

Loyalty is a virtue, but when sex leaves a marriage some discreet 'outsourcing' can help

BETTINA ARNDT



"VOTES for women. Chastity for men!" A rather strange slogan, isn't it? It actually was used by certain 19th-century suffragettes who linked the political equality of women to controlling men's sex drive. Along with the vote, these women sought an end to their sexual subjugation, control over their bodies. They decided this required reining men in, putting an end to their tomcatting ways and keeping them on a very tight leash.

The suffragettes' crusade succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. A century later many heterosexual married men are living lives of sexual deprivation, with sex doled out to them only very occasionally — "like meaty bites to a dog", as one man explained to me. Many go for months, even years, with no sex at all.

Yet large numbers remain faithful. Here's a 50-year-old man who spent 19 years of his long marriage without any physical intimacy: "Try sleeping next to your wife night after night and not being able to touch her. Try watching her shower, dress and undress ... God only knows I tried to love her, care for her, understand her and appreciate her. I never had an affair, never went to brothels or even bought a dirty magazine."

Of course, such restraint is far from universal. Look at Argentina, a prime example of a country remarkably untouched by the suffragettes' efforts. I had a fascinating conversation with an Argentinian journalist after my book *The Sex Diaries* was published in her country. She couldn't believe the sexual restraint shown by Australian men. "Here if the wife doesn't offer any sex the husbands will be off finding other women, a mistress, a prostitute. There's no way they'd put up with getting no sex."

Many Australian men not only put up with it but seem to have bought the idea that restraint is their only real option. Late last year saw the publication of our most recent Sex in Australia survey of more than 20,000 people, which revealed an ever-growing commitment to monogamy — from both men and women.

Most men (85 per cent) and women (83 per cent) now believe having an affair is always wrong in a committed relationship — up from a decade ago when 78 per cent of both men and women believed this to be true. Almost 96 per cent of men believe their relationships will always be sexually exclusive, with 98 per cent of women showing similar optimism.

It's quite a shift from the sexual licence historically available to men who once were entitled to demand sex in their marriages, given legal support for conjugal rights over their economically dependent wives. Many women in this situation had no choice but to turn a blind eye to whatever extramarital activity the man chose to enjoy.

This subjugation of women has ended, thank goodness, but men's essential sexual nature hasn't changed. "Men want sex more often than women at the start of a relationship, in the middle of it,



In the latest Australian Sex Survey ...

**96%** of respondents said they expected sexual exclusivity of themselves and their partner

**48%** of men and **64%** of women said they had discussed the matter and explicitly agreed on this

**1%** reported mutually non-exclusive ("open") relationships

A year later ...

**93%** of respondents were still in the same relationship

**4%** of men and **2%** of women had had sex outside the relationship

and after many years of it," claims Roy F. Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State University who has written extensively on gender differences in sexual drive.

His team's research concludes that men not only think about sex more often, they have more frequent and varied fantasies, desire sex more often, desire more partners, are less able or willing to live without sexual gratification, expend more resources and make more sacrifices for sex, desire and enjoy a broader variety of sexual practices and have more favourable and permissive attitudes toward more sexual activities.

This is not to say that women don't like sex nor that there aren't some women with similar sex drives to men, but research clearly shows that, on average, men are more interested.

The male's stronger interest in sexual novelty has long interested psychologists who refer to it as the Coolidge effect. The name comes from a story about US president Calvin Coolidge and his wife visiting a poultry farm. During the tour, Mrs Coolidge inquired how the farm managed to produce so many eggs with such a small number of roosters. The farmer proudly explained that his roosters performed their duty dozens of times each day. "Perhaps you could point that out to Mr Coolidge," replied the first lady in a pointedly loud voice.

The president, overhearing the remark, asked the farmer, "Does each rooster service the same hen each time?"

"No," replied the farmer, "there are many hens for each rooster."

"Perhaps you could point that out to Mrs Coolidge," replied the president.

Our roosters are expected to be content with one hen ... and indeed most now expect this of themselves. What is remarkable, given these circumstances, is how well many men succeed. Most married men remain faithful for most of their marriages.

Yes, there are philanderers, men who just can't keep their trousers zipped. As Hillary Clinton quipped about her husband, "He's a hard dog to keep on the porch."

But they are rare. The second Australian Sex Survey, led by the

University of NSW and released late last year, found only 5 per cent of men (and 3 per cent of women) in a regular relationship had strayed in the previous year.

Of course, over a long relationship these tiny percentages add up and significant numbers of men in long-term relationships have had some extramarital experience — a one-night stand, perhaps, or an affair lasting a few weeks, months or even a year or more. But these are tiny lapses compared with the commitment they show to staying on the straight and narrow.

