

# EXCLUSIVE: Harold Pinter's former secretary lays bare the cruel legacy

**A**S THE patrician tones of Lady Antonia Fraser drifted across the airwaves, Sheila Hughes's stomach turned in shock. She had once been familiar with the unmistakable voice, but had not heard it for many years. Now it was back, talking about the husband Sheila had also known well.

In saccharine detail, Antonia described Harold Pinter's genius as a playwright, his passion for politics and the uncompromising love that made them such a unique and special couple. She talked of the poems he wrote for her and the glittering figures who formed their social circle.

It was, Sheila concluded, a familiar display of self-regard from a woman she had long since decided was interested first and foremost in herself and her relationship with Harold.

But as Lady Antonia continued to read extracts on Radio 4 from the book she had written about Pinter, who died just over a year ago, Sheila's scorn turned to anger.

There was no mention of Vivien Merchant – the wife of 24 years Pinter had left for Antonia – and not a word about their only son, Daniel.

'Hearing Antonia talking in her sugary way about her pretentious book made me feel sick,'



By **Antonia Hoyle**

says Sheila. 'She didn't mention Vivien once. It was as if she was trying to sweep away her existence and reduce her role in Harold's life to a footnote. I don't even know why she's decided to write this book so soon after he died.'

'All I can assume is that she wants to be back in the public eye, no matter how much she claims to hate the Press attention, or how many people she will hurt. I haven't read the book yet. I can't bring myself to read it.'

It is probably for the best that Sheila – a friend of Vivien's who worked as Pinter's personal assistant for nine years and witnessed his relationships with both Vivien and Lady Antonia – has not studied the somewhat melodramatically titled *Must You Go?*, which was published this month.

When Antonia does mention Vivien, she is dismissed as a burden who tried to stand in the way of the great Pinter-Fraser romance by dragging out divorce proceedings. Vivien, despite being regarded as one of the finest stage actresses of

her generation, was, according to Antonia, an attention-seeking neurotic with the guile of a 'serpent'.

Antonia insists that Vivien and Pinter had been living 'essentially separate lives' before she met him.

She insinuates, too, that the drinking problem that would eventually kill Vivien was not caused by Pinter's infidelity, and that she was already 'on her way to being a serious alcoholic'.

Antonia chooses not to record Vivien's death two years after her divorce from Pinter, nor the fact that Daniel was so traumatised by his father's betrayal and his mother's demise that he refused to talk to his father after 1995, changed his surname and now lives as a recluse in a remote Cambridgeshire cottage.

The version of Pinter's life that Antonia has chosen to present is a personal eulogy in which the two main characters dominate and other people have walk-on roles. It is for this reason that Sheila has finally decided to reveal what she witnessed.

'Vivien would be horrified about the way she has been portrayed,' Sheila says in an exclusive interview with *The Mail on Sunday*. 'She and Harold were very much in love when he met Antonia. He adored her and she worshipped him.'

'Vivien and Harold liked a drink, but they didn't have a problem with alcohol. Vivien only started to drink heavily to ease the pain of Harold leaving her. It choked me up to see her so destroyed.'

'Although it was alcohol that killed her, I believe that ultimately she died of a broken heart, driven to destruction by the affair. Whenever anyone talks about Harold and Antonia, they never mention the fact that he was happily married before they met. I am the first person to do so. I am doing this interview for Vivien and Daniel.'

Sheila was married to *Only Fools and Horses* actor Roger Lloyd-Pack, and her daughter is actress Emily Lloyd. Now 70, she first met Vivien in 1967, when Sheila was a dresser for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Vivien was a prodigiously talented actress from Manchester and a muse of Pinter's who appeared in a number of his plays but was best known for her performance in the 1966 film *Alfie*. She had married Pinter in 1956 and Daniel, their only son, was born two years later.

It was Vivien who recommended Sheila to Pinter and persuaded her to

## 'She had been flirting, throwing herself at him'

work for them as their personal assistant. Sheila would, they agreed, work weekdays from 10am to 3pm, organising Pinter's schedule, typing his screenplays and helping Vivien as well. 'I felt privileged to be asked,' she says.

Sheila recalls turning up at the Pinters' six-storey Nash terraced house in London's Regent's Park the following week. 'It was like a stately home,' she says. 'Chandeliers dripped from the ceilings. There were Francis Bacon paintings on the walls. The whole house seemed hushed.'

Sitting regally on the chaise longue in the 60ft living room was Vivien. 'Harold put her on a pedestal,' says Sheila. 'He would cross the room just to light her Silk Cut for her, before he even thought of lighting his own Gitane. He bought her gorgeous lace underwear and made sure she didn't want for anything.'

