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Trudie Styler: 'Don't you start doing the 15-house thing on me'

At 59, Sting's wife is still a force of nature. Even her husband can't keep up. Interview by Helena de Bertodano

I'm just as happy to be Mrs Sting as Trudie Styler," says the actress, producer and wife of the rock star Sting as she takes a break from rehearsals of her latest play, *The Seagull*, which has just opened in New York. "I have never felt as Sting's wife that I'm in Sting's shadow — I've always had a strong sense of self."

Indeed, Styler was Styler before Sting was Sting; she was making a name for herself as an actress while Sting was still working as schoolteacher Gordon Sumner in Northumberland. "I had a profession and I made money and I was successful at what I did," says Styler, who appeared in *Poldark* in 1977. Sting's breakthrough came two years later when he had his first chart-topping album with the Police.

The couple have since raised four children: Mickey is an actress, Jake a model, Coco is a singer with the band I Blame Coco and Giacomo, their youngest, is in his last year of school. "I suppose my career did take a back seat for a while, although it's not like I didn't do anything," says Styler, who set up two production companies: Xingu Films, which launched the career of Guy Ritchie, and, more recently, Mavers Pictures, which produced *Filth*, which opened last month to excellent reviews. The movie is based on the book by Irvine Welsh and stars James McAvoy, who plays a bipolar, bigoted junkie policeman. "I do like bad-boy movies," says Styler, who produced it.

In 2011, Styler returned to the stage after a long break — in *A Dish of Tea* with *Dr Johnson* — at the encouragement of Max Stafford-Clark, who directed her both in that and in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Sitting

next to him in rehearsals, I ask him what Styler brings to the production. "I think she's got great boldness, great bravery and she's very charismatic on stage," he says.

As an actress, she appears to run the gamut of emotions with ease, flicking from supportive wife to pleading lover to furious mother, striking her "son", whose head is already in handbags. "Hit him on his scar," instructs Stafford-Clark. "Right, so I'm going for mother of the year," quips Styler. She delivers her lines with conviction (even "I'm quite, quite poor") and takes directions well but shows steeliness when pushed too far. As she sinks to her knees, pleading with her stage lover, Stafford-Clark calls out, "Hands down," meaning he wants her to move her hands down Cox's body. "No," says Styler firmly, "not here."

When rehearsals break she changes out of her period costume and corset — "I can breathe properly now" — and into yoga trousers and baseball boots, and we walk to an Italian restaurant, where she orders vegetable soup with farro and an octopus salad but barely touches either.

I have read stories about her so-called hauteur, but they don't seem to square with the easygoing woman sitting across from me. "I don't want to criticise my country but there are times I feel that Sting and myself have been treated unkindly [by the British press]," says Styler, who turns 60 in January but looks younger. "I feel much more relaxed here, not having to second guess myself."

The whole family is now based in New York: "Sting and I need to think what our relationship is to England in the long term or whether we will make a permanent move here. There are a lot of things we love about England



but I do like the optimism of the US, the feeling that whatever you make of yourself is 'good on you'."

The unkind treatment may be a reference to the damaging story a few years ago when the couple's personal chef successfully sued for unfair dismissal after losing her job while pregnant. "It was very wounding," says Styler. "I wasn't even asked to speak up for myself, it was trial by *Daily Mail* ... But rock stars' wives have never been given an [easy time]. They weren't nice about Linda [McCartney] until she died."

Although aware that her public image is controversial, she has a sense of humour about it. For example, she tells me that the budget on her upcoming movie *Black Nativity*, was so tight that they couldn't put the cast up in hotels. So she invited Forest Whitaker, its star, to stay with the

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family. What about the rest of the cast, I ask. "We only have one spare room, dear," says Styler, laughing. "Don't you start doing the 15-house thing on me."

They may not have 15 but they do have quite a collection — as well as the one in New York they have homes in Malibu, the Caribbean, the Lake District and London, not to mention an estate in Tuscany and an Elizabethan manor house in Wiltshire. On the flip side, though, they do a lot for charity, including setting up the Raimford Foundation, which has raised tens of millions of dollars.

Even these efforts can be misinterpreted. "In the US you're expected to be philanthropic but in England you're considered a bit of a hypocrite. It's always important to me to feel I can make some contribution because I do feel the privilege. I haven't always had this life."

FRONT COVER: PICTURE BY JAMES BRAWLEY; BELOW: GETTY IMAGES



Born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, the middle of three sisters, Styler grew up in a council house in nearby Stoke Prior; her father packed lampshades in a local factory, her mother worked as a dinner lady. "My mother had a penchant for hanging the washing in the kitchen and we weren't allowed to use the sitting room because that was reserved for high days and holy days. So we lived in one room. I can still remember the feeling of the washing dripping on my neck."

Her parents were "dutiful" rather than happy. "I realise now, when I see my relationship with my own husband, that they had rather a humdrum relationship, typical of my street, where people just got on with their work and didn't complain much."

