

Weekend

I don't feel at all guilty about my affair with Harold Pinter. After all, it was so life enhancing



MATTER OF THE HEART: Joan Bakewell is happy to be off the sexual circuit — 'men don't make passes now'

FOR Joan Bakewell, it has been *The Unmentionable*. Ever since it was "exposed", the broadcaster has refused staunchly to discuss her seven-year affair with playwright Harold Pinter.

It was the inspiration for his 1978 play *Betrayal*, written after the break-up of his marriage to Vivien Merchant but thought until recently to be about his later — and current — liaison with Lady Antonia

Fraser. Bakewell revealed the truth last year in Michael Billington's biography of Pinter and found herself splashed across the front pages of newspapers. Since then, she has refused adamantly to talk about it.

It is private, private, private, is all she has been willing to venture. So it's a revelation to meet the ebullient television presenter in her North London home and find her prepared to discuss *The Unmentionable*. Bakewell, 63, looks tremendous: wide

eyes, beautifully proportioned features, russet bob, gun-grey classical trouser suit. Still the epitome of Frank Muir's Sixties description of her as "the thinking man's crumpet" — which she dismisses as *The Phrase* — she exudes energy and sexiness.

Bakewell will be on our screens in a special *Heart Of The Matter* this month, to be aired after the BBC's showing of *Schindler's List*. Then, in February, she'll return to present her 10th series of these ethical

dilemmas programmes. But back to *The Unmentionable*. For 25 years her family "and all the people who mattered" had known about her affair with Pinter. So she was surprised at the fuss and door-stepping photographers when it was first disclosed publicly.

Yet again, Bakewell — the woman known for her micro skirts and clever questions who was goosed once by a

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'A face-lift? I might get my eyes done'

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Cabinet Minister and fondled by an interviewee during a live broadcast — was getting publicity because of her famed sexual allure.

Her husband Michael Bakewell, a drama producer at the BBC and a friend of Pinter, found out about his wife's liaison but remained silent. Pinter felt betrayed both by his lover and by his friend when he discovered Michael Bakewell had known about the affair for two years. Then Joan felt distressed to find the details of the affair — which lasted until 1969 — reflected in *Betrayal*.

"It's like a diary and so I was upset... Harold kept saying: 'It's a play, it's a play'. I was upset, however, because it was called *Betrayal*," she told Billington. She read the play then saw it at the National where, she says now, she "just kept emotionally aloof from it".

THE affair described in the play was so intense that "one can't ever forget how fraught it was", she told Billington. Now she says: "I didn't feel guilty about it, it was so life enhancing. I've always tried to embrace the good things in life without hurting people. I'm a great believer in pleasure and sensuality. But I don't want to say any more. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Both Bakewells were unfaithful and acknowledged their infidelities. They didn't aim for an open marriage and she has said the situation made her "dreadfully unhappy" and that it went against her own moral code.

So how did she manage to continue? "I can't really say. I've come through all that now and don't look back."

Why did her then husband resolve to say nothing to Pinter when he discovered the affair? "We decided together, it was a thought-through decision. It wasn't casual."

She says she "can't remember" why she decided not to tell Pinter about her husband's discovery. But she coped with the deception. "We live as well as we're able. It wasn't an enormous problem. It took care of itself."

How many affairs did she have whilst married to Bakewell? She bursts out laughing. "It was more than one." I point out that it was also ironic that Pinter felt so shocked when he was also the one doing the betraying. "You'd better ask him about that," she replies.

Bakewell married Michael in 1955. It lasted for 16 years. "There's always the assumption if you're divorced that your first marriage was a disaster. But ours was very good until the last two or three years." Despite *The Unmentionable*? "Sure."

The marriage, she adds, broke down because people change as they grow older. "But we had a civilised, middle-class divorce. There was no venom. We didn't rush to lawyers and say 'screw him'." She refused any maintenance.

In the Sixties Bakewell was everywhere on TV: on religious, arts and current affairs programmes. She said once: "Bosses at the BBC would demand that you slept with them if you wanted to get further". Did she bed them? "Certainly not."

The Seventies were tougher as television sought new faces. For two years after her 1972 divorce and the end of her *Late Night Line Up* contract, she was a single working mother looking after her two children. "It was so tiring. I was in quite a state, really."

In 1973, on a train to Exeter, she

met independent producer Jack Emery — whom she'd once interviewed. She told him to give her a call... and they married in 1975. She was 40. He was 28.

"It was pretty instant," she says. "We're well-matched and I can hardly imagine him not being part of my life. We're quite similar and can identify with each other's failings, like procrastination, lack of confidence and bumbling around in life."

Her views on fidelity changed because of Jack. "I got all I needed from being married to him," she says, her voice going low. She likes no longer being in the sexual circuit; "Men don't make passes at me now."

She must be bored of the 'What's it like having a toy boy?' line of questioning but says it doesn't cross her mind. "Except it hasn't occurred to me to sit back and be pensioned. But a 12-year gap isn't much."

