

Christine Baranski marveled at her family ties to the Gilded Age during talk at The Elms

Baranski said that if Gilded Age and Downton Abbey creator Julian Fellowes were to play a part it would have been Maggie Smith's Dowager Countess and her own Agnes.

by [Veronica Bruno](#) August 8, 2025



Christine Baranski at The Elms. All photos by Veronica Bruno.

“The Gilded Age’s” Christine Baranski cuts a much more elegant figure than her character, Agnes Van Rhijn, in real life. Resplendent in a stunning black power suit, a fab wavy blonde bob, a striking brooch, and Christian Louboutin heels, the Juilliard-trained actress held sway during her talk at The Elms lawn Thursday evening, August 7. The engaging conversation—thanks to Baranski’s deep intelligence, charm, and wit—was a gift to fans of the HBO show, which just got greenlit for Season 4 (after a boost in viewership in its strongest season).

Sponsored by the Preservation Society of Newport County (PSNC), Baranski's appearance was a highlight of the John G. Winslow Lecture series. Last month's featured speaker included celebrated actor Sam Waterston ("The Great Gatsby"). Amidst a backdrop of The Elms' gardens, Baranski spoke about her experiences on "The Gilded Age," her link to the age of the robber barons, and her travels to Newport.

Her inspiration for Agnes

During the press conference before the lecture, Baranski was asked how much of herself is instilled in the character of Agnes.

"The longer I play Agnes, the more I think I draw upon the memory of my mother," said Baranski. The two-time Emmy winner extolled the resilience, discipline, and admirable pragmatism of women like her mother and Agnes Van Rhijn.

"As Julian [Fellowes, series creator] said, 'She was a tough old broad.' She was raised in the Depression, walked to school with newspapers in her shoes in Buffalo, New York, in the middle of winter. She lived through the war. Then my dad dropped dead suddenly when" Baranski was just eight. "Agnes is that mold of tough ladies who do what they need to do, and they play the hand they're dealt."

She talked about how the character has grown over the three seasons, noting that hers was "a slow reveal."

"It's a wonderful thing for an actor to be a slow reveal because if you're that tough, the audience is looking for maybe if there'll be a crack. You've seen her love for her sister and her loyalty. You've seen her devastated when she lost her money, and just this last episode, you see her pain when she realizes that her son was in love with a man. And you see that without even having to speak words. So it's wonderful to play a character that tough and that rigid, because then when she does lose all her money and her sister's running the show, it makes for a lot of funny moments."

Julian Fellowes' favorites

Because of her dry humor, Agnes has become a fan favorite, myself included. Both Baranski and the late, great Maggie Smith (Violet Grantham, Dowager Countess from "Downton Abbey") often deliver the best lines on both series. Their clipped delivery is cherished by fans, with Agnes' line about Mr. Fish's wine from the last episode, the latest fun example. I belong to several Gilded Age Facebook fan groups, and it's Agnes's lines that they usually gush over.

"If [Fellowes] could play a character in The Gilded Age, he'd probably play Agnes or the Dowager, because he loves those kinds of tough ladies, and he loves that kind of humor,"

said Baranski about Fellowes' generous writing for these two impressive women. (Just like I did with Downton, whenever Violet appeared in a scene, I often waited for Agnes' quips when I saw Baranski appear on the show).

Baranski's links to the Gilded Age

The "Nine Perfect Strangers" actress sounded like a fan herself when she waxed about her personal Gilded Age connection. Her late husband, actor Matthew Cowles, hailed from the prominent Drexel family, including Anthony Joseph Drexel Sr., who founded Drexel, Morgan & Co., which later became JPMorgan Chase (J.P. Morgan also plays a vital role in this season's Gilded Age).

"My late husband was a great-grandson of a man named Joseph Drexel and his Aunt Bessie. Her portrait, the Baldini portrait, is in The Elms, hanging right there, and it was rather thrilling when I discovered it."

The Elms serves as the Russells' Newport "cottage" on the show, which Baranski said is also Fellowes' favorite Newport mansion.

"I didn't know initially that Matthew was from a Gilded Age family, because he took me off on his motorcycle after a play, and he had a black leather jacket, smoked unfiltered cigarettes, and just seemed like more of a James Dean type."

"Over the course of many years, I discovered that he had this family history. In fact, there were portraits in the attic of these rather beautiful family portraits, and I had them restored and cleaned, and they're hanging in the family house homestead in Bethlehem, CT."

Her late husband's cousins attended the talk and press conference along with the "Mamma Mia!" actress. Another relative's book, "King Lehr and The Gilded Age," by Elizabeth Drexel, is also available in the mansions' bookstores.

"What a story she had," added Baranski admiringly.

"I happen to love studying history, so that's just been tremendous. And I think Julian Fellowes, being an Englishman, I think he knows more about American history than 99% of Americans. Maybe Ken Burns knows more," she said, laughing.

"Why I'd like the show to continue is because it educates the audience, with the women's suffrage movement, and the immigrants coming in, and the robber barons, and the formation of unions. There's so much that's happening with every year that passes."

Several years prior, she approached Fellowes at an event when she heard rumors about a show on the Gilded Age in America.

“I had a temerity to approach him, to introduce myself, and say, ‘If you ever do it, I’d love to be in it,” revealing her family Gilded Age history along the way. “It was years later that it became a reality.

Julian and I have had wonderful conversations, and I gave him this book, which is called ‘King Lehr and the Gilded Age.’”

Being charmed by Newport

The last time she visited, it was at the outset of winter last year.

“I’ve never been here during summer. I was here in November and December, and it was cold. It was beautiful, but I’m thrilled to be at The Elms in the summer.”

