

# 'I've lived through some tough stuff —and survived'

ALEX KINGSTON made her name in *ER* and won new fans in *Doctor Who*. The actress talks to *Elaine Lipworth* about her gritty new crime series and dramas off-screen – divorce, IVF and the pressure to go under the knife

PHOTOGRAPHS *Steve Schofield*





**A**LEX KINGSTON is nursing a hangover when we meet for breakfast in New York. You'd never know it. There are protestations that she looks a mess, accompanied by an amused glance down at her Nikes ('I walked across Central Park,' she explains). But the star of *ER* and, more recently, *Doctor Who* actually looks fresh, cool and pretty, with her distinctive halo of gold Pre-Raphaelite curls, full lips and wide smile.

Alex lives in Los Angeles with her 13-year-old daughter Salome, but has been staying in Manhattan while playing Lady Macbeth opposite Kenneth Branagh in an excellently reviewed production of 'the Scottish play'. There's a performance this evening, but that didn't deter her from overdoing it last night with her 'absolute best friend' from Rada, who is over from the UK. 'We had a bit too much to drink,' laughs Alex. Given the fact that she'll be on stage in a few hours, the actress is impressively relaxed and very friendly.

Alex's other new acting role is in ITV's gritty crime series *Chasing Shadows* with Reece Shearsmith (*The League of Gentlemen*) and Noel Clarke (*Doctor* ►

Alex wears **SILVER DRESS**,  
Kate Moss for Topshop

◀ *Who*). Alex stars as Ruth Hattersley, a senior analyst with the Missing Persons Bureau. 'Reece plays Sean, a detective who keeps being moved to different departments because he is socially awkward and can't communicate, but he's good at solving crimes. I don't want to compare him to Sherlock Holmes, but there's a similarity in that he can piece things together in a way that other people can't. A new department is set up and he is partnered with me. He sees clues that have been missed in the past. It's about Sean and Ruth reopening cold cases.'

Alex, 51, grew up in Epsom, Surrey, the eldest of three girls (Nicola is the youngest; her middle sister Susie is disabled). Her English father Tony was a butcher; her German mother Margaretha stayed at home to take care of Susie.

Alex landed a role in the children's series *Grange Hill* at 15, going on to win a place at Rada, where she met Ralph Fiennes, whom she later married. She established herself as an accomplished performer with the Royal Shakespeare Company before landing early screen roles in *Moll Flanders* and *Croupier* with Clive Owen. In 1996 – the year Fiennes left her for the actress Francesca Annis – Alex was cast as Dr Elizabeth Corday in the hit hospital drama *ER* and moved to California. She married German journalist Florian Haertel in 1998 and their daughter Salome, who was conceived by IVF, was born in 2001. The couple parted four years ago. 'It's civil,' Alex says of her relationship with her ex. I notice a pear-shaped ring with a border of diamonds on her engagement finger: 'Yes, there is someone,' she laughs, 'no, he's not famous; yes, he is a Brit.'

Since leaving *ER* a decade ago, most of Alex's best work has been in the UK: she starred in the BBC series *Upstairs Downstairs*, *Luise Miller* at London's Donmar Warehouse theatre, and won new fans playing the time-travelling action heroine River Song in *Doctor Who* alongside Matt Smith.

Here Alex explains why tweeting isn't for her but marriage is, and why she's delighted that her *ER* co-star George Clooney is to be married.

**Ruth in *Chasing Shadows* is a single mum; her personal life is all over the place.** She lives with her mum and her son and knows exactly what her daily routine is going to be. That changes when she goes into the field to investigate crimes with Sean. She's naive about what she's got herself into. In a funny way, both Ruth and Sean are dysfunctional.

**We filmed in London's East End, which was fabulous.** All the guys you see look like they're in Mumford & Sons, with big bushy Hoxton beards.

**I have never met anyone with as much energy as Noel.** He's in movies, he's producing, he's writing, he's



**Clockwise from above: Alex in *ER* with George Clooney, Laura Innes and Julianna Margulies; in new ITV series *Chasing Shadows*, and at the Academy Awards with then husband Ralph Fiennes in 1994**



involved in a drama school [London School of Dramatic Art] and he has a music label. I couldn't believe this whirlwind of a personality. Reece is quiet and private, but has a wicked sense of humour. Working with them both was really fun.

**I don't understand this need to tweet – to put yourself out there every minute of the day.**

Social media worries me because it's not part of my world. I have a computer and an iPad, but I have no interest in Twitter. Noel and Reece are constantly tweeting, and I said to them, 'You are obsessed. The minute you stop filming, you're tweeting' and they say, 'But the fans love it.' I feel I'm exposed enough in the work that I do, and anything else I want to keep as private as possible.

**My daughter Salome has a good moral backbone – she knows what's right and wrong.**

But what unnerves me is Snapchat [you receive an image or a text which lasts only for a few seconds]. I gave in and let her have it because of peer pressure at school. She says, 'Oh, Mummy, it [the snap] is just there for a second.' But my fear is that it will be used as a bullying tactic or that people will send indecent images. But you've got to let your children find their own way and create their parameters. I think it's important to guide as a parent, but also to let them experience things for themselves.

**We are not strict parents.** In fact, Salome says we're easy-going. I've never had to encourage her to do her homework. She loves school and that's such a joy for me, because I found it a chore and a bit of a bore. I enjoyed my schooldays but I thought, 'I've got to get through it and then my life can start.'

