

Cynthia Nixon talks HBO's 'Gilded Age,' 'Sex and the City' and New England love

Plus, "The Gilded Age" tours start May 12 in Newport.



Cynthia Nixon in "The Gilded Age." HBO

By [Lauren Daley](#)

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When I reach Cynthia Nixon on a late Thursday afternoon, she's just clocked out of work, filming Season 4 of HBO's "The Gilded Age" in Newport.

She's now in a car headed for Hyannis, and ready to hop a ferry to a place she's loved since she was a kid: Nantucket.

"My mother had a friend who was an old-time Nantucketer, and we'd go for a couple of weeks. I've only gone maybe three or four as a grown-up, so now seemed like a perfect" chance to return, Nixon tells me, a pre-vacation excitement in her voice. "My wife took the ferry out of New Bedford this afternoon."

The Emmy/Grammy/Tony winner —yup, she needs only the O to EGOT—planned to take in Nantucket's Daffodil Festival, then return to Newport for a sold-out talk at The Breakers Sunday and more filming Monday.

Fans of HBO Emmy-winning "The Gilded Age" know Nixon as Ada Forte — younger/beta sister to [New Englander Christine Baranski's](#) older/alpha Agnes van Rhijn. (Although Season 3 was a big growth season for Ada. We saw her finally stand on her own two feet as head of household —even if those legs were wobbly.)

Sidenote, Nixon's other co-star is Pumpkin, the sweetest lil Cavalier King Charles Spaniel on TV.



Bertha Russell (Carrie Coon) and Ward McAllister (Nathan Lane) stroll on the back lawn of The Elms, which stands in for the Russell family's Newport summer cottage. – Barbara Nitke/HBO

“The Gilded Age,” the Emmy-winning series from “Downton Abbey” creator Julian Fellowes, has filmed in both Newport and New York since season 1.

Cast is currently filming season 4 scenes in Newport, including at [Preservation Society Of Newport County](#) Properties: The Elms, The Breakers, Marble House, Rosecliff, Chateau-Sur-Mer, Kingscote, and Hunter House.

And I'll point out that the nearly 4-hour [Gilded Age Tours](#) (\$275) start May 12.

HBO's “[Sex and The City](#)” franchise fans have known Nixon for some 28 years as Miranda Hobbes —the reboot, “[And Just Like That...](#)” wrapped last year.



Cynthia Nixon in “And Just Like That” season 3, episode 8. – Photograph courtesy of HBO

If you missed Nixon’s sold-out talk at the Breakers Sunday —billed as a discussion of her role, the series, and her career —never fear. I called Nixon, 60, to discuss all that — plus her childhood connection to Sarah Jessica Parker and Baranski, Newport’s Trinity Church, her favorite Newport spots, Worchester, Filene’s Basement and more.

Boston.com: I know you film a lot of your scenes in New York. But how do you like filming in Newport?

Cynthia Nixon: Oh, it’s so amazing. You just keep pinching yourself. First, you can’t believe these mansions actually existed —and that the people who built and lived in them weren’t royalty. It blows the mind.

And just for their “summer cottages.” [laughs]

[laughs] Six weeks out of the year! It’s insane.

It is mind-blowing.

Just the idea that they’re allowing us and trusting us to film in them is mind-blowing.

When I’ve filmed here before, it’s usually to do with **the Russells**. When the Russells invite my character, Ada, to a party, I get to come to Newport.

I’ve usually come for two or three days, but I’m here longer because —not to give anything away —we have one very long, extended dinner scene to which Ada is invited. So it’s been great for me to have a little more time here.

When I interviewed Christine Baranski, she told me she liked The Elms the best. Do you have a favorite shooting spot, or favorite room in general?

I love **The Breakers** [Great] Hall. I love to stand there and just look up. It’s wonderful.

And actually, it’s amazing to just sit on the benches on the property itself and look out at the water. That’s incredible.



The Breakers Great Hall. – Sandy Nesbitt/The Preservation Society of Newport County

I bet. So what do you like about playing Ada? What drew you to the role?

