



**BROADWAY BABES** Jennifer Tilly, left, and Kristen Johnston make their Great White Way debuts in *The Women*.

# WOMEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

I was totally prepared for there to be a couple of divas," says Kristen Johnston, referring to the all-female cast of Broadway's current production of *The Women*. To be sure, Clare Booth Luce's acid-tongued 1936 comedy is about a gaggle of gossipy society ladies and is renowned for its bitchy banter and claws-bared catfights. But to hear Johnston and costar Jennifer Tilly tell it, backstage at Broadway's American Airlines Theatre—cramped nightly with a cast of 25—is a diva-free zone. The most precious behavior to be witnessed during the interview is Tilly's pretend pique when a vase of flowers arrives for absent costar Cynthia Nixon. So much for female stereotypes—offstage, anyway.

Onstage, it's a different story. Johnston and Tilly play, respectively, relentless rumor-monger Sylvia Fowler and voracious man-stealer Crystal Allen, roles immortalized by Rosalind Russell and Joan Crawford in George Cukor's 1939 film version of the story. This is the Broadway debut for both Johnston, who's best known for her Emmy-winning stint on the NBC series *3rd Rock from the Sun*, and Tilly, who scored an Oscar nomination in 1994 for her turn in Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway*.

On a recent afternoon between matinee and evening shows, the two decidedly droll actors lounged on the daybed in Johnston's dressing room, eating take-out sushi and engaging in a candid chat about the play's eminently quotable dialogue. As you'll see from the excerpts in italics below, it's as fresh as ever, 65 years after it dripped from Luce's poison pen.

*Mary: Who does Mrs. Fowler's nails?*

*Nancy: I'd love to do Mrs. Fowler's nails, right down to the wrist, with a nice big buzz saw.*

**Time Out New York: How much pain will you endure for your beauty regimen?**

**Kristen Johnston:** Pretty much anything. For beauty, baby, whatever it takes—except starvation.

Addictions to beauty, jewels and gossip are just a few things Jennifer Tilly and Kristen Johnston share with their catty characters in *The Women*

By Erik Jackson

Photograph by Eddie Collins

**Jennifer Tilly:** I won't starve myself, either. [*Glances down*] As you can see.

**Johnston:** We're a very healthy cast.

**TONY: Jennifer, what did you do to prepare for the scene in which you rise, fully nude, from a sudsy bathtub?**

**Tilly:** I tried to eat less, but I was beset by anxiety when we started performing for the audience, and I got really hungry. I had to fill my inner void.

**TONY: The scene is a little surprising. How are audiences reacting?**

**Tilly:** They think they're in happy 1937-land, and all of a sudden, they're staring at pubic hair. And that upsets them a lot.

**TONY: Is it a difficult scene to do?**

**Tilly:** I get nervous every night before I come out, especially if it's an older audience. I'm worried that I'm going to shock somebody into their final moment. Once I'm up there, it's fine. Maybe a little breezy. I go home some nights and re-create the moment sans bubbles, in front of my skinny mirror, just to make sure that I'm not making a big fool of myself.

**TONY: And when you do wear clothes, you're all dressed by Isaac Mizrahi.**

**Tilly:** I was excited when I heard he was doing the costumes. But he's the biggest diva of all. Backstage, he's like, "I don't like that hair! Your nails need to be more pointed!"

**Johnston:** He's detail-oriented.

**Tilly:** And it doesn't stop with the clothes. He stopped me the other day and said I had to do something about my bikini wax. He goes, "Darling, Brazilian is not period!" I was like, "Don't you have someplace to be?"

*Nancy: You both look so relaxed. Edith, has Sylvia performed the modern function of friendship among the ladies?*

*Sylvia: Which is?*

*Nancy: Orgasm by gossip.*

**TONY: As celebrities, do you mind that everybody talks about you?**

**Johnston:** Jennifer has a better sense of humor about it all than I do.

**Tilly:** Well, a lot of people go on Barbara Walters and talk about really intimate things like their relationship with their parents or their previous marriage. And I just think that's a deadly trap, feeling that you have to offer up your personal life on a plate.

