me my first divorce. He [Drewe] had affairs.”

Then, of course, you had an affair... “I didn’t ever have affairs,” she replies, quickly adding with a laugh, “I just went from one person to another — maybe overlapping a little bit!”

But she left Rudman for Stoppard? “That wasn’t an affair, darling!” she shoots back, before gathering herself. “But I don’t talk about him [Stoppard]. He’s married and he doesn’t like it.” Yes, but... I try. “I don’t talk about him. He is off limits. That is the quote.” She says this nicely, but firmly.

How does she look back on that time? “It was a very, very good period for work,” she says with a mischievous chuckle. She was in Stoppard’s *Arcadia* and *Indian Ink* during their time together and some say that for a while Kendal was his muse. Of her divorce from Rudman, she says: “It wasn’t because of anything anybody had done. It was just a reaction, I think, to the first. We [Rudman and her] just went through a period when we got on badly. When things started to go wrong, you had in your head a programme that said, it is going to happen again, and then we sort of let it. We were working too hard and not spending enough time together. That’s what happens when you are ambitious. It is hard to go through life and not have wobbles.

“But we had Jacob [now 31 and a barrister], so we were in communication all the time, going on holiday. I was always here and he was living there.” She points out the french doors in the direction of Rudman’s old house. Then, after the divorce and after Stoppard, they managed to fix it all in a neatly unconventional way: living together unmarried.

“I don’t think from the night we were divorced that we spent a week without being on the phone three or four times, or meeting up. At some point we realised this is ridiculous, you’d better bring your dressing gown round. I say the first divorce was bad, but the second one really didn’t work. It was a waste of money.”

Money isn’t something I would expect Kendal to worry about. So why, at 72, is she about to go through the stress of treading the boards in the provinces?

“I have been working since I was 12 and I have never stopped for more than a year at a time,” she says. “A lot of it is guilt. My father thought that the work of an actor was an important part of society and that to be offered a job was a gift, so you have to take it. So, I have this ingrained feeling that I should always take a good job.”

Her father, Geoffrey, and mother, Laura, managed a theatre company performing Shakespeare across India in the 1940s and 1950s. Kendal was born in Warwickshire, but her early years were spent travelling

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the length and breadth of India on trains and buses, joining in the family productions. She left India at 20 and made her London stage debut a year later. Today she is still driven by the buzz of theatre.

“It is like gambling, you risk everything on it. Judi Dench is still on the stage and she’s 84. I will probably never give up.”

I tell her that she looks great. “Thank you. Yes, I do, don’t I?” Is she happy when she looks in the mirror? “It was better 10 years ago, but it’s OK now. I’m not unhappy. When I was in my twenties and thirties there was this thing, I’m not beautiful enough, not tall enough, not whatever enough. Then there was a time when you’d think, I’m over 60, I can’t possibly wear a short skirt ever again because of my crinkly knees. Then you come out the other end and say, f*** it, I’ve got good legs, I’m going to put tights on and a short skirt. Yes, it’s a very nice place to be now. Considering what I have done, I should be worn out. What with all the walking, the driving, the travelling, the babies... I should be exhausted. In five years’ time I might be creaky and not able to get out of bed, so I am enjoying myself.”

I take a deep breath and take the plunge: have you had Botox? “Oh, I have had a bit.”

When was the last time? “Last year. You have to go and top it up, here and there. It’s fun.” She puts a finger on a faint line to the edge of her right eyebrow. “It’s exactly the same as having my roots done. I do it every six months, then you don’t get the little terrible frown line. It’s not that I want to change the way I look, but I like to look happier. As you get older, it sinks into the frown of depression.”

Anything else? Fillers?

“I did once, but they didn’t suit me. I had them around here [her top lip], but I didn’t like them at all.”

Have you had a facelift? “No.” So, no scars behind your ears, then? “No!” Can I check? The inquiry tumbles out with innocent spontaneity. “Oh, OK...” And then she sweeps back her thick, bouncy hair and leans forward. I grab my reading glasses to stare at the scar-free area behind her freckly left ear, which is weighed down with a heavy gold earring with diamonds and a chunky, smooth green stone.

“I have very long ears,” she suddenly volunteers. “That is one of the tragedies of getting older. They grow. I wouldn’t mind getting those done. Can they be pinned? Once they were up here.”

Kendal deals with my impudent intrusions with gracious aplomb. Her existence seems picture-box perfect — surely, this is the real good life?

“It sounds like I have a charmed life, but I have not just bounced from one thing to the next,” she says. “I have had times of such darkness and such despair — unhappiness and death. I have seen the end of things.” She is referring to the death of actor friends from drugs and one from Aids, as well as the death of her sister, Jennifer, at 51 from cancer. She was also with her mum and dad when they died. Most poignantly, she held her housekeeper’s 18-month-old grandson when he died from leukaemia in Great Ormond Street Hospital. The boy’s young mother could not face being there as his life-support machine was switched off, so she took her place. “That was the worst of the worst and puts everything into perspective. So, to get here, with all my family safe and well, it feels lucky.” ■

The Argument is at Theatre Royal Bath, August 7-24. For tickets, call 01225 448844 or visit theatreroyal.org.uk