

ALL about Anna

NO STRANGER TO CONTROVERSIAL ROLES AND WITH A TIRELESS WORK ETHIC, ANNA FRIEL DOES THINGS HER WAY. FRANK AND FEARLESS, SHE TALKS BEING A BUSY WORKING MOTHER AND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO DATE IN YOUR FORTIES

Words ROSIE GREEN Photographs PAUL EMPSON Styling OONAGH BRENNAN

I have Anna Friel to thank for my best dinner-party anecdote. In the late '90s, we met in LA and she, the fêted ingénue, blagged me, a lowly fashion assistant, into Madonna's party. Donatella was in the lift with her bodyguards, Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck were hanging out, and every supermodel you've ever heard of was getting down on the dance floor alongside her Madgesty. At the bar was an old guy. Who turned out to be Jack Nicholson. "Nice tits," he said. "Can I get you a drink?"

My moment in the spotlight was short-lived, though. Within milliseconds of clocking the luminously pretty Friel, he switched target and indicated he would not rest until he had slept with her (he didn't, FYI).

Twenty years later, I am standing in the kitchen of Friel's townhouse in Windsor, >

Dress, Temperley
London. Ring, Bulgari

reminding her of our adventure. “Oh, my God,” she laughs, her petite frame and glowing skin looking remarkably unchanged. “That story has followed me for years!”

TODAY, SHE'S IN HER WORKOUT GEAR, DELICATE FEATURES AND FLAWLESS SKIN reigniting the spark of envy I felt on our first meeting. She makes me a glass of the lemon juice concoction she is drinking, which involves mixing, among other things, natural tree syrup and some kind of cayenne pepper. She pads around her chic but lived-in grey kitchen with its AGA, marble island and dark-stained floorboards, relaxed and comfortable.

The image is a far cry from industry whispers about her trickiness that pre-interview googling had warned me of. As we move to sit on her sofa, it transpires the lemon concoction, plus the training she has just returned from, is part of her prep for a new role in the Steven Soderbergh-produced TV series *The Girlfriend Experience*. “I’m playing a lesbian again,” she laughs. No stranger to controversial roles (she filmed the first pre-watershed lesbian kiss in *Brookside* and a famous threesome in *The Tribe*), this, she says, is even more outré.

It also involves being naked, and this leads Friel onto the “responsibility” and “pressure” to “look really good when you have a big job coming up”. She talks honestly about it being “hard to maintain” a laser-like focus on appearance as a busy working mother. “I saw a picture of Reese Witherspoon and her daughter recently and they looked identical,” she says. “I think it’s important for real women to know that there are personal trainers involved, and [that looking like that] probably means no carbs, or just a few in the morning, and going to bed at eight or nine. It’s a massive discipline and you have to ask yourself, ‘Is that the life I want?’ I try to find a happy medium.”

A healthy diet, she says, is everything. “Every single day I have a shake with walnuts, cherry juice, frozen blueberries, frozen spinach, coconut oil, flaxseed and chia.” Exercise would ideally be the reformer Pilates that she started in LA. “But it’s too expensive here, and you have to book three weeks in advance.” Instead, she works out with a trainer and walks a lot, because running hurts her back. That glowing skin is undoubtedly down to genes, but she’s also a beauty junkie and pumps make-up artists for their latest tricks. One she swears by involves mixing coffee grounds with raw honey and patting it around the eyes to take down dark circles. She says she’s also tried the vampire facelift (aka, the Plasma Lift) with London-based cosmetic surgeon Dr Sebagh, but now credits his Ultralift treatment as “the best thing on the market”.

As any actress knows, looks and youth play a major role in securing screen time. In an interview last year, Friel joked she was dreading turning 40. She’s now a few months away from turning 41. “I don’t feel that different

now to how I did at 30,” she shrugs. “Maybe a bit more grounded and a little wiser. Before, there was an element of ‘I don’t deserve it’ or ‘I’m not good enough’. Now I don’t waste my time on that negative energy.” I ask if there is any trepidation that there will be fewer parts as she gets older, but she replies determinedly, “I won’t let there be.”

Looking at Friel’s CV, there’s such an impressive body of work, you sense she should be a bigger star than she is. It all started, of course, with that lesbian kiss in *Brookside* back in 1994, such an iconic moment it’s still brought up in every interview she does. Friel received critical acclaim for playing the character of Beth Jordache for two years. Film roles quickly followed, then the Emmy award-winning US comedy *Pushing Daisies* and, most recently, *Marcella*, the ITV crime thriller which many critics think is her best work to date (she’s filming the next series before Christmas). “I’m on a really good run,” she grins.

BUT WE’RE HERE TO TALK ABOUT BROKEN, her project with BAFTA award-winning writer Jimmy McGovern (*Cracker*) and *The Lord Of The Rings*’ Sean Bean (“a beautiful empathetic person”). Her story is that of a single mother in grinding poverty. “And how far someone will go to be able to put food on the table for their children,” adds Friel. In the short clip I’m allowed to watch, the palpable distress of her character seems to leak out from the screen. The real-life story it was based on was so harrowing, Friel felt it necessary to check that it did actually happen. “People,” she says with a fierce intensity, “are in desperate states.”

