

I still think I'm a fat, ugly brunette!

Esther Rantzen may be a sex symbol to her husband, but she tells Jane Dimond that really she's riddled with insecurities

THAT'S ESTHER
TV/MONDAY

Q Your daughter Rebecca recently described you as stubborn and impatient...

How dare she! Moi?

A She must have been thinking of someone else. I can be stubborn when it's something I really care about, impatient? I am often in a hurry and sometimes if you don't strike while the iron is hot, it's too late. But I don't think those words would have been the qualities I'd have picked.

Q What would you have picked?

A Warm, loving, caring, adorable – and a bit

impetuous, I suppose. Sometimes I have to rein myself back because my instinct is to leap the moment I get an idea, which isn't always good. And some people might say I'm controlling – I get scared if something like a programme or family project starts to get away from me and I don't understand where we're

going. Actually, my real weak spot is that I'm not good at self analysis, partly because I tend to be rather absorbed in the world outside me and if you spend a lot of time in introspection, it can end up distracting you.

Q Do you think people do that too much now?

A No, I just personally think if God intended me to look at

myself he would have placed my eyes the other way round. I'm an extrovert and talk all the time so I get all my feelings out of my system.

Q What would Desmond say was the best thing about being married to Esther Rantzen?

A I think it's that we make each other laugh, but he would say my legs. He thinks I'm a sex symbol, bless his

heart! He still finds me attractive, which is a pleasure. He's a romantic, a red roses for Valentine's Day man, and is never off the phone to me. Isn't it awful, I can't think of any romantic things I've done!

Q But I sense you've got a wicked sense of humour?

A I do and I like surprising him. I think being boring can



IN THE CHAIR WITH
ESTHER RANTZEN

be a virtue but it's not one that I've ever admired so I do try and amuse people if I can. I don't think Desmond ever quite knows what to expect from me.

Q What part does faith play in your life?

A I'm an agnostic, so when I pass on to wherever it is, I shall be very interested. My background is Jewish.

Q You've had a hard two years (Rebecca had ME and Desmond a heart attack) then someone diagnosed you in bed for six weeks. During that time have you ever thought things are predestined, that they happen for us to learn from?

A My husband's illness taught me what a survivor he is, what strength he has, and he learned from the experience too. But the suffering my daughter endured – if anyone sent it to teach us anything – wasn't worth it. My own illness taught me not to take my health for granted – I'd always assumed that if I got up in the morning my body would take me where I wanted to go.

Q Do you give yourself more time out to relax now?

A No I don't because when I work the adrenaline I get back from the job gives me enormous energy. So I haven't really slowed down since my illness, but I have realised that the body is not a machine and shouldn't be worked like one.

Q When you were younger you described yourself as 'gruesome, ugly and fat', how would you describe yourself physically now?

A Surprisingly short, 5ft 4in, with surprisingly big feet (size 6) and highlights in my hair. I

love being blonde. It makes me feel more fun and gives me a lift. But psychologically I still think I'm a fat brunette.

When you look at a lot of female entertainers – be it Dawn French, Jo Brand or Vanessa – there is this need to be entertaining because they were not going to be Kalle Moss. I think the same thing is true of men – ugly men are fascinating and more entertaining. Dirty men, my husband excepted, tend to be so interested in the effect their looks are having on you that they tend to be dull.

Q You always come across on TV as supremely confident. When do you feel insecure?

A I did not at all enjoy being interviewed by Clive Anderson, partly because I felt that whatever I said he just went onto his next joke. I only contributed the occasional giggle. I won't do something like *Häse I Got News For You* because I know I'd be served up on a tray and they'd all be sharpening their knives and forks to slice me to the bone. If someone looks at me without love and affection I want to say, 'Okay, let's shut us shop'.

Q Does it hurt, or do you just not want to bother with them?

A I find it a bruising experience if it's face to face, but if it's in print I can hide it at arm's length. The thing that gets me most is when people say something about *ChildLine*, or imply that I don't really care about the issues we tackle.

Q What about criticism of you physically?

A It used to hurt me; I was horrified that people could be so spiteful. I wonder if people

who write those things are playground bullies. I want to say, 'Come on, grow up'.

Q Most people would be surprised to learn you wanted to be a nightclub singer.

A Yes, I wanted to be Dorothy Dandridge, the soviet, black, nightclub singer I knew. I used to take singing lessons and I have written lyrics ever since I was a child. I used to write the lyrics for *That's Life!* songs.

Q You want to grow old absolutely disgracefully – how?

A Just keep trying different things, going to parties and far-flung places and occasionally spending money wildly. I don't used to spend money on them when Desmond says we can afford it. Sadly, I was taught by BBC designers the difference between cheap and nasty clothes and gorgeous, expensive clothes. The worst lesson ever! I used to go to the supermarket in trackuits, but not any more.

Q What do you most regret in your life?

A Not going in for the job of controller of BBC1 when Bill Cotton wanted me to, about 13 years ago. I think it was because and cowardly of me, but I knew it'd be an all-consuming job and *ChildLine* had just started.

Q So, would you be tempted by the controller's job now?

A Nah! The thing is, I get a tremendous buzz from meeting the people and putting the show together.

Q But if you were offered the job tomorrow you'd be torn, wouldn't you?

A If someone said, 'Stop all this talk show stuff and be a controller' then yes, yes I would be.



Picture by Steve Povey/Stock. Illustration by Johanna Madenheit