

'I don't go around clomping women but Rula drove me to a state where words weren't enough and I lashed out'



EMOTIONAL: Scratch the tough-guy surface and discover a muddled, unhappy man

THE poster outside the Brighton theatre shows a tough, tight-lipped guy: Dennis Waterman playing an ex-con in the new thriller, *Killing Time*. The real Dennis stands in front of his image reading a review, wearing shades, loud check shirt and gold medallions. Dennis in this incarnation is lean and taut with a knuckle-crushing handshake.

He is touring, playing provincial houses from Aberdeen to Bromley, hardly a career triumph of *Minder* proportions. After television, is theatre second best? "Yes, financially and socially. I get p***** off sometimes," responds Dennis, in his glottally castrated South London accent.

He has worked consistently since he started acting at 11. Aged 16, he appeared at the Royal Court in *Saved*, Edward Bond's ground-breaking play (in which a baby is stoned in its pram) that helped change the censorship laws. He also co-produced and starred in the Emmy-nominated *First World Cup*, became famous in *The Sweeney* and toured Britain as a sell-out pop star with Sheena Easton. He even set up a film company in 1988, producing a £3 million flop called *Cold Justice* and personally losing £200,000.

Dennis, 49, looks into the middle distance as he talks, rarely making eye contact and smoking tensely. He agitates his leg, seemingly uncomfortable with himself. And his hands, poor man, are raw with eczema. Is it due to nerves? "Probably, but I'm not nervous," he says airily. With similar braggadocio he says later: "Nothing has any effect on me." But he rubs and scratches his entire body during the interview and his ankles are horribly red and afflicted.

This is his first interview since Rula Lenska, his estranged wife, went to a newspaper in May and said that she left Dennis because he had hit her, attacking her with his fists during drink-fuelled rages. "I haven't said anything and I'm not going to," he responds abruptly. "I made it clear that I wouldn't talk about that in this interview."

After Rula's confessions, Pat Maynard, Dennis's second wife, stated publicly that he'd never touched her and that a couple of smacks didn't constitute being a battered wife. Then one of Dennis's two daughters said she'd never seen Rula with bruises. A tabloid even started an is-it-right-for-a-husband-to-hit-his-wife phone-in and the columnist Lynda Lee-Potter asserted that it was probably more a shove of exasperation than a clout. "I won't talk about my private life," persists Dennis stoically.

But then he relents, with much reluctance. His emotions are so close to the surface, it is almost as if he can't help disclosing himself. So were Rula's revelations true? "There's a kernel of truth but the reports made it look as if we had an entirely different life from the one we had.

"I don't go around clomping women. It has never happened before. But this particular woman drove me to a state where I lashed out, where words weren't enough. Things would culminate in our having a



row so big that I'd hit out." He won't detail the frequency, severity or circumstances. In a newspaper interview in 1993 Dennis admitted he'd been physically abusive to his spouses. "One has lashed out occasionally," he said then. But now he says: "I didn't. I've only ever been violent with Rula."

And was that, as she maintained, always under the influence of alcohol? "No, not necessarily. Rula is a victim and wants everyone to feel terribly sorry for her." Is she a liar? "No, she firmly believes what she says. She's a romantic." A fantasist? "Yeah."

ASK then about his drinking. He coughs defensively. "There are times when I've been drunk and times when I haven't," he says breezily. But he has said that he can't go a day without alcohol. "I may have said that but it's a lie." Yet he appears to have a nose threaded with drinker's veins. "I've always drunk but I certainly don't drink by myself," he replies, uncomfortably. How much does he imbibe at worst? "When it's that bad, I can't remember." Is he an alcoholic? "B*****, nowhere near."

What of drugs? Has he ever snorted coke? "No, never," he replies plausibly. "The most I've ever had is a joint."

Dennis wed first in his "early 20s". He was married for three years to Penny Dixon, a schoolteacher. "We broke up because of my conceit. I was getting successful and meeting other people."

The lure of young flesh and the pub? "Yes." Then came Pat. "A smashing bird and a good actress." While they were married, he encountered

Rula, a Polish countess. Rula was also married and they met illicitly for the first year. Initially his feelings for her were so powerful that Dennis famously likened the impact to being "hit in the stomach by a 10-ton bag of cement".

They were together for 15 years, married for 10. "The first eight years were terrific. She's a good-looking bird." Three years into marriage, Dennis strayed for a year-long affair with Fiona Black, a television production assistant. "It sounds limp but I was away filming for seven months and she was working on the show."

Rula and Dennis didn't have children together. It has always been reported that this was because they were too old. Curious, I say, as they were in their early 30s when their relationship started. "Well," he counters, "we already had three children between us." Yet it was also publicised that they had plans to adopt a



INSTANT ATTRACTION: The first eight years were terrific, says Dennis

baby boy. "I'd had a vasectomy so we couldn't have kids," Dennis admits now for the first time. "Rula was having trouble with the Pill. I can't remember when the f*** I had it. It wasn't a big deal."

So how then did it all end? "It finished because I found she was with another man, which precipitated an explosion in our house. I didn't hit her then. We had a huge row and I broke a few doors. I'd found a photo..." his voice trails off and he refuses to finish his sentence.

He hasn't spoken to Rula since her disclosures. "The lawyers can talk about it. We're divorcing and I may change the negotiations. She's got most of my money but I might battle for some back or to keep remaining bits she wants. No way was it a half-half split. She said she needed the money to buy a house, so I said okay."

Dennis has now sold the marital home, lives in a small four-bedroom modern house near his golf club in Buckinghamshire and is in a relationship with actress Pamela Flint, a Rula lookalike. "We spend a lot of time together," is all he will say. Will he marry again? "Give me a f***** break. I'm deeply embarrassed about having been married three times."

He hasn't lived on his own since he was 15, moving seamlessly from one relationship to the next. Is he frightened of being alone? "I'm not very good at it. I get bored." And depressed? "That happens anyway," he whispers. "I go silent for long periods." He is reluctant to be drawn further. Dennis grew up on a Clapham

council estate, the youngest of nine children of Anglican parents. "I suppose every time they were speaking they went to bed," he laughs. "They didn't talk often. They should have divorced years earlier but instead they kept having children."

"My mother was 45 when I was born. I hated having older parents. I was brought up with two sisters and a brother because the others had already gone. I was very independent. They all worked and I had a house key as long as I can remember. As the youngest, I was very spoilt."

He grew up fast, had his first kiss at nine, started drinking at 14 and lost his virginity at the same age.

"I was in love with two teachers at primary school. One was very tasty. But when I was 15, I had sex with a teacher from another school."

He appeared in Stratford productions aged 12 and went to Hollywood at 14. He ended his formal education aged 15 and went to Corona Theatre School, where he was a contemporary of Francesca Annis, Susan George and Richard O'Sullivan. "Sometimes I feel I can't join in intellectual conversations because I'm not up to it. Then I think who the f*** cares."

He makes conversation easily, is bright, emotional and humorous. To my surprise I liked him. He is not the male chauvinist, beer-swilling, Chelsea-supporting lout he pretends to be. Just a muddled, unhappy, truculent man always running from himself. "I'm going to f*** off in a minute," he says curtly. And suddenly walks off without even a handshake or backwards glance.

'There are times when I've been drunk but I certainly never drink by myself'

'I found out she was with another man and it caused an explosion'