She was involved in "an horrific road accident" in her childhood. Aged 2, she ran outside while her mother was bathing her baby sister and was hit by a reversing truck. "The wheels missed me but the exhaust pipe grabbed my head and pulled me across the street so my head was just ripped open."

She was in hospital for months, having her face put back together; it still bears faint scars, just noticeable above her left eye. (Sting once called her his "damaged angel.") Once she started school, she was mercilessly teased. "I was called Scarface. I only had one friend and she had a huge red

birthmark on her face. She was my ally; we were known as Scarface and Beetroot."

Acting was her salvation. "From about 14 I knew I wanted to be an actress. Once I became known for being good at something, then I felt I was indomitable."

Her father was less thrilled. "I had a big fight with him. He told me to get out. He wanted me to be a secretary at Harris Brush Works, the local paintbrush factory. To him that would be a coup, but to me..." She wrinkles up her nose at the memory: "You could smell the pig bristle in our street; that's how they made the brushes. It was repulsive. The women would come out of the factory in their rollers and they would say [here she does a perfect regional accent]. 'Oooh, the bristle's horrible today.'"

Styler hitchhiked to Stratford-upon-Avon and found a job as an au pair while she took a course in drama and liberal arts. Eventually she won a scholarship to Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. "That began the period of real happiness for me." She went into rep in Manchester and later moved to London. After playing the role of Emma Tregiris, the gypsy girl, in *Poldark*, "the door started to open for me." Soon afterwards she met Sting. "I was living with someone else and [Sting] was married. We both owned

basements two doors from each other and we had the problem of dustbins in common, because everyone on the higher floors wanted to put their bins in our basement cellars."

So one of the most enduring relationships in rock history was forged over the bins. At the time Sting was married to the actress Frances Tomelty and the two women became friends, acting together in a 1980 production of *Macbeth*. Styler was playing first witch, Tomelty Lady Macbeth. In 1982, Tomelty and Sting — who had two young children together — split up, the following year Styler was pregnant with her first child and on tour with the Police. "I don't ever really talk about that chapter," she says equably, "because it exposes too many people whose privacy should be respected."

By all accounts it is an exceptionally strong partnership. "Something works," Styler says. "There's the chemistry, that's undeniable, and it's still there. I love him more each day. Also, we like each other. Our daughter said at a wedding anniversary celebration, 'A lot has been made of my parents being in love but to my eye they really like each other.' That was hugely felt by Sting and me; we laugh at the same things; we're Fifities kids — we have the same points of reference, like Morecambe and Wise.

We're very alike; we both have working class backgrounds and [had] similar struggles trying to carve out identities in the arts."

When I ask if I can put a few questions to her husband, Styler agrees readily. "He'll probably tell you, 'The old boiler's done all right.'" As he is just down the road doing a concert — songs from his new album, *The Last Ship*, at the New York Public Theater, which is sold out — she rings through and gets me a \$1,000 ticket. "It helps if you have connections," jokes her assistant, Zana, and off I toddle. It is a tiny theatre and Sting appears on stage in a white T-shirt and skinny jeans. ("I'm 61 — if you don't count tomorrow, when I turn 62," he tells the audience.) He thunders out a collection of songs about Newcastle and shipbuilding, mixed with anecdotes about his roots. Towards the end of the concert, her own rehearsal finally over, Styler appears at the back of the audience, dressed in a white shirt and ripped jeans and dancing to her husband's music.

Eventually I get the chance to put my questions to Sting by e-mail. So is

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Trudie right: would he say the old boiler's done all right? "Absolutely not, I'D NEVER SAY BOILER," replies Sting, using capitals to emphasise his point. "But she's always got something on the boil." I admire her gifts and talents greatly; her energy is amazing and she works harder than anyone I know and in so many fields that it's hard to keep track.

She is clearly a force to be reckoned with. "That's why I'm a good producer," Styler says. "If I read a script and connect to it, then I'll make heaven and earth move to make it because it's already in my head."

There's an absolute confidence that I know how to make it happen."

As for Sting's take on why their marriage works, he tells me: "Our relationship is successful because I make all the big decisions and she makes all the small ones. Luckily, in 32 years together, we've never had to make any big decisions."

They seem to share a sense of humour as well as romance. Earlier this year, Styler says, they renewed their marriage with a *puja* (devotional act) in Varanasi, India. "You put candles in the Ganges; it is very lovely," Styler says. On her wrist is a string bracelet marking the occasion.

Its counterpart is a huge emerald. "Sting bought it as my wedding ring. It's a 15th-century ring that went to the bottom of the sea in a Spanish galleon bound for the Vatican."

Sting once said that, despite everything, he is a huge emerald from Walsend. I ask Styler if she still feels like Trudie from Stoke Prior, but before I have even finished asking the question, she is shaking her head. "No, I know who she is that Trudie, but she seems very far away. I have such a great life now and I'm very grateful for it. I do feel like I'm just about the luckiest girl on the planet." **Fifth is in cinemas throughout the UK now**