



‘MONOGAMY IS TOUGH... *you’re still attracted to other people*’

Therapy, nudity and endless tubes of toothpaste: when it comes to having a successful Hollywood career and marriage, actress KRISTEN BELL has some incredibly frank and very funny advice...

INTERVIEW ELAINE LIPWORTH PHOTOGRAPHS JAMES MACARI

AS soon as Kristen Bell bounds into her publicist's Beverly Hills office and leaps on to the sofa beside me, I can tell we are going to get along. The talented star of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Bad Moms* and *Frozen* (she was the voice of plucky Princess Anna) is quirky, charming and confiding, and we immediately bond over the ups and downs of being a mum. Married to actor and director Dax Shepard, star of the TV series *Parenthood*, the couple live in Los Angeles with their daughters, five-year-old Lincoln, named after the iconic American president and the car ('Dax has a 67 Lincoln that he's been fixing up since he was 24'), and Delta, three. 'I love my kids more than life itself, but they are also disgusting, feral creatures who live in my home. My daughter gave me pinworms recently,' says Kristen, chatting nineteen to the dozen.

We've got together to discuss the 38-year-old actress's latest role in *Teen Titans Go! To the Movies*, a 'funny and irreverent' animated film based on the TV series. The Teen Titans [young superheroes who want to be taken seriously by the heavy hitters] 'believe they deserve their own movie like all the other superheroes. I play Jade, a director who ►

◀wants to make a film with them. She is exactly how you'd imagine a Hollywood director to be: big promises, sweeping statements and she's a bit of a control freak.' Kristen loves animation: 'There is something challenging about only having your voice to convey emotion and leaving it to the animators to come up with your facial expressions.'

Lincoln and Delta must be thrilled that their mum is in the coolest family films. 'They don't care!' she says. 'They assume all parents voice cartoons. They've seen *Frozen* and one of them has the Elsa dress...not mine!' Her daughters are under no illusion about the mechanics of cartoons. 'When we watch [the TV show] *PAW Patrol* and a scary dragon appears, my little one says, "That's not a dragon. It's a man making a voice in the microphone," and I'll go, "You're absolutely right." We tell them all about the messiness of life.'

We order lunch and she launches into a hilarious diatribe about her husband's questionable culinary skills. 'He calls himself "This Doctor". One time, he decided to eat only broccoli for a week. He said it was "This Doctor's First Superfood Cleanse". It lasted four days! Now he is on a kick where he is only cooking meals we had as children in Michigan [Dax and Kristen were both raised in the Midwestern state], made with mayonnaise, Ritz crackers or a can of beans. He calls it "This Doctor's First Worst Superfood Cleanse".'

Kristen loves to cook, 'but Dax has no desire to eat my food,' she sighs. 'When we met, I was desperate to impress him. I'd be wearing jeans shorts, cooking a three-course meal... No interest from Dax,' who would 'suffer through it' and then suggest a takeaway. 'He is the only man I know who doesn't want a 1950s housewife.'

Together for 11 years and married for five, the couple had a pact not to walk down the aisle until same-sex marriage became legal in California. 'Dax makes me laugh even when I'm

angry at him. He's also romantic.' Kristen's favourite animals are sloths ('They make me happy') and, with the help of an expert, Dax 'once arranged to have a sloth in our living room so I could learn about it. It was the nicest present I've ever received.'

Kristen is candid about the challenges of relationships. 'We fight about everything,' she says, recalling how she used to get so frustrated with her husband that 'I would slam the door to the room we were in, slam the door of the house, slam the car door and drive around the corner,' before cooling off.

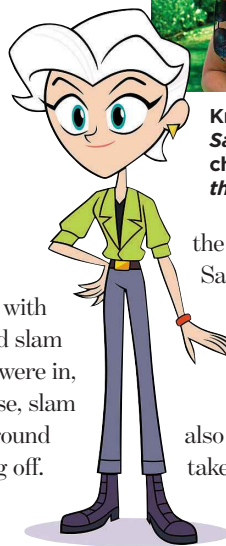
Couples counselling has helped, with Kristen and Dax learning how to defuse potentially volcanic rows before they escalate. Their therapist told Kristen: 'The next fight you have, you can slam the front door, but don't get in your car; then the fight after that, you can mentally slam the door.' Five months later, all door slamming, both real and imaginary, had stopped. 'We still fight, but don't take disagreements to heart. I know he's on my team. If you have a long marriage that thrives without therapy, please call me because you are a unicorn!'

Counselling, says Kristen, has helped her to understand that everyone has deep-seated patterns, rooted in childhood. An example is her husband's idiosyncratic shopping rituals. 'He will buy 30 of the same item: toothpaste, butter, anything. I'm like, "We don't have space." Now I realise he thinks everything is going to run out because he grew up poor. So rather than try to change him, I reorganised the laundry room. I know he needs to have 30 tubes of toothpaste available at all times.'