'Vivien would fix his tie and buy him silk socks. Every lunchtime, Harold would ask me to bring up crystal glasses of champagne for them both. She would tease him coquettishly while they drank it.'

Yet their seemingly harmonious lifestyle hid a deep deception. Between 1962 and 1968, Pinter was, Sheila later discovered, having an affair with BBC presenter Joan Bakewell. He was also, Antonia alleges, enjoying a liaison with another woman she has called 'Cleopatra' in her book, but is believed to be New York socialite Barbara Stanton.

'Harold and Vivien shared a bedroom and he must have been very good at hiding it,' is all Sheila will say.



**HITTING BACK:** Sheila Hughes is critical of Antonia Fraser's latest book

When Sheila went to work for Pinter, Daniel was seven. Sheila recalls a solitary boy obsessed with his teddy bear, Tessa. 'He was a bright child, but seemed lonely,' she says. 'So I befriended him. As he grew up, he would read Philip Larkin. Harold was very proud of him.' The irony of Larkin's famous line on parents – 'They f\*\*\* you up, your mum and dad' – is not lost on Sheila.

'Daniel would wander up to the study when Harold was away and ask me for a hug,' recalls Sheila. 'They weren't a tactile family and I felt he was deprived of physical affection. He needed laughter and normal conversation. He was closer to Vivien than Harold. They both loved him but their work often made them distracted.'

'When he was 17, he developed a bit of a crush on my daughter Emily. He would write her long poetic letters. He was a very gifted writer. Antonia wasn't really interested in Daniel. She already had enough children of her own.'

Pinter's work took precedence over parenthood. He wrote in his study on the sixth floor at a green leather-topped desk with a lined pad of yellow notepaper permanently open, waiting for inspiration to strike. Sometimes Sheila typed out his notes but often Pinter would dictate his dialogue direct.

'He paced up and down like a lion,' says Sheila. 'He spoke in a bark. He didn't waste words. If I dropped something on the floor, he'd simply point at it until I picked it up. He didn't shout but everyone was in awe of him.'

Pinter, who had a complex relationship with the women in his life, liked and respected Sheila. He and Vivien attended Sheila's marriage to Roger Lloyd-Pack in 1968. Pinter would often find work for Roger.

Pinter, meanwhile, mostly surrounded himself with his literary peers. 'Once there was a writers' conference in the house,' says Sheila. 'Simon Gray and Samuel Beckett were there. The ashtrays in the drawing room were overflowing. I don't believe in being awestruck but it was an exciting time.'

Pinter was at his most unpredictable when he'd had a few whiskies. On one such occasion in the late Sixties, Sheila had been for dinner in Hampstead Heath with Pinter and the actor Alan Bates. 'I took a taxi home with Harold,' says Sheila. 'He put his arm around my shoulder and made an alcohol-fuelled grab for me. I laughed it off. I'd come

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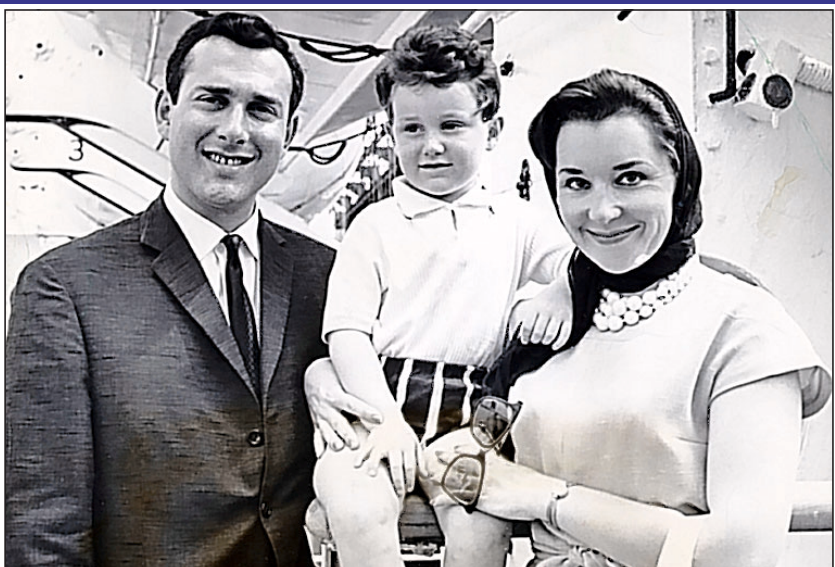


of his infidelity with Lady Antonia and his callous disregard for his son

# Hearing Antonia Fraser talk about her pretentious book made me sick...she didn't think about the pain she caused



**LITERARY TIE-UP:** Harold Pinter and Lady Antonia Fraser on their wedding day in 1980



**MEMORY:** Harold Pinter, his wife Vivien and their son Daniel in the Sixties

to understand Harold and knew he wasn't seriously interested in me.'