Baranski also marveled at the glamour of the Newport mansions, especially The Elms.

“I was in the golf cart, and I said to my cousins, ‘My God, it feels like we’re in Europe.’

Discussing the time of the Gilded Age, she continued: “You know, the English aristocracy was kind of going bankrupt, so we just bought all of their paintings and all of their swag and put it in Newport. And really, when I say *enchanted kingdom*, it really does feel that way. I mean, look at what the ELMS looks like on a summer evening. It’s unbelievable.

“The Elms is my favorite, and it’s Julian Fellowes’ favorite mansion.”

Another Newport connection

Earlier this week, the Jane Pickens Theatre had played “Reversal of Fortune,” which centered around probably Newport’s most infamous case, the one involving the von Bulows, which occurred at Bellevue’s Clarendon Court, just up the street from The Elms. The 1990 film featured Baranski as von Bulow’s glamorous girlfriend, Andrea Reynolds. It also has another Gilded Age link: Jack Gilpin (Church!) played Peter MacIntosh. I asked her about working on that iconic film.

“I just recently had a baby [during filming], and I was just not thinking very much about preparing for this role. And I had to have this Hungarian accent, and I remember just working up a Hungarian accent, and she was a brunette, so I darkened my hair and chopped it off because she had rather short, full hair. But I just went in there and I thought, well, ‘here it goes.’

“And I remember years later being in a nail salon on the Upper East Side, and a woman came up to me and said, ‘I just wanted you to know I knew Andrea Reynolds, and you were exactly like her.’”

The costumes are not easy. The cast is a dream.

Agnes may get the best lines, but her costumes on the series can be a bit on the drab side, with Baranski jokingly referring to them as “curtains.” As Agnes, she’s not trying to impress, which is the polar opposite to Carrie Coons’ Bertha Russell. But Baranski also said her costumes were essential to the performance.

“You put on those clothes and you step into those ballrooms. You just feel that you’re in that world. You don’t have to act that much. You don’t have to pretend, it’s right there. And it’s enchanting. We all pinch ourselves to think how lucky we are to be on a show where we get to be part of this extraordinary world that’s depicting this time in American culture, in American history.”

She was also tickled pink to work with Cynthia Nixon again, who gleefully called her when they got cast.

“When I was offered *The Gilded Age*, I remember going out to do the recycling in the garage, (too much information), and I get a call on my cell phone, and it was Cynthia saying, ‘Christine, I hear you’ve been offered a role on *The Gilded Age*!’

“One of the reasons we all love the show and wanted the show to continue is because it is rather like a repertory company of theater actors, and most of us have worked together. We’ve seen each other’s work, or we’ve done readings, or we did regional theater at one time, and we did Broadway shows. I mean, I played Cynthia Nixon’s mother in 1984 and I was in a courtroom with Audra McDonald on ‘*The Good Fight*.’ So we have all of this bonding, and it’s very special.”

Lessons from history and a callout to today’s “robber barons”

As an avowed lover of history, Baranski is a perfect boon for the show. During the press conference, she was asked to compare the robber barons of the Gilded Age to today’s billionaires, and the Buffalo native didn’t hold back.

“I think they have to step up and start supporting cultural institutions and universities and museums.” Talking about the powerful men on *The Gilded Age*: “They may have been robber barons, and they may have been really ruthless guys, but they cared about leaving something behind. And you can’t tell me that J.P. Morgan at his magnificent library, or Henry Clay Frick in that magnificent collection, it wasn’t just done to show off. They were passionate about culture, and I so admire that.”

Comparing the priorities of today’s billionaires, like, say, Jeff Bezos’ over-the-top wedding? “And I wish our present day batch of mega billionaires—who have plenty of money to spare—would care about these issues.

“The private sector really has to step up.”

She has a point: I mean, how can we have a performing arts center that’s been sitting vacant for 10 years while certain billionaires own multiple Newport homes? Surely, one of them could finance the completion.

Any news about the highly anticipated finale?

One of the biggest surprises this season was Bertha’s visit to Agnes’ home. We thought we’d never see that moment. But for Baranski, she admitted that it lacked some of the tension she was hoping a standoff between social-climbing Bertha and old-money Agnes would produce.

“I think more could have been made, and I think Carrie and I are still waiting for that.”

She says that when it happens, “I think it will be delicious. I’m sure it will happen.”

Hmmm, now let’s get down to the nitty-gritty. What about that explosive last episode? The heart-wrenching scene with her son Oscar (Blake Ritson): will she come to grips with his homosexuality during a time when it would not only have been shocking, but criminal?

“So the final shot of the work day was just a close up of me watching him go, go up the stairs, and just realizing how much he’s suffering, and that I’m helpless. So it was really a wonderful scene, and I’m glad it turned out that way. I thought Blake was wonderful. And you know, there’s so much that you can do with no words.”

And will George Russell survive his assassination attempt?! Also, is Gladys pregnant (crossing my fingers on that one) now that she and the Duke of Buckingham’s relationship is developing into a love match (such Cora-Robert Crawley vibes here).

“What they have to look forward to is an extraordinary final episode,” was Baranski’s smooth answer, keeping the details close to the vest.

She also added, “Season Three has been a great triumph for the show, and I think in large part because it took a while to establish these characters and for the audience to get to know all these different storylines.

“But now that we’ve established it, the audience is so invested in the storylines of these characters. So I’m so happy we’re gonna have a season four, because all these storylines will continue the journey of what’s happening in America at that time.”

PSNC will be airing the finale on the lawn at The Elms Sunday night. How marvelous!

