

Forest Found Solace in Travel and Showbiz

BY DUSICA SUE MALESEVIC

When performer and five-decade Village resident D'yan Forest was diagnosed with breast cancer 24 years ago, she took the dictate "the show must go on" to heart.

"[I] went every morning to get the radiation and in the afternoon I'd sing in Staten Island and be a French chanteuse," Forest, 81, told Chelsea Now by phone. "I wasn't going to stop. I drove to Staten Island and I performed."

Continuing to work while she got treated for cancer, she said, helped her to get through it, as she was focused on the performing, not herself.

Both Forest's mom and aunt had breast cancer. She credits having a very good gynecologist for its discovery.

"What happened was I said, 'my breasts are getting bigger,' " she explained. "I had just had the mammogram and everything a couple months [before]. He said 'go in again.' "

Forest took his advice and got X-rayed again. While away for Christmas, her service kept getting calls from a number she didn't recognize (it was the early '90s and cellphones were not ubiquitous). She finally connected with the caller, who turned out to be a doctor filling in for her regular one, and was told her mammogram showed something was amiss.

She went to a specialist. "We looked and looked and sure enough, there was something," she said.

Forest had a lumpectomy to remove the tumor and some of the surrounding tissue.

"My girlfriend had gone home and I was all alone in the room," she recalled. "I woke up and I didn't know what had happened. I [could] hardly touch my breasts."

The surgery was successful, but she also had to have radiation. She went to New York Hospital and was told she would have to wait over a month.

"I wasn't going to put up with that — that's not right," she said. "I've done very well navigating the system because I won't put up with anybody putting me off. I said, 'Forget this.' So I went to a private radiation guy."

The radiation and the surgery left her breasts burned and scarred.

"The breast cancer, you think,

'Oh, my God, nobody's ever going to look at me again. I'm not going to have a relationship,' " she said. "But the right person doesn't care."

While Forest said she didn't like the disfigurement, she has found a way to address the cancer, albeit obliquely, in her solo shows and comedy act.

Forest said she wanted to get her breasts evened out — after the radiation, one was drooping while the other was not. In her act, she explains how once she got a lift, the left breast was fine, but the right began to droop. To the tune of "East Side, West Side," Forest sings "left breast, right breast," she said with a laugh.

Another joke originated with her mother, who had a mastectomy as a result of breast cancer.

"[My mother] didn't want to wear this prosthesis stuff or anything. So she'd go around playing golf and everything with just one breast in the bra," she explained. "She said, 'I'm one hung low.' "

She added, "One of the things that I use [in my act] is, I don't say it was cancer — but I say as I got older, I noticed that one of my breasts was drooping longer than the other one. And my Asian boyfriend started calling me, one hung low."

She talks about the experience of cancer, she said, but never mentions the word because she doesn't want people to feel sorry for her, but rather laugh.

Forest grew up in a nice, Jewish family in a conservative town near Boston and moved to New York City in 1966.

"I got a masters degree in education, and now I'm sort of talking risqué comedy," she said.

She has done several one-woman shows, including, "I Married a Nun" and "Around the World in 80 Years." About 10 years ago she decided to give stand-up a try. She said that after 9/11, her singing and piano playing gigs dried up and she was sick of not performing.

"I got home and I looked in my closet with all the instruments — the glockenspiel, the trumpet — and I see my old, old, old ukulele," she recalled.