The next morning, Pinter called her to his office. 'He said, "I hope you can forget about last night, Sheila,"' she says. 'I laughed and said I already had. I knew he hadn't meant anything by it and that he still loved Vivien.'

By the early Seventies, Pinter was becoming a dominant figure in the theatre, with hits such as *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker*. But Sheila says that Vivien, who starred in television dramas at the time, remained staunchly independent. 'She was adamant that she remain

known as an actress in her own right and not simply as Harold's wife,' she says. 'She enjoyed the status that came with being married to him but she wasn't in awe of him in the way Antonia seemed to be.'

It was at this point in 1975 that the now famous meeting with Antonia took place at a party to celebrate the opening night of *The Birthday Party*.

Antonia depicts it as her romantic destiny – a fairytale chance meeting. Sheila recollects a rather more tawdry version. 'The next morning, Vivien told me she'd had a terrible time at the party,' she says. 'She said,

"That damned Antonia Fraser was there." Apparently she had been throwing herself at him and flirting, and Vivien had had to leave.'

Vivien had spotted the threat in her immediately. 'Over the next two weeks, I noticed a tension growing between Harold and Vivien,' says Sheila. 'Vivien confronted him and I knew a serious rift was developing.'

'Vivien would lock herself in the bedroom and Harold spent most of his time in his study. I'd never met Antonia and I'd never considered Harold to be the unfaithful type. But I had a premonition that Antonia was bad news for their marriage.'

Sheila's fears proved real enough. Two weeks later, Pinter confessed he was in love with Antonia. 'Vivien was deeply hurt, upset and angry,' says Sheila. 'She had been betrayed. As far as I could see, Harold had been perfectly happy with Vivien and if it hadn't been for Antonia, he would never have left.'

Within weeks, Pinter had moved out of the house and into Antonia's home in West London. Lady Antonia, the daughter of Lord Longford, was a historian and, at the time, married to Tory MP Sir Hugh Fraser, with whom she has six children. Fraser had conveniently moved out. She was as aristocratic as Pinter was working-class.

Yet as the unlikely liaison grew into a longer relationship, Sheila was faced with the unenviable prospect of dividing her duties between Vivien and Pinter. 'I felt torn,' she says. 'The first time I went to see Harold at

Antonia's house, she was wearing a white chiffon breakfast gown. She floated condescendingly towards me. She seemed possessive of Harold and I knew at once that I wasn't wanted. To me, she seemed morally bankrupt.'

Nonetheless, Sheila found herself taking messages between Vivien and Pinter – much in the same way, she says ironically, as the messenger boy did in Pinter's adaptation of *The Go-Between*. 'Vivien was distraught,' recalls Sheila. 'One morning, she asked me to tell Harold she was going commit suicide.'

His reaction was one she will never forget. 'He looked me in the eye and

any rate) happily accepting his fate as a spurned husband – Vivien sank into despair.'

'She was so vulnerable,' says Sheila. 'She drank more to ease the pain, mostly whisky. She stopped dressing properly or putting on make-up. I tried to get her to see a doctor but she refused. The offers of work dried up but she wasn't bothered.'

'Nothing else mattered to her. She was convinced Harold was the only man she would ever love. She called Antonia a man-eater and a fake.'

In subsequent interviews, Vivien, who initially refused Pinter a divorce, scorned Antonia. Her comments ranged from the trivial: 'Harold didn't need to take a change of shoes. He can always wear Antonia's. She has very big feet, you know,' to the threatening: 'If she wants to play silly games with my husband, I'm prepared to do the same to her.'

'That was her humour,' says Sheila. 'She had a sardonic wit and she wasn't in awe of Harold in the way that Antonia was. Antonia didn't care about Vivien. In part, Vivien wouldn't divorce Harold because she wanted to get back at Antonia. But it was more because she simply couldn't stand the thought of losing Harold.'

Daniel was similarly distressed. He went to Oxford University to read English literature shortly after his father left, but suffered a breakdown there. 'He turned up at my house one evening,' says Sheila. 'He had dyed

## 'Vivien said she would commit suicide'

said simply, "What time and where?" I didn't see any pain or guilt in him. He genuinely didn't seem to care.'

She carried on working for Pinter for six months. 'One day, I told him that I felt I was a go-between,' she says. 'A few days later, he agreed that it wasn't really working.'

