

Cynthia Nixon:

Survivor's Daughter

Cynthia Nixon of HBO's *Sex and the City* dishes up intimate details of her mother's bout with breast cancer, and shares a few of her own survival strategies.

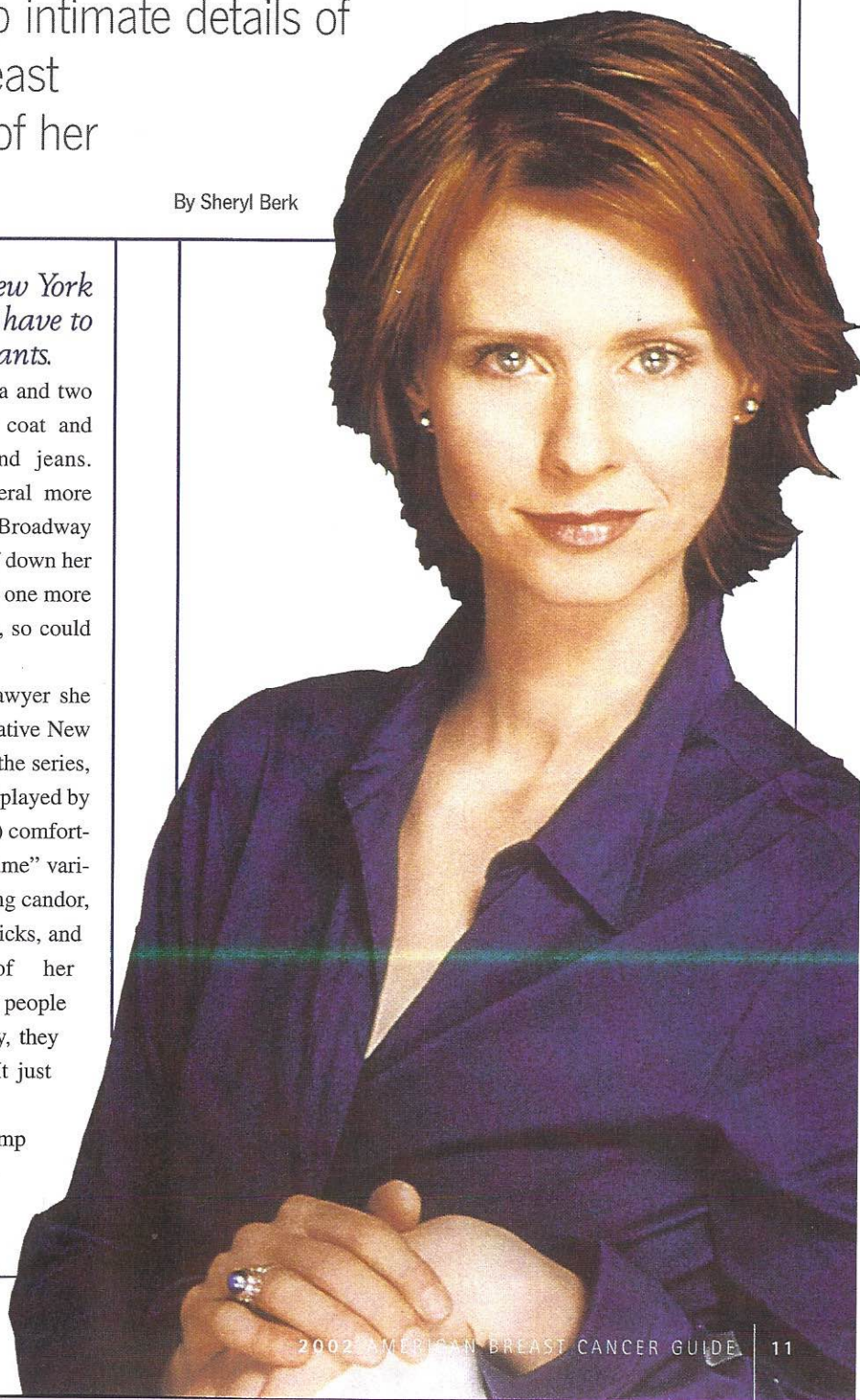
By Sheryl Berk

Cynthia Nixon sweeps into a trendy New York City sushi restaurant, and doesn't even have to glance at the menu to know what she wants.

"I'll have a miso soup and edamame and green tea and two yellowtail..." she dictates, while peeling off her coat and sweater to reveal a simple white tee shirt and jeans. The waiter can barely keep up as she adds several more pieces to her order. She's currently starring in a Broadway play, *The Women*, and has a mere 30 minutes to wolf down her meal before getting into costume and makeup. "And one more thing?" she smiles sweetly. "I'm kind of in a hurry, so could you just bring it all on?"