You sense Friel’s childhood in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, gives her an authenticity in these roles. “I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth,” she says. “I’m the daughter of two teachers, but it’s not a massive stretch for me to understand hardship.” Her father’s Irish Catholic background came in handy for her *Broken* research, where religion features strongly. She also displays an admirable lack of vanity, saying, “I look awful in *Broken* and I think I should do.” Her face is convincingly battered and bruised, and the wardrobe was hardly couture. “My character doesn’t wear anything that costs more than £7. It was second-, third-hand George at Asda.”

Her father’s love and talent for folk singing has passed through the generations, too. In fact, Friel was offered a recording contract post-*Brookside* by Simon Cowell, but turned it down. “I’m not sure his standard was as high then,” she laughs, then adds, “I wanted to act and be taken seriously.” Now it’s Gracie, her 11-year-old daughter, who is showing serious vocal prowess.

It seems, in part at least, her tireless work ethic is born from being a single mother who still needs to fill the coffers. “No one’s paying my bills,” she says. “David [Thewlis, her ex-partner of 10 years and Gracie’s father] pays »

“
Before, there was an
element of ‘I’m not good
enough’. Now, I don’t
waste my time on that
negative energy
”



Dress, Temperley
London. Ear cuff, Jagga
Jewellery. Rings,
Iosselliani Jewellery

RED WOMAN

the school fees and for a nanny, but I pay the rest. I've always been independent, [I've] financially supported myself since I was 16. It has meant I've been able to be in relationships, or not in them, because of love rather than need."

Back to David. The second time I met Friel she was in the first throes of that relationship. I remember her giddy pride at his acting credentials [which include *The Big Lebowski* and *Seven Years In Tibet*]. Did they consciously uncouple, Gwyneth-and-Chris-style? "I'm friends with all my exes," she smiles, stiffening slightly. "You have to be grown-up about these things." I sense there is pain still yet to be fully anaesthetised by time. "We don't see each other as much, but we're really blessed in that way. It's hard enough to have a separation, but it must be so hard to have a separation that's vile. David is married and lives near here. Gracie needs to see her daddy."

GRACIE, IT'S OBVIOUS, IS THE CENTRE OF FRIEL'S WORLD. It's the reason she moved back to the UK from LA, even though her career was taking off there. "My agents would love me to go back there," she says. "But you choose a career that's going well in America, or you take your child away from their father. I had to sacrifice that."

The Girlfriend Experience will take her away from Gracie for three months, their longest separation ever and, as she tells me about it, tears start streaming down her cheeks. "I'll see her for three of those weeks," she says. "It gets harder because I can't just accept jobs in England." I get a real sense the opportunities are better for her abroad. "I've had two and a half months of doing the school run, but it just goes so quickly." She looks momentarily panicked. "And then she'll be off to university and I'll wish I'd had another one when I was younger because I just love being a mum."

Her pride in Gracie is joyous. "She's an amazing singer, a brilliant guitarist. She helps around the house, she understands the value of money and she doesn't take things for granted," Friel says. Gracie has even been scouted for roles, including one in Netflix's *Stranger Things*. "I don't think she's ready. Arrogantly, I think we know she can do it – so I think you can wait," she says.

Talk turns to Friel's romantic relationships, and I detect a wariness that stems from over two decades of press



FROM LEFT: Friel with David Thewlis; Rhys Ifans; and in ITV hit *Marcella*



dissection. "You can see I'm open," she smiles, but says that she wants to keep such matters "private." Back when we first met, she was bearing the scars of

her Darren Day split. Then there was a dalliance with Robbie Williams and, post-David, a longer relationship with Rhys Ifans. What now? "I was seeing a Garrison Sergeant Major [a senior British Army officer] for about a year, but he's now cycling across America." Currently, there is someone new. I try to get some insight into what dating in your forties as a famous actress must be like. "I don't think you date," she says. "You get on with it. It's not all romantic. It's a bit more, 'Let's see how it goes.'"

Her discomfort is similarly visible when I ask her about her time hanging with the Primrose Hill set; Kate Moss, Sadie Frost, Jude Law, Meg Mathews and Noel Gallagher in the '90s. Was it much exaggerated? "Yes," she replies firmly, but then softens to say, "Of course we all hung out. All our worlds collided. They were all kind and lovely to me. I was on my own and I'd just come to London and some of them had seen Brookie and said, 'She's kind of cool,' and so took me under their wing."

There's a knock at the door. It's a friend and her daughter with the Pomapoo puppy they co-own with Friel and Gracie. It's time for Friel to pick up Gracie from school and for me to go. (It occurs to me that their visit might be conveniently timed to cut off the interview.)

As I head off into the weak spring sunshine, I consider Anna Friel. Ambitious. Maternal. Talented. Conflicted. Warm. Consumer of not altogether pleasant lemon drinks? Yes. Tricky? Not in the slightest.  *Broken airs in May on BBC One*

For Anna Friel's Best Things In Life, visit REDONLINE.CO.UK

FRIEL WEARS: DRESS: LUISA BECCARIA; HAIR: MICHAEL ROWAN AT MICHAEL ROWAN HAIR.COM (@MICHAELROWANHAIR); MAKE-UP: CAROLINE BARNES AT FRANK AGENCY; USING MAX FACTOR; NAILS: EMMA WELSH AT AUGUST MANAGEMENT; USING NAILS INC; PORCHETER SQUARE GEL EFFECT NAIL POLISH; STYLISTS: ASSISTANT SOPHIE HOOPER; SET DESIGNER: ALUN DAVIES; LOCATION: THANKS TO BIG SKY STUDIOS; ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: FILM MAGIC, GETTY, ITY