The problem is the extraordinary value we now place on sexual fidelity in a marriage means that the discovery of an affair often leads to irretrievable breakdown. Twenty per cent of people surveyed in the Australian Divorce Transitions project conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies cited an affair as the reason for the marriage breakdown.

Over the years I've counselled so many couples who are dealing with the aftermath of the discovery of an affair and I'm always struck by how many wives come under pressure from friends to turf the husband out, to give up on the marriage rather than allow the bad dog back on the porch.

Of course, sometimes it's a husband who's unwilling to forgive, but more about female infidelity later.

It's crazy to give up on a marriage simply because a spouse has been naked with someone else, says America's leading sex advice columnist, Dan Savage, who's running what is pretty much a one-man campaign to persuade his countrymen to rethink their ideas on monogamy.

Savage, who presented his views at the 2013 Sydney Festival of Dangerous Ideas, is better known for the *It Gets Better* project, an archive of hopeful videos aimed at troubled gay youth. But his determination to persuade society to adjust expectations about marriage is one of the highlights of his new book, *American Savage*, published last year.

It's a strange position for a gay advocate. As Savage explains, it's often assumed he'll take a very liberal position on sexual freedom in marriage, but he's actually quite conservative. He's not promoting

"wide-open" relationships, nor swingers' conventions or f. king in the streets". He believes we should value monogamy and if we make vows to be sexually exclusive in a marriage, we should work hard to stick to that promise. All that he's suggesting is "perhaps a little licence, a little latitude. An understanding that two people can't be all things to each other sexually all of their adult lives. An understanding that life is long and circumstances change and some things — love, devotion, loyalty — are more important than sex and that life-long, perfectly executed sexual exclusivity is not the only measure of love, devotion and loyalty."

The chapter in his new essay collection on this topic — "It's Never Okay to Cheat (Except When It Is)" — spells out his considered position, reached after 14 years of dealing with a deluge of daily emails from people trapped in sexless marriages. He concludes that it's sometimes OK to cheat, for instance when a man has "a wife who mysteriously loses her libido or has never had much of a libido to begin with and decides she's finished with sex and then engages in emotional blackmail in an effort to get her duped husband to drop the subject". And "it's OK for men and women who are married to people who don't like sex and so their best to make sure sex is so lousy that their spouses will

stop pestering them for it". But it's not OK when "you've made a monogamous commitment and your partner is doing his or her best to meet your sexual needs".

It's also not OK to seek sex elsewhere "because you're horny right now and she happens to have the flu right now".

Nor simply because you are bored or she recently had a baby. The Savage view is that even if it's sometimes OK to get sex elsewhere, that's provided you have only safe sex, provided you are discreet and don't humiliate your spouse, and provided you don't tell your spouse — unless you are sure the deal is they want to be told.

Of course very few couples ever properly discuss in advance how they wish to handle this issue. The Sex in Australia survey found 48 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women in committed relationships believed that they had discussed and reached agreement about sexual fidelity — a very revealing gap in perception.

In fact, most affairs remain undetected — two in three are never discovered, according to US research. They usually come to light when the unfaithful spouse blurts out the truth. Annette Lawson reveals in her book *Adultery — An Analysis of Love and Betrayal*. Lawson shows how "this telling business", prompted by the new obsession with total honesty, takes

such a toll on marriage. Confessions are often made in the name of honest disclosure when people don't have the backbone to live with their guilt.

Yes, this whole business is mighty complicated. But Savage's essential argument is the current head-in-the-sand approach is a disaster waiting to happen.

Treating monogamy as the main indicator of a successful marriage gives people unrealistic expectations of themselves and their partners, and destroys more marriages than it saves.

For total numbers having affairs in the US, he cites figures of 50 to 60 per cent of men and 40 to 50 per cent of women. (There's no good Australian data on lifetime totals — one *Australian Women's Weekly* survey of almost 15,000 people found 14 per cent had had affairs, but one of the few experts in this area, Juliet Richters from the University of NSW, believes this is probably a little low.)

There's no question many married women also struggle with fidelity issues — although far fewer than men. Savage's book shows that the American marriage advice industry, dominated mainly by women, tends to always blame the husband.

So even when it is the wife who strays, the man is at fault for not keeping her happy. Savage finds it astonishing that the feminist revolution, instead of extending to women "the same latitude and licence and pressure release valve that men always enjoyed", has chosen instead to impose on men "the confines women had always endured". It's an interesting point.