Her parents had bought her a ukulele when she was teen in the

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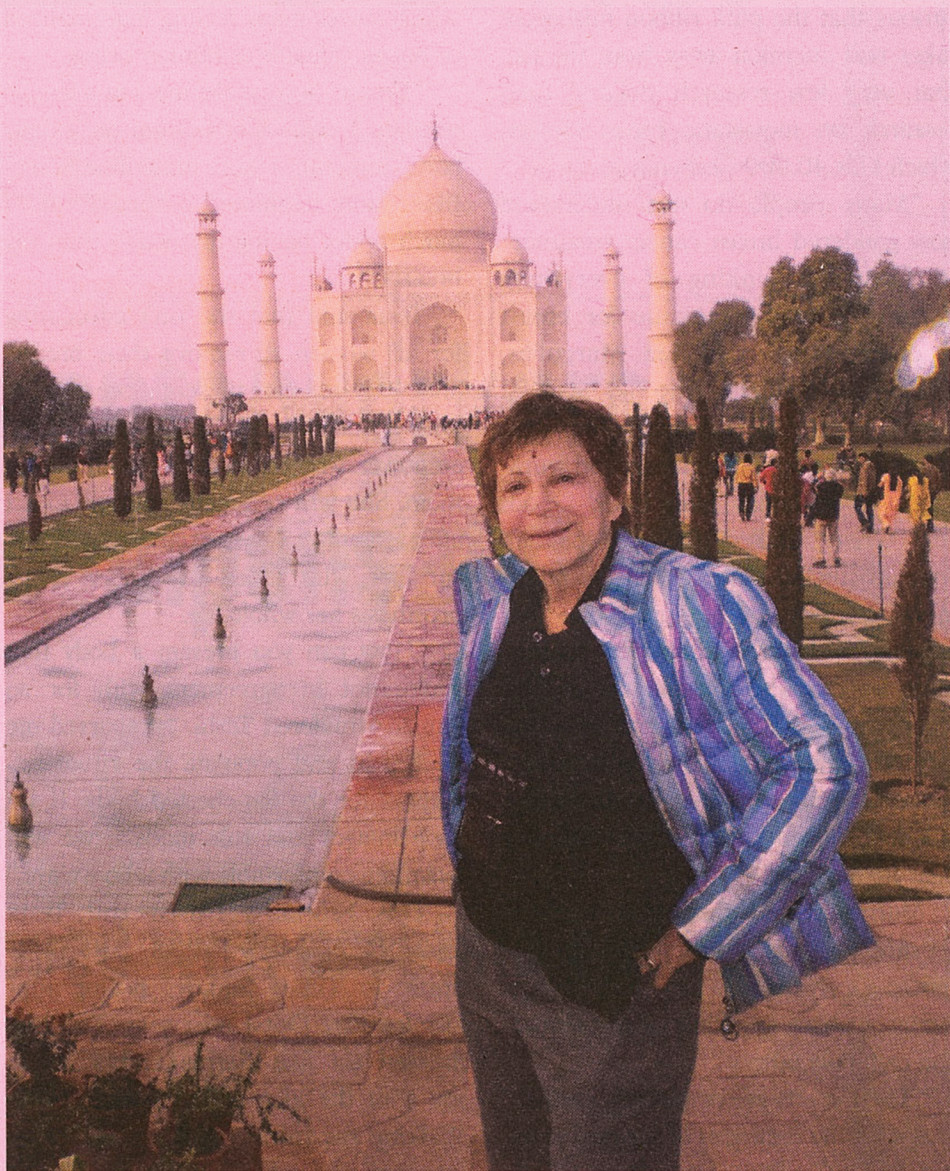


Photo by Nancy Pearse

From India, proof that D'yan Forest lived the title of her solo comedy show, "Around the World in 80 Years."

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'50s — she had wanted a guitar.

"They said, 'a ukulele is for girls, a guitar is for boys,' " she said. "Even then, they knew I was AC/DC."

The ukulele has found its place in her comedy — she begins and ends her show with it. Forest has traveled to Europe and around the United States performing.

She was in Germany when she started to experience stomach pain, she recalled.

"When they took the CAT scan two years ago, the doctor said, 'nothing's wrong with your stomach but there's something wrong with your lungs,' " she said.

Forest had lung cancer, and the doctors are now saying it could have come from the radiation that she received when she had breast cancer.

"This cancer haunts you forever," she said. "You just don't know what's going to show up."

Again, Forest found solace in work. For the majority of the time, she didn't stop rehearsing or practicing during the development phase of "Around the World in 80 Years." She did have to stop for two weeks after the radiation and headaches started, but then began again.

"I put cotton in the gown, in the bra, so it wouldn't hurt when I was performing," she said.

Both cancers have been in remission and Forest shows no sign of slowing down.

"I'm only eight-one and everybody says 'why don't I go to Florida?' I said '[performing is] what keeps me going. This is what keeps me happy.' "

For more information, visit dyanforest.com.