No difference in interests then? "No." Or sexual needs? "No problem about that." And what when she turns crumbly and dribbles? "I'll get someone to look after me."

Bakewell is the last remaining member of her family. Last New Year's Eve her sister Susan, six years her junior, died of breast cancer which had spread to her brain. "We were very close. I'm still knocked out by her loss."

"She took six months to die. It was terrible to watch," she says, with palpable sadness.

"She lost her hair, wore a wig and kept saying rather charmingly: 'It's me in here'."

In 1992 her father, 87, died in Bakewell's arms. "He used to say: 'Don't grow old. It's very unpleasant'." She pauses. "Ageing is really about losing the people you hold dear." Her mother died of leukaemia when Bakewell was 28.

Does she believe in God? She says she'll tell me "if you tell me what you mean by Him". Bakewell adds that she doesn't believe in an afterlife

and wouldn't mind meeting her Maker but not her mother.

"My mother was very severe. If I took a boat to the Other Side, the moment I landed my mother would say: 'You've left the kettle on', and 'Just look at how you've let yourself go to seed'."

Bakewell, who has five grandchildren, is cheating time and takes HRT. "I'll read *The Lancet* before commenting on the breast cancer link stories. I came off it for two months this year and felt dreadfully weak and lethargic."

And she would consider a face-lift. "I saw a recent article about having your eyes done and thought 'That seems a good idea'."

HER children — Harriet, 37, a television researcher, and Matthew, 33, a cabinet maker — have been her priority. They recall having lots of fun as children. But did she overshadow them? "I don't think so but there was a time during adolescence when Harriet said: 'I'm fed up with being Joan Bakewell's daughter'."

Is her mother competitive or jealous of Harriet's youth? "No, just of my flabby post-Caesarean tummy," Harriet quips later.

And didn't Matthew, who fared badly in his A-levels, feel he'd been a disappointment to his academic mother? "I probably overdid wanting him to achieve," replies Bakewell, "so he ran away to sea and rang and said: 'I'm not coming back.' But we worked it out."

Bakewell has two daughters

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PARADOX: The mixture of short skirts and reasoned questions turned heads

ters of parents who'd pulled themselves into the lower middle class — "my grandparents lived in a Coronation Street house" — was raised in a semi-detached house in the suburbs of Stockport.

"It wasn't poverty, it was thrift. I'm still thrifty. I never throw away food and I keep the string, paper and elastic bands the post comes in."

As the first-born, she was the beneficiary of her father's aspirations. "He told me: 'If you work hard and want something, I'll back you.'"

Cheery by nature, Bakewell was silent and obedient at home. Her mother, a depressive, hit her frequently and hard with a hairbrush and slipper. "It makes you subversive. You think: 'I mustn't get caught.'"

Sometimes her mother didn't speak to her for weeks. "Her depression was such a strong influence and made me so sad as a child that the moment I was away

from that, life couldn't but be marvellous."

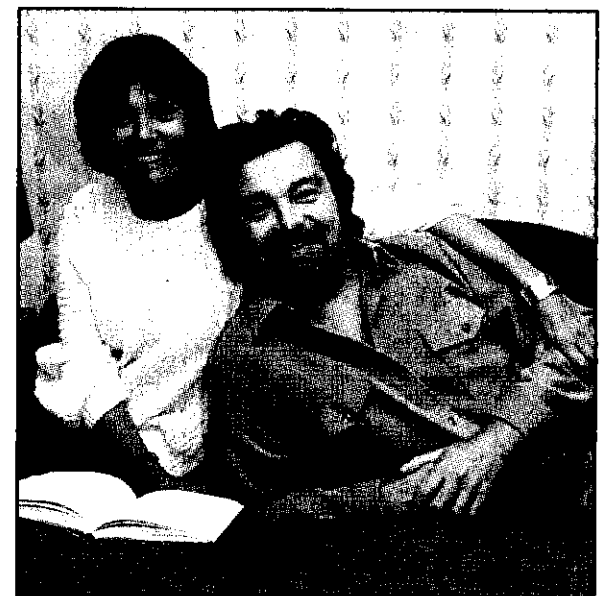
We return to *The Unmentionable*. The anguish about the transposition of her life into drama dissipated long ago. "Harold and I are very fond of each other and have terrific lunches," Bakewell told Billington.

OH, HE'S a very good friend, a close friend," she adds now. And what of her relationship with his wife Lady Antonia Fraser? "We're close friends." Really? "I'm always pleased to read her books or see *them* socially."

Bakewell is vigorous, strong-willed, buoyant, assertive and judgemental. If she were to interview herself, what would she ask to elicit the most revealing response?

"Come off it, Joan," she says, aggressively. "Do you think you really know yourself?"

And what would she reply? "Probably not."



THE LOVER: Today Pinter, left, is still great friends with Bakewell and her husband Jack, right