**TONY: Still, if Barbara Walters asked you to do her show, would you?**

**Tilly:** Oh, of course I would. It's a coup to be on Barbara Walters. But I won't tell her anything! I have an alternative personality that I share [with the media].

**Johnston:** A whole different thing! You hang out with her alone, and you've never met so solid and smart a person. Then we're outside, and all of a sudden, she's the movie star. I want to learn how to do that, because it keeps the other person, the real person, safe.

**Tilly:** It's my fake front.

**TONY: Does that get old, having to do that?**

**Tilly:** No, I like it. Talking about my childhood would get old. I mean, everybody loves a party girl, right Kristen?

**Johnston:** I sure do.

**Tilly:** And I think we're lucky to be doing a frothy period piece right now as opposed to some real deep, dark exploration of the human psyche. People just want to get away for a while and laugh.

**Theater**

*Mrs. Moorehead: One more piece of motherly advice. Don't confide in your girlfriends! If you let them advise you, they'll see to it, in the name of friendship, that you lose your husband and your home.*

**TONY: Who's easier to share your secrets with, a man or a woman?**

**Tilly:** Gay men are really good to confide in.

**Johnston:** Really good.

**Tilly:** So loyal and understanding. A lot of women are easy to confide in, but it depends on who. You get a sixth sense about who you can talk to and who you can't. I don't think straight men are very good to confide in.

**Johnston:** I agree. I have a lot of straight male friends and gay male friends, and they're good for different things, you know?

**Tilly:** I think straight men who want to be your hand-holder and your really good friend always have an agenda.

**TONY: What's the agenda? To get in your pants?**

**Tilly:** I think so. There's always some kind of other thing going on. Some other dynamic.

*Mary: Well, he told me, on my birthday, I'd always look the same to him.*

*Nancy: Nice present. No jewels?*

**TONY: What's the ideal gift for you?**

**Tilly:** [Without a moment's thought] Jewels. I'm really, really, really into jewelry. I'm not 18 years old anymore. If a man gives me a stuffed animal, it's doorsville for him. I don't want any badly written poems. I really think that if a man can afford it, he should give a woman jewelry—if that's what she likes.

**TONY: What about you, Kristen?**

**Johnston:** As boring as it sounds, something they love. A favorite book, or a CD, if they really love some musician that I've never heard of.

**Tilly:** I hate it when it's something like a tennis bike. Or a treadmill.

*Peggy: A woman's best protection is a little money of her own.*

*Mary: A woman's best protection is the right man.*

**TONY: Would you rather have love or money?**

**Tilly:** I'd rather have money, 'cause money can buy you love.

**Johnston:** [Shaking her head] Oh, Jennifer.

**Tilly:** Oh, shut up.

**TONY: Is this the false front speaking, or is it the real Jennifer?**

**Johnston:** You have to know her a long time to tell the difference. [Ponders] I guess I'd rather have love.

**Tilly:** Love goes away, but money, if you invest it well...

**Johnston:** But the love of a good man...? I've had both, and I have to say, love is better.

**Tilly:** Okay, I'll say that too. But you know what? When I'm in my closet on my hands and knees in front of my safe putting on my jewelry, I'm experiencing pure love.

**The Women is playing now at the American Airlines Theatre.**

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# LADIES AND TRAMPS

Meet the estrogen-fueled cast of *The Women* By **Lissa T. Rodgers**

Playwright Clare Booth Luce was also a novelist, painter, war correspondent, congresswoman, ambassador, *Vanity Fair* editor and a member of the Reagan administration. Still, she owes her enduring fame primarily to *The Women*, a play whose witty dialogue and wickedly incisive portraits of upper-class women has drawn audiences—and actresses—for 65 years. The cast of the current production at the American Airlines Theatre features:

**MARY**

**Played by:** Cynthia Nixon  
**Walking in the designer pumps of:** Norma Shearer, June Allyson, Kim Hunter, Susannah York  
**Female stereotype:** Saintry friend, not to mention wife and mother (to Little Mary, a.k.a. Hallie Kate Eisenberg, the nine-year-old moppet from the Pepsi ads).

