

Singing and strumming

BY DUSICA SUE MALESEVIC

When performer D'yan Forest was diagnosed with breast cancer 24 years ago, she took the dictum "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, said. "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, since she was focused on the performing, not on herself.

A five-decade Village resident, Forest said that both her mother and aunt had breast cancer. She credits having a very good gynecologist for discovering her own illness in the early 1990s.

"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 once more. While away for Christmas, her answering service kept getting calls from a phone number she didn't recognize. 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. Yet when she went to New York Hospital, she was told she would have to wait more than 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.

She 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 mom, who had a mastectomy as a re-

sult of breast cancer.

"My mother didn't want to wear this prosthesis stuff or anything," she explained. "So she'd go around playing golf and everything with just one breast in the bra. 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 master's 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 a teen in the '50s, though she had wanted a guitar.

"They said, 'A ukulele is for girls, a guitar is for boys,'" she recalled. "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 her 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 81 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.