As for her own behaviour? 'I think I'm perfect,' she jokes, before revealing that her own 'annoying habit is talking a lot, in a nonlinear fashion. This is how Dax describes me telling a story: "I saw Sarah at



Kristen with Russell Brand in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, above, and, left, her character Jade in *Teen Titans Go! To the Movies*



the grocery store – you know, Sarah, who I knew when I was living with my mum, before she had her boyfriend Dick – but not the second Dick, the one with the kid, also named Sarah..." Kristen takes a deep breath. 'He's like, "What is the story here?"'

Dax 'now understands that because I've always been small and didn't get listened to when I was a kid, I struggled with feeling that nothing I said was of value. That's why I have this scattered approach when I talk, because I'm trying to be heard.' She gives me a friendly tap on the shoulder: 'Good luck making sense of anything I say,' she laughs.

One reason their marriage works is because they 'have splendid debates and hate the same things: unkind people and a lack of self-responsibility'. They also share a similar approach to parenting. While liberal in some respects ('We let the girls wear what they want – my five-year-old wears ballet leotards exclusively'), Kristen says that discipline is also important. 'Other than at weekends, the girls can only watch television once a week when we all watch *Planet Earth*.'

The family are delightfully laid-back about nudity. 'I'm naked way more than anyone else I know – but not on purpose. If it's 7am and I'm trying to get dressed and one of the kids is begging for yoghurt, I will forget that I don't have a top on.' Is she body confident? 'I have a fine body; I've had two children. I don't dwell on it. I hope I bring something to the table with my personality, not



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because I have a flat stomach.’

The couple will not be expanding their family, says Kristen, who had a pregnancy scare when Delta was 11 weeks old, while she was filming *The Boss*. ‘I told Dax, “I feel nauseous. I need you to get me a pregnancy test” and I saw the blood drain out of his face. It was a false alarm, but four days later he got a vasectomy.’

Kristen’s parents – Lorelei, a nurse, and Tom, a television executive – split up when she was two, but she says she had a happy childhood with her two stepsisters and four half-siblings. She viewed divorce as ‘just having more people who loved me’. She says, ‘I’m a positive person. When I was 16, if I was in a fight with my mum, I would drive to my dad’s and vice versa, which was amazing!’

I’ve rarely met someone as upbeat as Kristen, yet as a teenager she suffered from depression. Although she won a place at New York University, some of her experience was pretty distressing. ‘I dealt with a lot of ups and downs. The ups were super-exciting. I was getting auditions and I had a boyfriend who loved me, yet little things upset me. If a piece of clothing didn’t fit, or my toothbrush fell into the rubbish bin, tears would come down my face. Nothing was really wrong, but I felt sad. It was scary,’ she says.

She learned that ‘both my grandmother and my mum dealt with depression, so there is a hereditary line. We’re not going to figure out where depression comes from, but we have the opportunity to treat it and have better lives.’ Since her student days, Kristen has taken antidepressants. ‘I don’t believe in over-prescribing ►

◀ anything, but I have a serotonin imbalance, which is akin to having diabetes.’

There are concerns about her children inheriting the condition. ‘I’ll have the same conversation with them that my mum had with me:

“Sometimes you might feel sad and not know why. If you feel that way, talk to me.” I

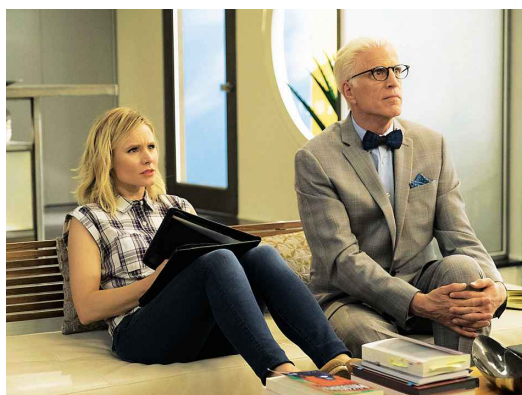
don’t want them to feel there’s a stigma.’ The girls are encouraged to express their feelings. ‘I tell them, “Don’t be afraid of your emotions – you’re allowed to cry.”’

By confronting her issues, Kristen has fostered resilience in her personal life and career. She has starred in the popular TV shows *Veronica Mars* and *Heroes* and gained a following as the enigmatic narrator of *Gossip Girl*. Her big-screen breakthrough was the 2008 comedy *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* with Russell Brand. ‘I adore Russell; he has a lot of cuckoo opinions, but so do I,’ says Kristen.

Her most celebrated role has been Anna in the Oscar-winning *Frozen*. The film subverts ‘prince rescuing princess’ stereotypes: ‘The boy doesn’t matter. It’s about a girl [Elsa, voiced by Idina Menzel] who’s struggling because she doesn’t want to be who she actually is – a queen. People wanted to see Elsa accept who she is. That’s what every little person who lives inside us wants.’ In next year’s *Frozen 2*, ‘the sisters are back in the kingdom of Arendelle. It tells the bigger story about these girls and who they are meant to be.’