He sent Sheila a leaving card that read simply: 'Sheila, you are a marvellous girl and you have been a marvellous [sic] secretary. Much love and gratitude, Harold.'

As Antonia and Pinter proclaimed their love to the world – with Sir Hugh (according to Antonia's book at



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his dark hair peroxide-blond and said he had just smashed up a phone box. He looked so troubled, it broke my heart. Harold wanted him to go to a clinic but he'd refused. He said he was going to stay with a friend but that I wasn't to tell Harold. I begged him not to do anything stupid and let him go.'

Hours later, Pinter called Sheila and asked if she knew where Daniel was. 'I said I couldn't tell him,' she recalls. 'He asked me if I thought I loved his child more than he did. I said I didn't, but I understood him better.'

'We had kept in contact and become friends. Daniel found Antonia cold, shallow and precious. I'd tell him not to worry about "f\*\*\* face Antonia" and we'd both laugh. We joked about how she was so haughty he should curtsy when he saw her.'

With Vivien barely working, Sheila stopped being her PA and found work instead as a theatrical agent. In 1980, Vivien finally granted Pinter a divorce and he married Antonia. Vivien slipped

further into depression, admitting with a touch of Pinter's dark humour that she had told her psychiatrist: 'You can only help me if you give me a bottle of pills marked "husband".'

In October 1982, Vivien was admitted to hospital. Sheila rushed to see her. 'She was drifting in and

## 'I felt angry that she had such a tragic end'

out of consciousness,' she says. 'She kept asking where David was. As far as I know, Harold didn't visit her in hospital. I kissed her on the cheek and said goodbye. I felt so angry that she had come to such a tragic end.'

She died a week later, aged 53. Pinter and his son were momentarily reunited at her funeral. 'It was a severe, Pinteresque occasion,' says Sheila. 'Harold read a poem of his. He didn't look guilty or ashamed to me, although Daniel was clearly distraught. I hugged him but didn't

speak to Harold. Daniel had developed alopecia through the stress. It broke my heart. I don't know if his hair grew back.'

Over the years, Sheila lost contact with both men. 'Harold knew my loyalties lay with Vivien rather than Antonia,' she says. 'He changed after he met her. He became drawn into her aristocratic way of life.'

For Daniel – who is now 51, uses the surname Brand and cut off all contact with his father in 1993 – the situation was much more bleak. 'He doesn't want to see anyone,' she says. 'If he reads this, I'd urge him to get in touch. I loved him like a son and still feel empty that he's not in my life.'

Pinter was diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus in 2001. He died in December 2008, aged 78, after the cancer spread to his liver.

'I suppose Antonia must have loved Harold,' says Sheila. 'But with this book she has dismissed the fact that he had a son and another wife who loved him too.'

'I'm not sure she's ever thought about the pain she's caused. Even now Vivien is dead, she seems intent on destroying her reputation.'

# Gordon's F-words in India spark a viewer backlash



'DISRESPECTFUL': Gordon Ramsay

GORDON RAMSAY has been criticised for his 'disrespectful' treatment of Indian chefs in his latest show.

More than 100 viewers complained to Channel 4 about his behaviour on Gordon's Great Escape.

The 43-year-old restaurateur described an Indian guru as 'Father Christmas' and repeatedly used obscenities when speaking to locals.

The three-part series, which aired last week, featured Ramsay visiting different parts of India to learn about traditional cooking methods.

In one scene, Ramsay – who claimed he had never eaten a dish without meat – met a guru and learned how to cook vegetarian food.

He made fun of the guru's beliefs, saying on the show: 'When I first saw him I thought he was Father Christmas. But I don't dig all the stuff about the food. I respect carrots, fine, but they're not living to keep us happy.'

In another scene, he told a Keralan tree climber: 'You little f\*\*\*\*, making me look like a t\*\*\*\*.'

Channel 4 admitted it had received

By James Tapper

116 complaints – more than double the average the network receives for his other show, The F Word.

Viewer Beejal Nagar wrote on OneIndia.com: 'I thought Gordon's Great Escape was offensive and disrespectful! The Father Christmas comment about the guru was uncalled for. His swearing was disgusting.'

Another viewer said: 'I'm not normally bothered by swearing on telly, but I did find myself wishing Gordon would stop saying "Oh s\*\*\*\*" every two minutes. I guess he doesn't have the vocabulary.'

Another said: 'It is a shame or even a disgrace that Ramsay is being so rude in a foreign country though. What an ambassador he makes!'

A Channel 4 spokeswoman said: 'Gordon is a passionate character and viewers know what to expect when watching his programmes.'

The series was broadcast after the watershed and each episode was preceded by a clear language warning.'

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