Like Miranda Hobbes, the cynical workaholic lawyer she plays on HBO's *Sex and the City*, the 35-year-old native New Yorker is not one to dilly-dally or mince words. On the series, she and her gal pals Carrie, Charlotte and Samantha (played by Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis and Kim Cattrall) comfortably swap bedtime stories (not the "Once Upon a Time" variety, mind you) over brunch. With the same unflinching candor, Cynthia takes a deep breath, digs in with her chopsticks, and begins to share the intimate details of her mother's bout with breast cancer. "Often when people interview me, in their attempt to make a good story, they put in all this drama that's not there," she says. "It just wasn't like that with my mother's breast cancer."

In 1979, her mother, Anne Nixon, discovered a lump in her right breast. Despite the fact that no close family members had a history of cancer, "she just knew that it was malignant," Cynthia says. "But



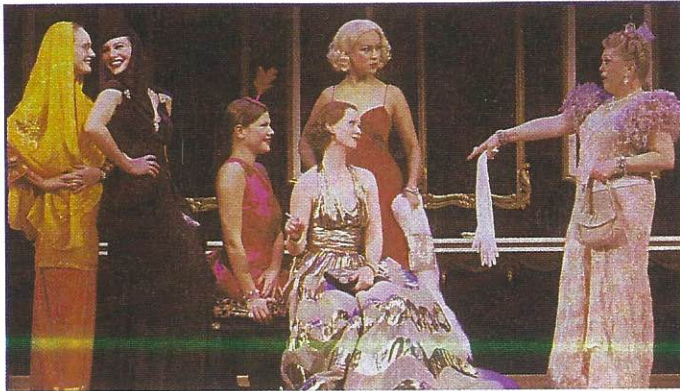


Photo: Joan Marcus

What An Affair: Cynthia Nixon joins Jennifer Tilly, Rue McClanahan, and Kristin Johnston as the much-gossiped-about Mary Haines in the Broadway smash play "The Women"

she didn't panic. I actually have very little memory of the whole incident because she treated it as no big deal."

Cynthia was 13, an only child of divorced parents, and a child actress; she had just finished making her first big movie, *Little Darlings* with Tatum O'Neal and Kristy McNichol. "I remember there were a number of quiet, hushed conversations between my mother and her boyfriend. I know she told me, but I can't remember the actual moment. It was very matter-of-fact. My mom is just very streamlined – she doesn't believe it's good to make a fuss."

Part of It Was a Feminist Issue

When Anne went to a doctor, he confirmed her suspicions and immediately recommended a full mastectomy. "He said, 'Take the entire breast off,'" says Cynthia. "But my mom had read a lot of articles and done a lot of research, and she didn't want to take such a drastic step. She believes that less is more, and there is such a thing as being too medically efficient."

Anne backed up her beliefs with hard evidence culled from scientific studies of women with early-stage breast cancer such as hers. They indicated removing the entire breast was no more effective than a combination of lumpectomy and radiation.

"Part of it was a feminist issue," Cynthia reflects. "Most of the doctors were men, and they just weren't thinking about how a mastectomy can affect a woman's sense of self. So she sought out a doctor who was at the forefront of lumpectomy. She trusted him. She was assured that he wasn't going to jump to level four when they were at level one."

The surgery left only a small three-inch scar, and Anne followed it with six weeks of daily radiation. "She was great for a long time, then she had a recurrence about five years ago, this time in the other breast," Cynthia says. "It was like *déjà vu*: She found it; they did a lumpectomy; she was fine. In fact, it was much smaller this time, and again, no panic: mom was confident that she'd get through it. She was even more assured, I think, because she had done it once before."

Anne, now a vivacious 71, is an inspiration, not just to her daughter, but to other family and friends. "I remember I was 19 and I was doing a play with Jill Eikenberry right before she joined L.A. Law," Cynthia says. "We met at a movie premiere, and she told me she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and was going to have a full mastectomy. She was frightened, not only of what it would mean for her personally, but, as an actress, she worried about what it was going to look like." Cynthia told Anne, and Anne immediately pulled Jill into the ladies' room and revealed her lumpectomy scar. "She told her, 'Look, there are other options. Think about it – it's your body.'" Thanks to Anne, Jill wound up saving her breast.