Kristen has the knack of tapping into the zeitgeist with the roles she chooses. ‘It’s just luck,’ she says, ‘but one secret is saying yes a lot. When you think things are beneath you, you miss out on a lot of fun.’

Her latest TV series is the brilliantly inventive hit sitcom *The Good Place*. She stars as the self-centred Eleanor Shellstrop, who when she dies ends up in a heaven-like utopia because of what appears to be a bureaucratic error. ‘The premise is: What if an a**hole



Kristen and her *The Good Place* co-star Ted Danson, above, and below, with her husband, actor and director Dax Shepard



got into heaven?’ In this pristine place, bad language is banned and, when Eleanor tries to swear, the words come out distorted, as ‘shirt’ or ‘fork’ or ‘ash-hole’. ‘I swear all the time and on set when I’m supposed to say fork, I still say f***. I have to train myself.’ Eleanor decides to earn her place by trying to be good. Ted Danson plays the mercurial Michael, an angel who oversees the afterlife community. ‘Ted is like a 16-year-old boy – goofy, funny and kind,’ says Kristen. Moral philosophy is at the heart of the series, which is about ‘how every choice you make affects someone else’, she says. The show’s creator, Michael Schur (*Parks and Recreation*), dreamt up the concept for *The Good Place* after becoming aware that he would only tip the staff in his local coffee shop when they were looking his way. ‘He wanted to explore how selfishness

and greed exist in us. But we all have empathy and goodness, too. If you nurture those qualities, they will rise to the top.’ Kristen’s philosophy? ‘Being good involves practice. If you choose it consistently, it starts to become second nature. I strive to promote happiness and alleviate suffering

however I can. How we relate to one another is important.’

Which brings us back to the subject of relationships and why they work. Kristen has been quoted as saying that monogamy is tough. ‘I see the benefits of a society with monogamous relationships, but it’s difficult because you’re still attracted to other people,’ she says. ‘Dax was in an open relationship in his 20s and it scared me when we first started dating. We don’t have one and I don’t know if we ever will.’

Kristen believes that if both partners are secure, there is no need for jealousy. ‘I think what alleviates the pressure-cooker of monogamy is understanding that your partner’s attraction to someone else is nothing to do with you. I talk about who I’m attracted to in front of Dax, and he’ll say: “I could never pick your type out in a line-up.”’ Her line-up, by the way, includes actors Benicio del Toro, Riz Ahmed and Peter Dinklage. ‘If I ever get to make out with Riz, Dax will give me a round of applause!’

Likewise, says Kristen, ‘I’ve told Dax that if, one day, Jennifer Lopez comes up to him and says, “I need a weekend away with you in Sonoma [a romantic city in California’s wine region],” you have to go *now*, because I am clear that Jennifer Lopez’s beauty is not a reflection on me not being good enough. Here’s the thing,’ she says. ‘I love this man and I would not want him to be on his deathbed thinking, “I could have had sex with Jennifer Lopez...”’ ■

■ *Teen Titans Go! To the Movies* will be in cinemas nationwide on 3 August. *The Good Place* seasons one and two are available on Netflix

CAN-DO FOR KRISTEN

FAVOURITE BREAKFAST

Takeaway porridge that comes in cardboard cups. They are great because the last thing you want in the morning is to leave the house with the kids for school, knowing there is a pile of dishes waiting for you at home.

WHAT KEEPS YOU UP AT NIGHT?

Nothing. Other than my three-year-old. I’m a good sleeper.

GO-TO SONG

Toto’s ‘Africa’. It’s one of the best songs ever written – Dax and I used it to get pumped up for a trip to Africa we took – so it has a special significance. It jizzes us up every time we hear it.

PLAN B I would explore working with kids because I can communicate really well with them. Maybe I’d be a nursery-school teacher.

LAST TIME YOU CRIED

Reading the book *It’s Okay to Laugh (Crying Is Cool Too)* by Nora McInerny Purmort. I cry all the time. When have I not cried?

HIDDEN TALENT I can read a room really well and tell what people are like right away.

BIGGEST FLAW I’m incredibly forgetful. There are holidays I took with Dax before our kids that I do not recall. He’s like, ‘We’ve been skiing in Big Bear,’ and I’m, like, ‘We did?’ I miss everyone’s birthday. It’s really frustrating.

THREE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE YOU

Scrappy, kind, energetic.

WHERE ARE YOU HAPPIEST?

In a pile on the couch with our ‘bunnies’ (Dax calls all the girls in our family bunnies).

MOTTO I live by the quote ascribed to Eleanor Roosevelt, ‘No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.’

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