I love her. I based her on my own godmother who never married —well, now, of course, Ada has married [in season 3]. My godmother was very devoted to the young people in her life —like me —the way that Ada is so devoted to Marian [Louisa Jacobson], almost like a fairy godmother.

I love Ada's shyness, but I also love her excitement and curiosity. Agnes is all about history and grandeur, while Ada is all about wanting to know new things and the future. She's not interested in the future in the way the Russells care about the future, in terms of what they can accomplish. She's interested in knowing about worlds, and people, and philosophies she's been previously ignorant of. She's endlessly curious.

When we were getting ready to film the first season, they were working on wigs for us. I said I wanted Ada to have a lot of curls. I wanted her to be girlish in that way, because she is so girlish, even though she's old. So she's outgrown her hairstyle, but is young at heart, sometimes inappropriately so. I love that about playing her.



Cynthia Nixon (right) and Louisa Jacobson sit on a couch in season 1, episode 9 of “The Gilded Age.” – Photograph courtesy of HBO

Wow, that's an interesting note about her hair — it does convey her childish innocence. And what's interesting about her story arc, in season 3, she's come up from under Agnes's thumb; she's finally asserting herself — getting married despite what Agnes says.

Right! Now she has to acquire some stature, which she's not so comfortable doing, but she's excited to try. She's also somewhat of a frightened person, but wants so much to be brave. I think someone with less character might've just allowed Agnes to continue to rule the roost.

But part of Ada's curiosity and interest in new things is a new version of herself. She was brave, she fell in love, she took this bold step to get married, and when the time came to step into being the lady of the house, she did it. She did it kind of poorly at first, but she learned, and took feedback. She was convinced temperance was the answer. But when she didn't get any traction [laughs] with people she loved and respected, she put that to bed.

Now you're playing Christine Baranski's sister — but you played her daughter once.

I did! I played her daughter when I was 17 and 18, around 1983-84 in a play “**The Real Thing**.” I'd been a fan of hers — particularly her Helena in “A Midsummer Night's Dream” in Central Park [at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1982], which she won an Obie for.

She was so wonderful in “The Real Thing” — she won a Tony —and she was so kind to me. “The Real Thing” was such an important experience in both of our lives. For her, maybe even triply so, because she'd just gotten married; she came back from her honeymoon when we went into rehearsal, and during the course of our run, she realized she was pregnant. She eventually had to leave the show because she was just getting too big. So it was a wonderful professional time in both of our lives, but I think for her, maybe even more sentimentally so.

Had you stayed in touch since? Or did you reconnect on “Gilded Age”?

We hadn't really stayed in touch so much, but little things, like they did a biography of her, I can't remember what channel, and she asked me to be one of the people interviewed.

And I'm always bothering people about political events and political causes. She was one of the people I invited to meet Bill de Blasio when he was running for mayor, and very much a long-shot. She'd come see me in plays; I'd see her in plays. Things like that.

A lot of people also know you as Miranda from “Sex and the City” and “And Just Like That...” Who do you relate to more: Miranda or Ada?

I really like them both. I feel like I'm probably a little more like Ada than Miranda. Although when you play a character for so long —like I did with Miranda —a lot of her rubbed off on me. Also, when writers know you so well, they start including more and more of your personality in the character.

True. You told me you've been acting in film and TV since age 12, and in theater since 14. Which do you prefer?

I like it all. They're so different. It's like asking: Do you like Italian food or Chinese food? They use different muscles. One is more conducive to being at home and having a schedule, and one tears your life apart, but it's brief, and maybe you don't work every day, or maybe you go out of town to a wonderful place like Newport.

[laughs] It is a great town.

You know, I was working really late last night. I wanted to go The White Horse Tavern, but we were shooting too late. So I went to Stoneacre Brasserie, which I love. That place is so great.

And I went to church last Sunday at the Trinity Church, which was so fun. **Jack Gilpin**, the gentleman who plays Church, the Russell butler. He's actually a minister in real life.

So I was heading to church and I [texted] “Jack, sorry for the late notice. I'm leaving in five minutes for Trinity Church. I wonder if you wanted to come?” And he said, “Oh, I'm here in a pew already. I'll save you a seat.”

[laughs] I love that.

