

# Perhaps I was promiscuous but now I wouldn't even cross the road for an affair



After three failed marriages, the time has arrived for Sian Phillips to dote on her cats



**The  
Caroline  
Phillips**

*Interview*

**Sian Phillips**  
ACTRESS



**SIAN THROUGH THE AGES: Top left, as a young actress in 1959; above, with second husband Peter O'Toole in 1963; and below, with third husband Robin Sachs in 1991**



**A**CTRESS Sian Phillips is a little batty. For years she has sent her family Christmas cards from her cats, expressed her regret at not having spent more time with her four-legged friends in their declining years and left them answerphone messages. Pat and Kate, her daughters by Peter O'Toole, have both received letters sent by Sian to the cats after she saw a cat therapist in New York in 1995.

Another of Sian's oddities concerns cars. "She can't cross roads. She gets in a complete panic and takes five minutes to dare to go," says Pat. Three years ago Sian confronted her fears and passed her driving test — but now resolutely refuses ever to go behind the wheel of a car.

Then there are her dietary habits. "She was on 500 calories a day when I met her," says author William Corlett, her close friend of 17 years. Pat adds: "My mother is always detoxing herself and drinking cabbage soup for weeks. Otherwise she'll eat nothing but bananas." Even Sian admits that she takes 15 vitamin pills a day and since 1993 hasn't touched wheat, dairy produce, sugar, caffeine or alcohol.

Perhaps this eccentricity helped her in her marvellous latest role as Mammy in the art house film *House Of America*, a depressing, sometimes funny and sensitive portrayal of madness, fantasy and the death of the American dream in a bypassed Welsh town. Sian plays an obsessive, deranged mother who wears badly bleached hair and chipped orange nail varnish. Does she identify with the character? "Not at all. It's a world away from old Mammy's mad as a hatter."

Sian filmed *House Of America* while she was in *A Little Night Music* at the National Theatre. "I'd get into the car after the show, fall asleep instantly and be driven for four hours to Wales," she says, her Welsh voice rising and falling happily. "I'd arrive at 3am, sleep for a couple of hours then start work."

It is this steely resolve plus talent that has helped her produce her formidably long and impressive CV — from parts in *I Claudius* and *Pal Joey* to her stunning recent West End portrayal of Marlene Dietrich. Now she's writing volume one of her memoirs, up to her time at RADA.

She won't kiss and tell. "I don't know how to write volume two. It's so personal. I may just finish the first volume then jettison the whole idea." Despite being an actress, Sian is fiercely private. Everything is designed to protect her — from the wall of words that tumble forth to her distancing

stage laugh and emotions delivered on cue. "Despite appearances to the contrary, she's driven by a lack of confidence," notes Pat.

We meet in a room in the Berners Hotel, near London's West End. Sian wears a chocolate tailored calf-length jacket and trousers. With her deep-set grey eyes, the beautiful face of a former Fifties Revlon model, perfect hair, perfect skin and perfect figure, she looks a decade younger than her age. She is sixtiesomething; she won't tell.

She had plastic surgery when she was 19. "My boyfriend drove into a lorry in Paddington. I hit the windscreen. But I got off the operating table and played the matinee." Her face was rebuilt by the pioneering plastic surgeon Sir Archibald McIndoe, the bill paid by Columbia Pictures, which had hoped to put her under contract.

"Being beautiful doesn't figure in my life at all," she says. "I'm not classically beautiful. And my face has never been my fortune." How does she feel about getting older? "It doesn't bother me at all."

Sian has been married three times. She wears what appears to be three wedding rings on her nuptial finger but one is her mother's wedding ring and the others turn out simply to be decorative gold bands

What did she do with her wedding rings? "I haven't the faintest idea," she says, airily.

She has also been engaged several times. She'd take the route of least resistance when things hotted up. "In the end you go, 'Oh all right.' I wish I'd kept all the rings. Six, maybe seven over the years. But I've lost them all." Now she professes to be done with marriage, "and I'd hardly cross the road for an affair. They've always taken second place to my work."

Yet she seems passionate and reportedly lost her virginity aged 14. "No, I didn't. But I can't even remember how old I was."

She lived most recently with her best friend, a man she declines to name because the obituaries didn't disclose that his death in 1993 was from Aids. She nursed him for the last three years of his life. But they were not lovers. It was a tumultuous time for Sian, coming shortly after the break-up of her third marriage in 1991.

Does Sian have a lover now? "I have lots of friends who are men," she states, carefully. "But I don't have time for affairs, although I have had a lot." Would she call herself promiscuous? "When I was young I suppose people might have called me that."

We talk then about her marriages. She can't remember how long the first lasted. "I've wiped it out completely. It was just one of those things we shouldn't have done. Nothing went wrong. It's just that nothing went right." He was an academic.

**T**HEN there was her 20-year marriage to Peter O'Toole. He was the international star of *Lawrence Of Arabia* and away working most of the time. So it was like being a one-parent family. Was his womanising difficult for her? "I wasn't aware that he was a womaniser. I don't think he was." And his drinking? "That was hard. It made him undependable. In those days it was a deadly secret and wasn't talked about."

She recalls O'Toole as "the most magical, attractive, amusing, original man you could ever meet". She has no regrets about the marriage. So what was the hardest thing about it? "Losing my self-esteem and confidence. Just trying to keep going was deadening." They no longer see one another. "It's

unnecessary. It came to a natural end. I have no bitterness." She walked away, without even a teaspoon. "I have a low embarrassment threshold and didn't want to read about a settlement in the papers."

Then came Robin Sachs, a man 16 years her junior. "I don't think the age made any difference. The gap wasn't that huge," she says. "We didn't have much in common, that was the problem. I never pretended that marrying him was a good idea. We were living together, he was very anxious to do it and I couldn't think of a good reason for holding out any longer."

"Marriage isn't good for my health. It gave me boils, psoriasis and eczema. I was extremely stressed even when I was happy. I always felt I was getting it slightly wrong"

Was she faithful in her marriages? "I'd rather not go into that. But I was pretty good except under extreme provocation."

Sian, an only child, was raised in her grandmother's isolated Welsh granite farmhouse. She had a curious childhood. She was ill "constantly" until she was 11. "I had scarlet fever twice and diphtheria, which were life-threatening then. I broke both my ankles and wrists and had chickenpox, jaundice and measles twice."

Because of her health, she didn't attend school until she was 11. Then she won a scholarship to Pontardawe Grammar School. "I was the first person ever to get 100 per cent in English and zero in arithmetic." It was also an unusual childhood because she worked. "I performed from the

age of four on stage in front of congregations of 800 to 2,000 people."

Her mother was a teacher and her father a frustrated singer who took a job in the steelworks to support the family. "I was very close to my father although he very rarely spoke. But there was a contest of wills with my mother. I left home when I was 15."

Now Sian sprawls across the hotel bed. Very comfortable it is, she says. Then she takes our bottle of fizzy water. In the taxi we share back to Kensington, she swigs from the bottle and talks about something "wonderful" called the metamorphic technique.

"It really changes your life. You lose your job and move flat in about a week." It's probably what she'll do when she takes time off from writing to the cats