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She loves Branagh deeply, but when she found letters from another girl she didn't hesitate to walk out on him;

(1) He couldn't marry a bimbo and she couldn't marry a wimp (2)  
**CONCLUDING AN INTRIGUING SERIES ON BRITAIN'S RISING STAR, EMMA THOMPSON**

**BYLINE:** Sandra Parsons, Lester Middlehurst

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EMMA Thompson and Kenneth Branagh, now in their fourth year of marriage, are widely regarded as having one of the strongest partnerships in showbusiness. Friends speak with some awe of the Ken and Em phenomenon, two titans of stage and screen who are as successful in their personal lives as in their careers.

But it was not always so. After meeting and falling in love while playing husband and wife in *Fortunes Of War*, there followed a tempestuous two years which culminated in Emma leaving Kenneth, who had something of a reputation for a roving eye. A friend recalls: 'It all came to a head when Emma found some letters from another woman. She called the whole thing off and went to New York.'

Another friend says: 'He had an affair. Emma went absolutely barmy. She said she never wanted to see Ken again. She went off to America, but she was secretly hoping he would follow her.'

It was entirely in character for Emma to take such a firm line. Everyone who knows her speaks of her strong personality: a woman who will not be messed about. The decision to leave the erring Ken was a risk but, as usual, a calculated one - and it paid off. Facing a future without the woman he loved, it did not take Branagh long to realise he had been a fool. He flew to New York, begged for forgiveness, and proposed. On their return to London, they went straight to see the Reverend Malcolm Johnson and began organising their wedding.

'I think Ken's efforts with Emma in those early days were comparable to Richard Harris in *A Man Called Horse*,' says the actor Brian Blessed, who was Branagh's best man. 'He had to go through all those ceremonies to earn that lovely Indian girl. I think Ken had to earn Emma, and there's a lot to be said for that.'

JOHN SESSIONS, a close friend of Branagh's for 14 years, described the relationship as 'spiky' to begin with. 'They didn't get on so well at first. I don't really know why, I think it was down to Em,' he says. 'She took off to America and he decided she was worth following.'

'Ken has an unconscious life plan, and there was no question that he would get married and that he would find the woman of his dreams, a woman who would be his match in the best sense of the word. Working with Emma he got to know her very well. It was a little bit spiky to begin with, but after all that time they realised they were a good couple. I was pretty convinced by the time he directed and acted in *Henry V* that wedding bells would be ringing. There had been girlfriends before, but she was different.'

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It was, perhaps, inevitable that two such strong personalities would clash, but it seems nowadays that Branagh is the one to have tempered his attitudes. In a recent interview in the American Us magazine, Emma said that marriage was a 'huge risk' which should only be taken once you had played the field and decided whether you were a monogamist as opposed to a polygamist. 'Marriage is an extremely dangerous step - don't do it until you have slept with everything with a pulse,' she said.

But that has never been Emma's style. 'That attitude that all girls should sleep with as many men as they want before they get married is more Ken's than Emma's,' says one friend. 'I think she keeps quite a tight rein on him.'

Emma said recently: 'Ken is not threatened by me, whereas I have found a

great many men are threatened by women who express opinions. He is much more of a feminist now than five years ago, because I am the world's biggest mouth on such issues. So you might hear Ken make a few supporting remarks he would not have thought of a few years ago.'

At their much-publicised wedding, at Cliveden on August 20, 1989, she did not promise to obey. Two days later the world discovered they were not really married - the legal ceremony was performed instead five days later, at Camden Register Office.

'They went to the register office after the event, which is rather unusual,' says the Rev Malcolm Johnson. 'They hadn't realised that it was necessary beforehand. It doesn't matter that they just got it the wrong way round. It was genuine confusion.'

'It wasn't a fake wedding. At the end of the ceremony I officiated at they weren't legally married, but they were married in the eyes of God and they were married in their eyes. Because they told me that they regarded that as the wedding.'

The ceremony at Cliveden was organised with the almost fanatical secrecy which, by then, had become their trademark. When they fell in love during the making of *Fortunes Of War*, nobody on the cast had any inkling that the two stars had become an item. 'They were obviously good mates, but I had no idea that they were going out with each other,' says the producer, Betty **Willingale**, while co-star Robert Stephens recalls: 'I was there for about 12 weeks and I didn't realise it all.'

Actor Sam Dastor had the embarrassing experience of realising that Emma, with whom he spent a week filming his scenes, thought he had developed a crush on her. 'At one point during one of our scenes she must have thought I was falling in love with her. She said to me: 'I'm very cold and hard you know.' I said: 'I don't think you're that hard.' That was all she said.'

'I wasn't aware of the romance with Kenneth. They played it cool.'

DURING an interview on location, Emma spoke of what it was like to be 'absolutely, totally and blindly in love'. But as soon as the Press picked up the scent, Branagh tried to deflect attention by pretending to be gay: 'I'm as camp as a row of tents,' he once declared.

By the time they got married, he had given up that particular tack. Instead, the couple embarked on a farcical exercise of trying to keep secret their wedding, a £30,000 extravaganza which, paradoxically, they had chosen to hold in a National Trust mansion which was open to the public.

The guests were not even issued with formal invitations for fear of the news leaking out. John Sessions says the reason for the attempted secrecy was because: 'At the time there was a lot of Ken and Emma bashing.'

More cynical observers concluded that it was just Em and Ken giving vent to their 'luvvy' tendencies. She, after all, is the woman who has said she always carries Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own* and Shakespeare's sonnets with her, and who once described her ill-fated TV comedy series, *Thompson*, as 'a little allotment' above which was 'a massive, an incredibly beautiful oak tree, and that's Shakespeare'.