There was a lovely lady who gave us an hour-long tour of the church afterwards, which was fascinating.

Any other favorite Newport spots?

The first time we filmed in Newport was during the pandemic. My wife and youngest child came with me; a good friend of ours came with her two kids. We stayed at The Vanderbilt. We all hung out together—it was our Newport COVID escape. They were very sweet there. They let us have dinner by ourselves in the restaurant one night, which was really lovely.

Also, my wife Christine [Marinoni] and I had dinner one night at The Chanler, the restaurant at the Cliff Walk, and they put us in a yurt! [laughs]

[laughs] That sounds awesome.

It was really fun. The yurt was near the Cliff Walk, but we couldn't see the Cliff Walk because the yurt was not see-through. [laughs] But it was still very festive and elegant.

And going back to your theater roots for a bit — there are a *lot* of theater actors on “The Gilded Age.”

A lot! And a lot of us, including me [in “Marjorie Prime”] are in plays this season. **Carrie Coon** [Bertha Russell] was in “Bug.” **Ben Ahlers** [Jack the clock-making butler] is in “Death of a Salesman” right now. **Kelli O'Hara** (Aurora Fane) is in “Fallen Angel.” **Taylor Trensch** [a Tony nominee, new to season 4] was in “Bat Boy: The Musical.” Christine Baranski is about to do “Hay Fever” in London. I'm sure I'm leaving people out. We have a lot of theater folks.

What do you think makes for that crossover?

Two things. One of the great advantages of shooting in New York is the access to amazing theater people. I have to say, our producers have been incredibly deft at working around people's schedules, particularly how they worked around [six-time Tony winner] **Audra McDonald**'s schedule when she was in “Gypsy”—that was a feat.

Also, I think theater people—who have more experience doing period drama and period comedy—are well-suited for Julian's language.

There is a certain elocution on the show, almost a theater feel.

And we have **Howard Samuelsohn**, our wonderful dialect coach [also a dialect coach on HBO's “The Penguin,” 2019 film “The Lighthouse,” Hulu's “Under the Banner of Heaven” among others] on set every day, trying to keep us honest—for those of us who need to speak particularly well, people who have who have a specific accent. We run a gamut.

I know you can't do spoilers, but is there anything you could tell us about Season 4?

Probably not. [laughs]

[laughs] I figured.

We do have some wonderful new people joining, either permanently or for certain episodes, including **Taylor Trensch**. He's joining the van Rhijn household—or, I guess I should say the Forte household. It's been a delight having him around.

Maggie Kuntz, who's been so great in things like “**John Proctor is the Villain**,” is joining. **Elizabeth Marvel** (“Homeland,” “House of Cards”) is a tremendous film and

stage actress. Really, every year we have another embarrassment of riches in terms of incredible actors.

We talked about your childhood connection to Baranski. You also knew Sarah Jessica Parker, your “Sex and the City” co-star, when you were a kid.

Yes! When we were like 12, 13, she and I did a record [an audio record for kids based on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House in the Big Woods]. And we played Vanessa Redgrave’s daughters together in a TV movie [“My Body, My Child” (1982)] when we were, like, 13 and 14.

It’s amazing that you have two childhood connections to your two adult co-stars on HBO series.

Well, if you stick around long enough in this business, people circle back. A lot of people fall by the wayside —some die; some change careers; some go into a part of the business you’re not in. But there are some amazing actors who career from career to career, as Stephen Sondheim would say.

So do you have any New England ties? I think you did theater in Vermont?

I did a play at the Dorset Theatre Festival. My oldest kid went to theater camp in Maine. My son graduated from the University of Vermont last year. And we’ve spent time with Bernie [Sanders] at the Sanders Institute; I campaigned for him in New Hampshire.

And my parents’ best friends lived in Worcester. We’d spend every Christmas with them.

Oh wow.

We’d also sometimes come out in the summer for a week or two and stay in their big beautiful house. The first mall I ever went to was in Worcester, because I was a New York City girl. And I remember Filene’s Basement.

[laughs] Classic.

And in more recent years, I’ve been invited out to Provincetown for a panel or award, different things. So my wife and I have gone three or four times. We love it there, too.

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