How rare it is that we hear these arguments publicly voiced. Another challenging American orthodoxy on the subject is New York therapist Esther Perel, whose landmark book *Mating in Captivity*, released in 2006, argues the stifling intimacy of modern marriage is leading to marital bed death. She's working on a new book looking at happily married people who have affairs — her experience is plenty of people in loving, committed relationships do sometimes stray. Her latest project focuses on "long-time monogamists who one day cross a line into a place they never thought they would go. They remain monog-

amous in their beliefs but experience a chasm between their behaviour and their beliefs," she explained in a recent interview with Hanna Rosin on slate.com.

For decades I've been hearing from people wrestling with this dilemma. People who believe in monogamy, who would prefer to remain faithful, but find themselves going outside the marriage for sex because they aren't prepared to end a marriage or kiss goodbye to any future hope of physical intimacy in their lives.

People such as Robert\*, who is in a loving relationship, married for 12 years. "Somewhere along the way we have lost that passion and intimacy. Never thought in my mind I would ever consider cheating, but I guess that lack of intimacy has got the better of me. We do not have a sexual relationship at all at the moment and it has been like that for a while. It's the usual reasons you have heard before, such as kids have come along, too tired, too busy, lack of desire. It's strange I have taken this route. I never thought I would ever become unloyal. I consider marriage vows very important."

Robert has had a number of sexual encounters through the online sex site Ashley Madison — intense, passionate experiences, but he still thinks he's "an asshole for cheating".

But Sally\* is sure she's doing the right thing. She's 55, in a very happy seven-year relationship, but also using Ashley Madison.

"I love my partner very much and he loves me. Unfortunately for me he doesn't love sex and finds my enthusiasm for sex and all the wonderful things associated with a happy sexual relationship embarrassing. After many discussions about this, seeing doctors and going to a sex therapist, I decided that I was going to stop hassling him about sex," she says. "I'm old enough to know exactly what I'm doing. I love all the good things my partner brings to my life and if I have to have this side of my life satisfied in a way society deems as unconventional, well, so be it."

Unsurprisingly, women using these sites are hugely outnumbered by males. Men pay to make contact with women on the sites, but women's activity is free. Most women get swamped with atten-

tion, some of it most unsavoury. "I was floored, gobsmacked, overwhelmed and actually filled with anxiety from the experience. On the mobile you can't exclude graphic imagery so it was wall-to-wall local and international cock," says Claire\*, 42-year-old mother of a preschooler who joined the site after endless fighting with her sexually uninterested husband.

"I was going nuts, we were fighting a lot and I was ready to walk out even though it's absolutely not what I want," she explains, adding she's now learned to avoid the sleazy males and has had some good experiences.

I've talked to people using these sites with the full knowledge of their spouses, others who participate together, seeking threesomes and other exotic sexual combinations. There are men and women seeking love affairs, others just passing encounters. Sometimes they find what they are looking for, others are disappointed, with many men angry about wasting money trying to sort out the far fewer legitimate female participants from the scammers.

But just as the online dating sites have proved a game-changer for singles seeking a partner, the new sex sites offer married people the best possible chance of a discreet dalliance.

As British sociologist Catherine Hakim points out in her recent book on these sex sites, *The New Rules*, the internet enables people to meet others well beyond their own social circle, neighbourhood or workplace community, providing opportunities for carefully handled erotic connections between like-minded people.

Hakim suggests this is promising "a different type of liaison between people who are both married, both committed to their marriages, who are discreet enough to avoid social and emotional catastrophe".

Hakim's research shows that across the world this is just what is happening. Her conclusion: "In this different, special situation, the impacts can potentially be almost entirely positive."

Hakim grew up in France, a country which she argues has a far more enlightened view of these matters. "It is divorce which is frowned on. There is no assumption that spouses must fulfil all of each other's needs, all of the time — exclusively."

In such countries extramarital affairs, she writes, are generally "conducted with great discretion, with consideration for the dignity of the spouse, who must never be embarrassed in any way".

It wasn't just the French who took this view. Savage quotes a *New York Times* interview with the Duchess of Devonshire, Deborah Cavendish, one of the famous Mitford sisters. Asked about her late husband's discreet dalliances, she replied: "It was absolutely fixed that we shouldn't divorce or get rid of each other in any way. It is completely different to Americans, who all divorce each other the whole time. Such a bore for everyone, having to say who's going to have the dogs, who's going to have the photograph books."

In Australia there are far too many unnecessary fights over dogs and photograph books ... not to mention children and houses. It's very sad that so many good marriages founder over the discovery of some sexual infidelity. Surely Savage is right in seeking better conversations about how hard monogamy is, how hard marriage is and whether we are making unrealistic demands on that institution and on ourselves.

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\*Names in personal stories have been changed.

