



'THE BIG C': CANCER AND CONNECTICUT

"THE BIG C" premieres on Showtime Monday at 10:30 p.m. See review, Page G5. Watch the entire first episode at <http://bit.ly/9deY8j>

LAURA LINNEY, top photo, is getting strong advance buzz for her performance as Cathy in "The Big C," a Showtime series. Oliver Platt, right, who plays Paul in "The Big C," has a home in Cornwall, and the show is filmed in Stamford. Below, Gabourey Sidibe was cast as Andrea in "The Big C" before the release of the movie "Precious," which featured her in an Oscar-nominated performance.

JORDIN ALTHAUS | SHOWTIME



By **ROGER CATLIN**
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The new series "The Big C" on Showtime has all the ingredients of a big premium-cable hit: a bold approach to a tough subject, a strong cast led by a brilliant actress, a tone that shifts easily from laughter to tears.

It's the kind of series audiences will love as much as Emmy voters. It won't be eligible for awards until next year, but it already has attracted the kind of advance buzz that has put Laura Linney on the cover of many magazines.

And though its story revolves around a fictional character in suburban Minneapolis dealing with the news of cancer, in many ways it's a local story.

"The Big C" doesn't stand for Connecticut, but its 13 episodes were shot in Stamford. Linney, who also is an executive producer on the show, took an apartment there to be close to the set; her home in Lakeville is just up Route 7.

Recently hired to take a small role as a purveyor of alternative medicine is her friend and neighbor, Liam Neeson.

And the cast — which includes Oliver Platt and Gabourey Sidibe, with guests that include Idris Elba and Cynthia Nixon — takes advantage of the East Coast acting pool from which Linney sprang.

"It was important to me that the show was shot on the East Coast to take advantage of the theater community that's there. And we've been very lucky with people who are willing and enthusiastic to be a part of it," Linney, 46, says. "It's a fantastic group of people who have come together, and I am delighted to go to work every single day. I love working with everyone."

Speaking to reporters at the TV Critics Association summer press tour last month in Los Angeles as part of a publicity blitz, she explained that though it's titled "The Big C," it's not

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necessarily a series about cancer.

Her character, Cathy Jamison, has fourth-stage melanoma — a diagnosis that silences a support group at one point — but she is determined at last to live her life and what's left of it to its fullest.

This leads to some unusual behavior in a wife, mother and teacher whose enjoyable activities before that included "organizing things in bins."

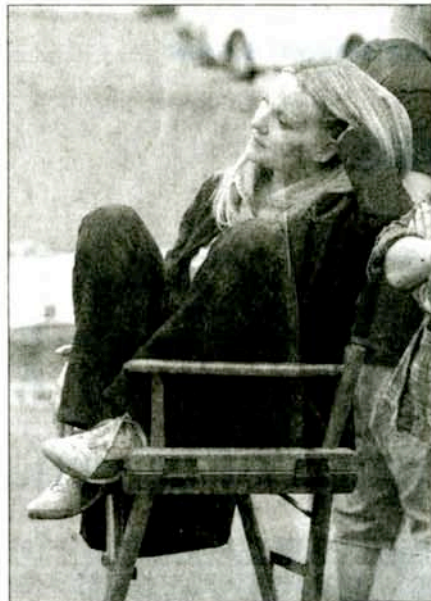
"I want it to be seen as a series about life," Linney said at a Showtime/CBS party, full of the sparkle she exudes in her role.

"It's about time and life and how you spend your time, how you live your life," she said. To be told that your time may not be long, "is it a blessing or is it a curse?"

Show creator Darlene Hunt, a one-time actress on TV's "Help Me Help You," said the idea of mortality hit her about the time she had a baby. "There's nothing that makes you confront your mortality more than having children and realizing you are probably going to go, hopefully, before they do."

And though Hunt has not had personal history with cancer, her co-executive producer Jenny Bicks did. She's a breast cancer survivor who understands the impulses to do all the things one had been putting off.

"It puts your life in a while different framework," Bicks says. "I did some of these things. Cathy decided to cash out her whole 401k and goes out and buys a sports car thinking, 'Why am I waiting



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LAURA LINNEY is both star and executive producer of "The Big C."

for this?,' which is something I actually did. I always wanted a Porsche convertible, but I was this Yankee from the East Coast who thought that might be too showy. Then I realized, 'Oh what the hell, do what you want to make yourself happy.'"

Like Cathy in "The Big C," Bicks learned that during such a period, "you're challenging all the relationships you have. They're all put under a microscope."

Bicks had brought the subject to a premium-cable comedy previously, when

as a staff writer and executive producer on "Sex and the City," she wrote the episodes in which Samantha battles breast cancer.

"It's very hard to find a way to write about it that brings out the absurdity of what you're going through to the table," she says.

Robert Greenblatt, then the president of entertainment at Showtime, suggested Linney for the lead, after which "everything fell into place," Bicks said.

Sidibe, who was an Oscar nominee and Golden Globe winner for her breakout role in "Precious" last year, was cast before that film was released. She plays a student who attracts Linney's attention.

The decision to shoot in Connecticut was based in part on the state's tax incentives for filmmakers, Bicks said, but also because it offers quite a lot in terms of location.

"We love it here," she says from the show's office, above a medical supply-manufacturing company. "I think what Stamford and a lot of Connecticut areas around Stamford offered us was giving us locations similar to other U.S. suburban areas, especially Minneapolis."

The Shippan neighborhood near the shore serves as the place where the exteriors of the Jamison house are shot. The relative calm of the Long Island Sound can make it serve as one of the 10,000 lakes of Minnesota, Bicks says.

"The water is useful for us, the way it's shaped. The way Shippan Point sticks out, the water doesn't seem like the ocean; it doesn't have the huge tide and waves."

"Stamford has a look that's unique," Bicks says. "You have the downtown that can serve as a small metropolitan area,

and in downtown we used the park for a bathtub race. Then there are beautiful homes by the water."

The area is also "great for us for a casting perspective. We get all these great stage actors, many of whom live in Connecticut."

Among them are Platt, who is based in New York and has a house in Cornwall, not far from Lakeville; John Benjamin Hickey, who plays Cathy's homeless brother; and Phyllis Somerville, who plays a crotchety neighbor.

Besides all that, the climate allows "The Big C" to show its planned structure, to have each 13-episode season reflect a season of the year.

It starts in the summertime, with Cathy desperate to dig a swimming pool (or a hot tub, or wait, maybe a pool after all) and to have her teenage son (played by Gabriel Basso) cancel all his summer plans so she can spend time with him.

Next will be fall and winter, should the show be a success and continue.

Some of the pilot episode was shot in California, but after that most of the exteriors will be familiar scenes to those in southwest Connecticut, Bicks says. "If you come to Stamford, you'll recognize a lot of it."

So far, crowds gathering to watch the action haven't been a problem in a city where several nationally syndicated daytime shows already are shot.

"This is a very jaded group here in Stamford," Bicks says. "We've had small crowds, but nothing we can't handle. They've been appreciative and shown nothing but polite interest."

Shooting in Stamford is "really fun creatively," she says, "to be not in the midst of Hollywood and doing something unique here."