

NETWORK QUEEN:
Tessa, now one of the
country's leading interior
designers, is a
confidante to some
of the most famous
names in Hollywood



No regrets for blazed a trail

TESSA KENNEDY was front page news when she eloped to Cuba, aged 18, with Dominic Elwes, the society painter and close friend of Lord Lucan. Her father made her a ward of court, a warrant was issued for Dominic's arrest and Interpol and the world's Press hounded them across the continents as she pursued him round the world for love, in the tradition of Dominic's aunt Nancy Mitford. Due to inherit a Yugoslavian shipping fortune, Tessa was dubbed the Runaway Heiress.

That was in 1958. Today Tessa retains a high profile. The woman described by Tatler as a "social networker of queen bee proportions" is confidante to most of Hollywood and has an address book like a 60-volume International Who's Who.

Her close friends include Frank Sinatra, Candice Bergen, Jack Lemmon, Shakira Caine, Stephanie Powers, John Aspinall, Tomasz Starzewski, King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan. The late Princess Grace was godmother to her daughter Milica.

Tessa, 57, is also a leading interior decorator. She is one of 30 top designers who are each decorating an area in a

*As a teen rebel, she
fled to Cuba. Since
then there have been
wild years, marriages
and bizarre liaisons*

40-room mansion at London's Regent's Park, which will be opened by Princess Margaret. The property will then be sold after the British Interior Design Exhibition for around £15 million. The event, at 1 Cambridge Gate, runs from June 4 to 22. The one-off exhibition house includes a library, three kitchens, a wine cellar and a ballroom with a swimming pool covered by an electronically operated glass dance floor.

Leaning back in her chair in her Hyde Park flat, Tessa admits: "I can't imagine



what it'll look like. We haven't even looked at each others' designs." Tessa's own style is mostly rich and over the top, with a Middle Eastern and Victorian influence. She has decorated for George Harrison, Richard Harris, Richard Burton, Walter Matthau and Pierce Brosnan. She splashed 17 shades of beige around Lord Sainsbury's offices: "He doesn't like colour," she says. "I was told he said it was the most daring scheme he'd ever done."

Blonde-haired Tessa has an ethereal, motherly quality and the discomfiting

heirress who of scandal

habit of being able to read upside down, which warns her of tricky areas of the interview long before I notice her curious ability.

Tessa met Dominic Elwes at the first dance of the debutante season in 1957 and fell helplessly in love with him. "He was 25, incredibly good looking and unbelievably funny," she says. That summer, the penniless Dominic met up with his friend Jack Warner (of Warner Brothers) who threw a big engagement party for the couple on his private yacht. But Tessa's parents were adamantly against the relationship and she was below the then age of consent.

HER mother, Daska, whisked the love-lorn teenager off on a distracting tour of the Middle East. Meanwhile, Tessa penned secret love letters to Dominic, and Tessa's grandmother was so touched by her plight that she arranged for the lovers to meet in Zurich.

The couple eventually eloped to Edinburgh. "Then we headed for Cuba because Henrietta Tavistock (now wife of the Marquess of Tavistock) had a boyfriend, the Cuban Ambassador's stepson, who arranged for us to marry there."

Back in Havana they were befriended by Meyer Lansky, the legendary Mafioso. "We met him at the dinner party given in our honour the night we arrived," Tessa says. They also met the reclusive Ernest Hemingway in a curious exchange set up by the British Press. "He told the journalists he'd give them an interview only if they'd introduce him to The English Couple."

The English Couple married in Cuba in their lawyer's house. "We had as witnesses two taxi drivers who said they'd known me all my life and that I was 21." Three months later they married in New York in a civil ceremony in a judge's chambers, because the first proved illegal. "We thought we'd avoided the Press, but when we arrived, the judge was wearing make-up and the place was filled with TV cameras." Their third wedding, a Catholic affair after she'd converted, was in Northamptonshire, England. She was 21-years-old and heavily pregnant for the third time.

In Havana, Tessa started gambling, playing Black Jack sitting next to Nat King Cole. But when the Cuban revolution started and the casinos closed, they had to leave their "waterfront flea pit" and head for America.

When they returned to England, Dominic was jailed for a month for contempt of court. In addition, Tessa's father refused to talk to her for 18 years after she married, "but we became firm friends after that".

Tessa lost her first baby at the age of 18 when she was four months' pregnant. But she bore a further three children in three years.

Cassian, the oldest, is now 38 and a film producer married to heiress Priscilla Woolworth. Damian, an artist, divorced Christina Oxenberg and remarried. Cary, meanwhile, is an actor who was Rupert Everett's love interest in *Another Country*.

In London, Tessa met Lord Lucan, who bludgeoned nanny Sandra Rivett to death. Speculation about his whereabouts has continued for more than two decades. Normally voluble, Tessa closes

down when asked about him. "I hardly knew him," she says. "But I would see him at Dominic's flat."

So what did Dominic tell her about Lord Lucan? "Nothing until after he disappeared, and then Dominic had this terrible time," she says. "The police thought he knew more than he did, and he felt persecuted."

In 1975, amid allegations that Dominic had profited from the scandal by selling photos of the Earl to newspapers, Dominic (by then divorced from Tessa) committed suicide. He was a manic depressive and had been treated with electric shock treatment.

"It would leave him like a vegetable. He had tried to commit suicide three times during our eight-year marriage. That contributed to our separation. I was afraid the children might find him one day. But I never thought he'd really do it," she says, looking forlorn.

Tessa's childhood was extraordinary. One of four children, she has a twin sister Marina, now a Wiltshire farmer.

Aged two, they had their first Press exposure when they became the first twins to cross the Atlantic. "Being a twin is incredible. Fifteen years ago, I had major surgery. Marina didn't know it was happening, but at the time of the operation she doubled up in agony." During the war, the twins were evacuated to New York to stay with their 50-year-old grandmother. Tessa's parents remained in England. So for the first five years of her life, Tessa didn't see them.

The return to war-torn England and school was traumatic. "We'd only ever been to school for a day but didn't like it, so our grandmother took us away." When Tessa was 10 years old, her mother left the marital home to marry the Tory MP Billy McLean. Her father was awarded custody and mid-term, Tessa was sent to boarding school. She left, aged 16. "My father didn't think girls needed to be educated."

Her recent life has been no less colourful. In 1967, she was playing gin rummy with Leslie Caron and Warren Beatty in a London hotel when Warren introduced her to American film producer Elliott Kastner, whose films include *Where Eagles Dare* and *When Eight Bells Toll*.

The couple married in 1971 and had two children, Dillon, a film "dogsbody", and Milica, (the youngest of her children at 25) now studying drama in America.

ELLIOTT, a prolific producer, was not very popular. He was pursued into personal bankruptcy in 1988 by Mo Rothman (who owns the rights to most Charlie Chaplin films), sued for monies owed to Mickey Rourke and Al Pacino, and chased for cheques by authors Alistair Maclean and Jackie Collins. But he also discovered Clint Eastwood and Bruce Willis.

"The marriage worked very well," says Tessa. "For eight years we'd only spend three or four days a month together. It wouldn't have lasted for more than a year if we'd been together, because we're very different and volatile." They separated two years ago. But it can't be long before the Runaway Heirress is scooped up by another larger-than-life suitor.

"I hope not," she laughs, seemingly happy just to live with her memories.

PROUD: Tessa with youngest daughter Milica, 25, who is now taking drama studies in America



TORMENTED: Husband Dominic Elwes in 1965