**I went through about 13 rounds of IVF before I got pregnant with Salome;** it was very tough. You are so desperate, you don't really understand what the long-term side effects can be. That's what they don't tell you in the medical profession. I

put on weight with all the IVF – it's insidious because it happens so slowly and then it's almost impossible to get rid of it. I was also perimenopausal very early; I have no proof, but I feel that it was linked to the IVF and the different hormones I was taking. There are things that I think aren't fully explained to women when they are going through all that.

**I'm so happy to have my daughter, but I could quite happily have adopted.** I would have felt able to look after and love a child who wasn't part of my genetic make-up. I believe that as much as any woman would love to carry a child and have that experience of pregnancy, actually that's a very small part of being a parent. I think that how you have the child, whether it is through adoption, surrogacy or fostering, is ultimately immaterial, because it's about being the parent to that child.

**My middle sister Susie was born profoundly physically and mentally handicapped.** My mum stopped her plans of having a career to look after Susie. She is in her late 40s, and still lives at home with my parents; she goes to a special centre every day, which gives my mum a break. My parents are dedicated to her care and Susie is not easy. She will wake up every night and walk around and go to my parents' room and want to sleep with them. My parents are extraordinary. They get no extra financial benefits. They took care of us when we were children and they are continuing to care for Susie. Would I have loved my sister to have been born without having been brain-damaged? Yes, but she wasn't. She's been an incredible part of our lives.

**I think the government should provide more external support for people with disabled children, allowing parents to have a break.** I don't think they understand how much money they're saving because of people like my parents – full-time carers who are not properly supported.

**I'm constantly racked with guilt about going away to work for long periods of time,** but my daughter says, 'Mummy, it's completely fine.' That makes me feel even more guilty – that she's the one who is having to placate me. It's not easy being away from her; but I think it's probably always more heartbreaking for the mum than the child. I live in LA because my daughter is happy at school and I don't want to take that away from her. She's the one who needs stability, so I'm the one who has to do the schlepping back and forth to England.

**It's not challenging being a single mum.** My

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Alex wears **SILVER DRESS**, Kate Moss for Topshop. **PLEATED SKIRT**, Tia Cibani



ex-husband Florian is always trying to be as flexible as he can given the craziness of my career. We have an established pattern, but then we have long chunks when Salome is with him and then long chunks when she is with me – and it works. As parents, you make it work, because it's what is best for your child.

**I am proud of my German roots.** I'm due a visit to Germany to see all my cousins. My daughter is trilingual: she speaks English, German and Spanish. She has an American accent, but when in England she speaks with an English accent, and says 'mummy' not 'mommy'. She has had quite a privileged life so far, in the sense that she has travelled and experienced different cultures because of my work.

**I'm very happy right now;** I've got somebody in my life who's an incredible support and really

understands me. It's a huge relief to have met somebody like that. I think one changes as one gets older – different things matter in relationships. I've matured in confidence. I know who I am better now. I have lived through a lot of tough stuff and survived; I have a resilience that I never imagined I would have.

**I never thought George [Clooney] would get married again.** I remember my first day on *ER*; he and I sat on a bench on set. I was through with my first marriage [to Ralph Fiennes] and he said, 'I was married once. Never again.' I said, 'Yeah, me too.' Then I did and I said, 'Well, never say never,' but I thought he would be the eternal bachelor. She [Amal Alamuddin] seems great. I don't know much about her but he has certainly met his match. She sounds

## ACCORDING TO ALEX

### RECURRING DREAM?

A whole town comes back to me in my dreams; I know the streets and the houses, but I haven't got a clue where it is.

### MOTTO FOR LIFE?

I don't have one, but I do feel keenly – and I know this is going to sound really cheesy – that I am lucky to be alive and I don't want to take a single day for granted.

### It upsets me when

I see people waste their lives.

### WHO MAKES YOU LAUGH?

Kenneth Branagh – he is witty and self-deprecating and he is very good at impersonations.

### WHAT MAKES YOU CRY?

I cry at the drop of a hat. Before one performance of *Macbeth* I became overwhelmed and had to pull myself together and remind myself that I had to start acting.

### WHAT DO YOU MISS MOST ABOUT BRITAIN

### WHEN YOU'RE IN LA?

Kippers and kedgerree.

fantastic and I'm very happy for them.

**George is an incredibly handsome man. He's absolutely gorgeous.**

And he's smart; I like the choices that he makes, whether they're political, or in terms of his acting, directing and producing career. I think Brad Pitt is similar to George – I have immense admiration for him; he seems to be a well-grounded person. Would I like to work with him? Yes, absolutely. But I'm also happy to watch him and just be a fan.

**Working with Ken [Branagh] has been wonderful;** he is incredibly open and generous on stage. We both feel that *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* are passionate about one another; but have made the wrong choice, and it destroys them and everyone around them. They lost a child and are desperate to create a legacy.

*Macbeth* is given that opportunity – and what greater legacy than to be King of Scotland? They just have to do this one terrible thing – and that leads to their destruction.

**Doctor Who was a great**

**opportunity.** I hope that my role hasn't ended because I wasn't officially told, 'That's it.' I loved watching it growing up and I'm amazed that young girls have an obsession with *River Song*. They consider her to be a great, strong role model, which is lovely.

**Plastic surgery is part of our world now.**

Everybody does it. I don't know how many jobs I may have lost because I haven't had anything done. To be perfectly honest, I don't know whether there will come a point when somebody may gently say to me, 'You may have to do something if you want this job.' The thing that's so great about doing a play is that it doesn't matter: It's about your acting ability as opposed to what you look like, and that's what working on television or film should be about.

**I am very happy being my age.** I've always led a healthy lifestyle and I have good genes. My mum is amazing; she is going to be 80 and she doesn't have any wrinkles. It's incredible. ❑

■ *Chasing Shadows* is coming soon to ITV