## Be it terrified mateship or sisterhood fear, our national conversation is best captured on the stage

Plays by the likes of Andrew Bovell must be kept alive

PETER CRAVEN



DRAMA — whether on stage or film or television — is one of the primary ways we have of talking to each other and talking to ourselves. And when a piece of dramatic writing works — let's say in a notable Australian film such as

*Lantana*, or a TV miniseries such as *Devil's Playground* — the fact that the drama is true to the imaginative reality of what human life is like means that the upshot will have a deeper truth.

In *Lantana*, the accuracy of the dialogue conveys a reality we recognise even though we could not paraphrase it — it's that look of intolerance on Anthony LaPaglia's face, or the smiling amazement of Kerry Armstrong at how a man can treat her.

Next week, Sydney Theatre Company opens a play that helps us take another look at ourselves. It is the revival of an early work by one of our more potent dramatists, Andrew Bovell, and it reaffirms the significance of drama to the nation.

His first play, *After Dinner*,

launched a formidable span of dramatic writing for Bovell, including the screenplay for the 2001 Geoffrey Rush film *Lantana*, based on his play *Speaking in Tongues*; the adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* for Neil Armfield; and the extraordinary epic study of dark familial sexual offence spanning generations, *When the Rain Stops Falling*.

And then, only last year, there was his contribution to *Devil's Playground*, one of the most impressive things ever made for Australian TV. Bovell is a dramatic wizard of the deepest and broadest kind and it is important that his work be kept alive. It's important to our culture that we have strong Australian plays, and to ensure they become part of the repertoire.

*Lantana*, which took away

everyone's breath when it appeared — not just because of the authority of the performances — got an authority from the lean dramatic literacy and the lack of obviousness (so often found in Australian film scripts) because it had its origins in a Bovell play.

And the works that penetrate our national consciousness are frequently plays in the first instance or along the way. Think of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, or *Don's Party* or *The Removalists* or *The Club* or *Hotel Sorrento*.

Think, too, in the case of novels, how something like Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* was a very successful (marathon) stage show before the famous TV adaptation. Just as *The Secret River*, which is being filmed for TV, had its first enactment as a stage epic. I sometimes think that

Patrick White, who raged with frustration at Joseph Losey not succeeding in filming *Voss*, would have had more success had there been a stage adaptation (eventually there was the opera, but that's different). And the corollary of all this is that we need to keep the best of our Australian plays alive.

The play remains the most dynamic and elastic way we have of talking to each other. Last year, Brendan Cowell's *The Sublime*, about rape and sport, was a case of a terrific work done superbly in a production by Sam Strong for the Melbourne Theatre Company.

One of the actors who towered in the production, Josh McConville, is also in the STC's *After Dinner* and so is that legend of the Australian stage, Helen Thomson (who gave as great a performance

of Pearl in Neil Armfield's 2011 *Doll* as I ever expect to see).

It will be fascinating to see how *After Dinner* stands up. It's a raw, rough, savage play that Bovell debuted with 17 years ago. Three women, one of whom has had a husband die of a stroke in his late 30s, go to have a Friday night meal in a pub. The woman with the dead husband freaks out at one point, but her two companions are a bitchy duo, forever planting some banana skin of malice under the other's feet. And then there are a couple of blokes. One is ostensibly mild, no great drinker, but keen for the release of more or less intimate male company in the aftermath of a marriage any glow had gone out of. The other's a tough, gruff man's man who's never had any great success with women, which con-

tradicts the shtick he projects.

This is one of those Australian plays where the flaws are almost taking over the glass, as they sometimes do in early David Williamson, where there is so much pity and terror and contempt mingled with the hilarity or melodrama. But this young man's play of rage at Australian banality also has a powerful streak of identification.

That great Australian poet and joker James McAuley (the dark cartoonist of the Ern Malley hoax) wrote once of Australians, "The people are kindly with nothing inside them." *After Dinner* is a play that confronts both the comic spectacle and the deep engulfing fear that goes along with that kind of black, mocking perspective.

It's not as mature a work as *Lan-*

*tana* but, like the film, *After Dinner* confronts the reality of life in a country where people eat their hearts out just to talk to each other. A country in which women can be afflicted by loneliness and men cling to mateship as a fig leaf for fear and hostility and isolation.

Robert Hughes said once that he used to think Australians were egalitarian, but had decided we are, in fact, deeply competitive even though we remain very much brotherly and sisterly in the way we are matey with each other.

Bovell's glimpse of such things is an example of how dramatic art may be the truest conversation the nation has.

*After Dinner, directed by Imara Savage, is in preview at Wharf One and opens on Tuesday.*