Her Own Health Matters

Despite her usual calm, level-headedness, Cynthia admits there have been a few times over the years when she's worried about her health. She can't ignore the fact that her mother's breast cancer puts her at higher risk for developing the disease. "I guess I feel that there's a lot of stuff you can get. If I get it, I won't be surprised, and like my mom, I'll just be smart and handle it. You can't live in fear, because that's not living. I don't obsess. I try and eat fairly healthy – less red meat these days –

"I try and eat fairly healthy – less red meat these days – and not smoke, and I exercise when I can, but you can't drive yourself crazy"

and not smoke, and I exercise when I can, but you can't drive yourself crazy. And to be perfectly frank, I'm so busy, I don't have time to worry."

Cynthia went for her first mammogram this year after her OB-GYN felt 'something'. "I was about due for one anyway," she says, "so I went. I didn't even procrastinate like I know so many women do." Though virtually painless, the test was inconclusive, and Cynthia was instructed to go to lunch then come back for a sonogram. "There was a brief moment when I thought, 'Uh oh, is something not right here?' I called my boyfriend [photographer Danny Moses] to meet me; I was not feeling so good, waiting for those results."

Fortunately, everything checked out fine, but Cynthia is well-aware that she has to be diligent about her breast health. She does self-exams once a month. "I confess, I don't know what I'm doing. People have showed me a million times, and still, I'm like, 'Well, that could be a lump, and that could be a lump.' But they tell me if I feel something that I don't think was there before – or it's harder than the others, it's a good idea to get it checked out."

She firmly believes that a healthy mental attitude is an important component in successfully treating-and beating-breast cancer. "I really think that having a positive outlook is half the battle," she says. "That's one very important lesson I learned from my mom."

Cynthia sees a lot of Anne in her own 5-year-old daughter, Samantha (her child with Moses). "She's really funny and

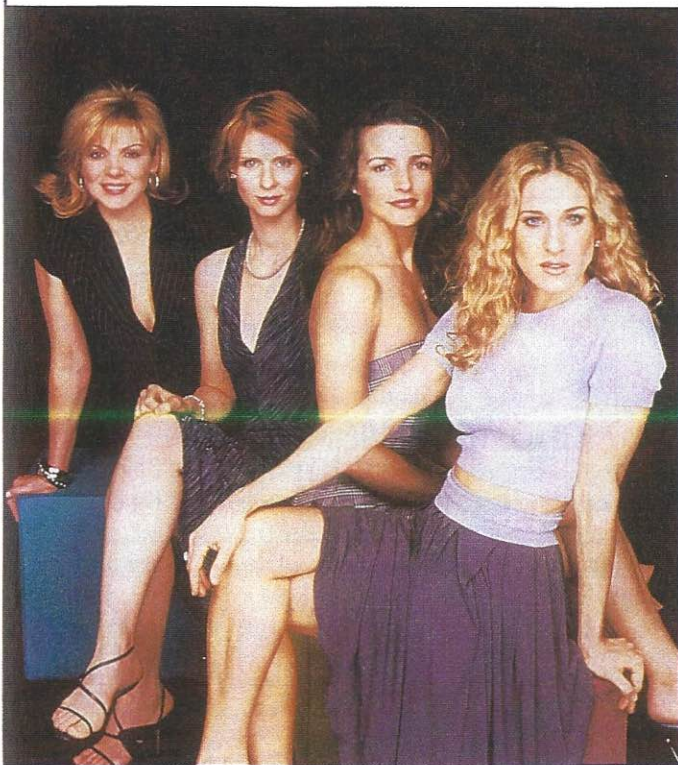


Photo courtesy HBO

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smart," she says, proudly. "One of things that amazes me most about her is that she's not shy. Nothing intimidates her or scares her off."

And though she claims she's not quite so courageous, Cynthia has some pretty strong convictions herself: "I think it's great that breast cancer is getting all this publicity and that people are raising money for research as well as raising awareness," she says. "But I think it's also important not to go over the top and create a mass panic with all these facts and figures. Cancer is scary, because you can have it and not know it. That's particularly paranoia-inducing. Women get so scared of what they might find, they either wind up hysterical or they ignore it all together. We have to reassure women that breast cancer is not a death sentence. It wasn't for my mom. Finding it early is the best way to beat it."



The Gang's All Here: Samantha (Kim Cattrall), Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte (Kristin Davis) and Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) are the fascinating foursome in HBO's *Sex and the City*.



Sheryl Berk is senior entertainment editor of *Biography* magazine. She writes for *Health*, *Glamour*, *Weight Watchers* and is co-author of Britney Spears' memoir *Heart to Heart* (Three Rivers Press, 2000) and the upcoming *Wise Girl* (Pocket Books, August 2002), the memoirs of *Sopranos* star Jamie-Lynn Sigler.