**Husbands and lovers:** One hubby.  
**Characteristic quote:** "A woman's best protection is the right man."



**CRYSTAL**

**Played by:** Jennifer Tilly  
**Sauntering in the stilettos of:** Joan Crawford, Joan Collins, Barbara Sukowa, Helena Bonham Carter

**Female stereotype:** Man-stealing, gold-digging tramp  
**Husbands and lovers:** Two we know by name—but there are those allusions to her past....

**Characteristic quote:** "I'd break up your smug little roost if I could. I have just as much right as you have to sit in a tub of butter."



**SYLVIA**

**Played by:** Kristen Johnston  
**Standing tall in the Gaccis of:** Rosalind Russell, Elaine Stritch, Ilka Chase, Diana Rigg  
**Female stereotype:** Gossiping, meddling backstabber with a fabulous wardrobe.

**Husbands and lovers:** One of each when the play begins—but flying solo long before the final curtain.  
**Characteristic quote:** "You know you can trust me."



**PEGGY**

**Played by:** Amy Ryan  
**Scuttling in the bought-on-sale sandals of:** Joan Fontaine, Hazelle Goodman

**Female stereotype:** Love-dazed, child-adoring, financially challenged newlywed.

**Husbands and lovers:** One. She's still new at this.  
**Characteristic quote:** "I wish I could have a baby. We can't afford one now."



**EDITH**

**Played by:** Jennifer Coolidge  
**Lying down, but still wearing the bedroom slippers of:** Phyllis Povah, Joan Blondell

**Female stereotype:** Blowsy, self-absorbed hypochondriac who can't stop getting knocked up.  
**Husbands and lovers:** One



husband. The perpetually pregnant aren't much for infidelity.

**Characteristic quote:** "Morning sickness! I heave the whole darn day."

**NANCY**

**Played by:** Lisa Emery  
**Strolling in the sensible shoes of:** Ann Sheridan, Mary Louise Wilson

**Female stereotype:** Sharp-tongued, globe-trotting, novel-writing spinster.

**Husbands and lovers:** Zero.

**Poor thing.**

**Characteristic quote:** "If I had a heroine in one of my books who behaved the way you do, my two readers would never believe it."



**COUNTESS DELAGE**

**Played by:** Rue McClanahan  
**Tilting on the too-high heels of:** Agnes Moorehead, Eartha Kitt, Joan Collins

**Female stereotype:**

Overdressed dowager with a penchant for mauling boy toys and mangling the French language.

**Husbands and lovers:** Oy. Two husbands during the play—plus the two before who tried to knock her off and the one who left her the fortune that bankrolls her addictions to clothes and men.

**Characteristic quote:** "What else is there for a woman but I'amour?"



**MIRIAM**

**Played by:** Lynn Collins  
**Filling the marabou-trimmed miles of:** Paulette Goddard, Rhonda Fleming, Ann Miller

**Female stereotype:** Wised-up chorus girl with a heart of gold and a sassy mouth.

**Husbands and lovers:** One, but she has been around the block.

**Characteristic quote:** "You're ashamed? Okay, sister. But my idea of love is that love isn't ashamed of anything."



**LUCY**

**Played by:** Julie Halston  
**Shuffling along in the work boots of:** Marjorie Main, Sandy Duncan, Charlotte Greenwood

**Female stereotype:** Sturdy, tobacco-chewing ranch proprietress.

**Husbands and lovers:** None that we know of.

**Characteristic quote:** "I don't feel sorry for you. You feel plenty sorry enough for yourselves."



**MRS. MOOREHEAD**

**Played by:** Mary Louise Wilson  
**Poised on the low heels of:** Myrna Loy, Polly Bergen, Phyllida Law

**Female stereotype:** Wise, old loving mother of saintly daughter Mary (Nixon).

**Husbands and lovers:** Well, she does mention the late Mr. Moorehead once or twice.  
**Characteristic quote:** "Dear, a man only has one escape from his old self: to see a different self—in the mirror of some woman's eyes."