But John Sessions loyally conducts a spirited defence on their behalf. 'When they are not working they don't go round to lots of openings. I once asked Ken if he had ever been to *The Ivy* (London's premier 'luvvy'

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restaurant) and he said he wouldn't be seen dead there. You either get off on the whole head-turning thing or you hate it. They hate it. They are not public ambassadorial figures like the Oliviers.

'It's the way they are. They work themselves to a standstill. If they decide to have a holiday, they are going to have a holiday.

'Ken decided to make the wedding a real humdinger. There weren't that many celebrity guests. Brian Blessed, Judi Dench and Michael Williams, Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, Richard Briers, myself and Ben Elton. After that it was mostly family and not-so-familiar actors.'

Malcolm Johnson remembers particularly the speech Brian Blessed gave at the dinner after the ceremony. 'It moved me almost as much as the service,' he says.

'He said that, out in the world at large, there were people who would want to pull down Emma and Kenneth, but the people in the room loved them and it was very important that we all kept in touch with them and surrounded them with a lot of love because there were a lot of people who would enjoy destroying them. I thought that was very telling. It was all very moving.'

Blessed himself says he is fed up with attacks on the Branaghs. 'We desperately need them because Ken is the only one in the field at the moment who can rescue the British film industry, and Emma is right up there with him. I think they can benefit all of us.

'Our profession has never been in a worse state, yet they are the two beacons to light the way. And they are both very nice people. I can say this because I have the feeling that I shall rarely work with them. I will be climbing mountains. So I can talk objectively.

'They need to be loved and encouraged. They are generous and out-giving. They are not interested in money, they only want money so they can put it into their Renaissance Theatre Company and films.'

Everyone who knows Emma talks of her generosity. Richard Briers says that if she made £100 profit she would spend it all on her friends; John Sessions says she is one of the kindest people he knows; and the writer Kim Harris, a Cambridge contemporary, says Emma is someone he can always rely on to be there for him. 'They have no acquisitive side to them,' says Sessions. 'As long as they've got a nice home and professional freedom, that's all they crave.'

ON THE set of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the latest Branagh film due for release later this year, Brian Blessed said he was struck by the way Emma was always the first to fetch the umbrellas if it was raining, or to get the extras a glass of water if it was hot. 'The only person I have ever seen do that before is Katharine Hepburn. Emma is an incredibly busy person, yet she's always aware of what other people are doing.

'She has a wonderful sense of humour. What is lovely is that I am terribly coarse and rude to her, being frightfully, monstrously insensitive in front of her, which makes her collapse with laughter.

'Richard Briers and I did a mock interview on the set of *Much Ado* in which we criticised the Branaghs and brought up all the nastiness that other people had said - how jealous we were of them, how they were so talented and rich and how we loathed them. At the end of it Emma came and threw a bucket of water over us.'

Briers recalls joking with Emma that, with her Oscar nomination, she would ascend into another stratosphere and would not want to talk to people like him anymore. 'No, I won't,' she told him. 'Bugger off.'

'She has no hang ups,' he says. 'She is a committed person, very well read, and she loves the business. There is no side to her or Ken. The truth is they are very nice people.'

Close friends believe the Emma and Ken relationship is so powerful because they are equally matched both in character and talent. 'Ken needs a strong woman,' says Sessions. 'He couldn't marry a bimbo and she couldn't marry a wimp. They are equally matched for sheer drive, dynamism and talent.

'They have a remarkable lack of obstruction between what they want to do and what they actually do. A lot of us faff around and say 'I'd love to write a novel', or 'Wouldn't it be great to do a film with Robert De Niro'. Whereas they just set off to make that a reality - fast.

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'They've been given the Lord and Lady Branagh tag, but they don't behave like Lord and Lady Branagh. Until Em came along Ken was the worst dressed man in London. He was seriously out of a chain store; Em gave him a bit of colour co-ordination. But Em ain't Mrs Dallas. She likes to look nice, but she can sit there with a cup of coffee and an old coat on.'

Actor Robert Bathurst, who was with her at Cambridge, says Emma is someone who's learned to ride the punches of criticism. 'She has ridden her disasters with great style. Emma is the only person I have ever met who has a well-defined sense of her own destiny. She has this cat-like ability to walk into a room and belong and not seem uncomfortable.'

'I suspect she will be the same at the Oscar ceremony. It will be: 'This is my right, I belong here.''

But one person who will not be by her side at the Academy Awards in Hollywood at the end of this month is her husband. He has to stay in Stratford-on-Avon where he is appearing in Hamlet.

There is, it appears, some poetic justice in that, because in 1990 Kenneth went to the awards without Emma when he was nominated for a best actor Oscar for Henry V. 'They were in Japan at the time doing King Lear and The Dream, and it meant he had to get an understudy,' says John Sessions.

'Emma felt that if they both went it would be letting the show down, so she nobly stayed behind. I think somewhere in the back of her mind she had the confidence to know that she would be there herself, sooner or later.'

If she wins the Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Margaret Schlegel in Howards End, she will be the first British actress to do so for 20 years - if you discount British-born but American-based Jessica Tandy, who won the best actress Oscar in 1990 for Driving Miss Daisy. Glenda Jackson was the last, for her role in A Touch Of Class.

But the greatest accolade of all will definitely not go to her head, believes Brian Blessed: 'She will take it with a pinch of salt. She'll probably give it to her mum for a bookend.'

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