



"I'm not brassy," says Miles, whose apartment is crammed with career memorabilia. "I'm effervescent."

Screen

FORGET THAT TRINKET IN HER RIGHT HAND—ACTRESS SYLVIA MILES'S BIGGEST FAN IS SYLVIA MILES

By John Stark

Sylvia Miles has just dragged another cardboard box full of mementos out of her hallway closet. "Read this," she says, pointing to an old magazine review of an off-Broadway play she was once in. "It says I'm an eidetic presence." Eidetic? "It means an image marked by vivid visual recall," the actress explains. In other words, Miles

does not go unnoticed, onstage, on-screen or on the town. She makes sure of that: She once dumped a plateful of pâté, steak tartare, Brie and potato salad on critic John Simon's head after an unflattering review. In her breakthrough movies, 1969's *Midnight Cowboy* and 1975's *Farewell, My Lovely*, the nasal-voiced, blond-and-

gray-haired actress received Oscar nominations for roles that together lasted 10½ minutes. In last year's *Wall Street*, with less than five minutes on-screen, she left audiences reeling as Charlie Sheen's racist, loudmouthed real estate agent. If scene-stealing were a crime, Miles would be making license plates.

Miles's seduction scene with Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy* propelled her from New York stage actress to movie star.



HOTOFEST (2)



Even as a corpse in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Miles diverted attention from stars John Ireland, left, and Robert Mitchum.



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Witness *Crossing Delancey*, her latest film. She plays a Jewish matchmaker hell-bent on fixing up Amy Irving, an '80s woman and a bookshop manager, with Peter Riegert, a traditional Lower East Side pickle salesman. Although hers is a small role, Miles plays it for all it's worth, gnawing on chicken legs, turkey wings and bagels while dispensing unsolicited advice about romance. "I gained 11 lbs. during that film," she says. It was worth it—there's talk of another Oscar nomination for her outrageous performance. "From your mouth to God's ear," she says.

Shyness is not one of Miles's virtues. It has often been said that she would attend the opening of an envelope. Which is why, on a recent evening, she lets herself be lured from her one-bedroom apartment on Central Park South to Queens, where the shine of a klieg light and the presence of reporters offer the promise of publicity. The event: the opening of the American Museum of Moving Images in Astoria. As Miles arrives, a crowd shrieks enthusiastically.

Wearing a flowing, leopard-print dress and laden with clunky jewelry, Miles stands out among the fairly conservative guests. She moves quickly, stealthily, among them, as if stalking zebras. "Have you seen me in *Crossing Delancey*?" she asks indiscriminately. "I'm in a big hit now," she noti-

"If I run to the store, people say, 'Sylvia's here, it must be an event!' " says Miles with good friend Andy Warhol in 1985.

fies WNBC-TV film critic Pia Lindstrom. Spotting movie producer David (*Cocoon*) Brown, she swooshes over and reminds him that she's "the only one who hasn't hit you up to be in *Driving Miss Daisy*."

"I'm always having to climb a flagpole to wave 'I'm here!' " says Miles, the only woman who could give Pia Zadora lessons in self-promotion. After character parts in more than 30 films, including a spin as a coke-sniffing Congresswoman in director Paul Morrissey's soon-to-be-released *Spike of Bensonhurst*, Miles can finally say, "I'm on a roll. Maybe it's a rocky roll, but it's a roll."

An alumna of the Actors' Studio (alma mater to Paul Newman and Robert De Niro, among others), Miles loves to perform, no matter how small the part or unglamorous the character.

"When director Michael Winner asked me to do *The Sentinel*, he said he wanted me to play a mad-dead-crazed-German-zombie-lesbian-ballet dancer," she recalls. "He said to me, 'You could really do that part.' I said, 'Who else would do that part?' " During one particularly tricky period in 1960, she was simultaneously performing in the first act of Genet's *The Balcony* in Greenwich Village and the second act of *Camino Real* at a nearby theater. She commuted between the two productions on a motor scooter, managing to get back to *The Balcony* just in time for the curtain call.

Almost three decades later, her energy has not abated. Visitors to Sylvia's world—her apartment-cum-personal shrine—should be warned to keep their seat belts fastened and their tray tables in the full upright and locked position. "Everybody's Talkin'," the theme song from *Midnight Cowboy*, is on the radio. Renderings of Sylvia—in photographs, paintings, and posters—abound. A montage of Polaroid portraits, taken by her late pal, Andy Warhol, hangs in her bedroom. It includes snapshots of Miles with such co-stars as Joe Dallesandro, her stud in Morrissey's semi-underground *Heat*, and Richard Chamberlain, who joined her in a 1976 off-Broadway revival of *The Night of the Iguana*. A large black-and-white blowup of Miles, without makeup and smoking a Pall Mall, hangs over her bed. "It's a good face," says Miles. "It's a lioness's face."



Miles gets a shine outside Central Park while learning lines for her new off-Broadway show, *Tea with Mommy and Jack*.

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From a brown folder the indefatigable ex-ingenue brings out photos of herself naked making love to Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy*. Another folder holds pictures of her with Linda Lavin from the 1963 play *The Riot Act*, in which Sylvia made her Broadway debut. She pulls out a script of *It's Me, Sylvia!* a one-woman, off-Broadway show she wrote and starred in for two months in 1984. "People disappoint you," Miles says. "Lovers disappoint you. But theatrical memorabilia stays with you, as long as you keep it under clear plastic." Her

"Finally I got paid for getting people together," says Miles (with Reizl Bozyk and Amy Irving) of her *Crossing Delancey* role.

code for living is a one-liner: "I don't let the gnat bites bother me."

Don't confuse Miles with the boozing, slatternly floozies she often portrays. Instead of TV she favors 19th-century books, including novels by Austen and Thackeray. She was once a renowned competitive chess player. The daughter of a Greenwich Village furniture maker, she builds her own chairs, dressers and kitchen cabinets.

Miles invites a visitor to poke through her closets, but bristles at attempts to poke into her past. Ask a personal question and she shoots a glance that would make Rambo back off. Throughout her apartment are pictures and a painting of her with Bob Dylan. Express curiosity at their relationship and she snaps, "Remain curious." Thrice divorced, she refuses to discuss her former husbands or even say who they were. Even her parents are off-limits. Ask their names and she hedges, finally muttering, "Reuben and Belle." Reuben and Belle what? "Just leave it at that," she says. Why such mystery? "It's just that there are so many great contemporary stories about me," she says. "Don't get hung up on the past."

In 1970, after four years of marriage, Miles was divorced from her third husband, New York disc jockey Ted Brown, who has been paying her alimo-

ny ever since ("It's been between \$200,000 and \$300,000 so far," he says bitterly). Brown says even he never learned Miles's maiden name (only that her parents were Jewish), her age or who her first husband was (her second husband was an actor named Gerald Price, whom she divorced in 1960).

"When I was married to Sylvia, she wasn't like she is now," Brown says. "She wore nice suits and went to the hairdresser three times a week. She'd have dinner ready every night with candlelight. She loved to play chess. But when she got that Oscar nomination for *Midnight Cowboy*, she changed. She said, 'I'm a star.' That's the first thing out of her mouth. We divorced because I wanted to have children. She didn't."

Brown recalls a telling moment when Miles pointed out to him her high school yearbook picture along with its attendant inscription. "To my darling daughter," it said. "Mother couldn't be more proud of you than I am. You're beautiful and talented and I love you." "That's very touching," Brown told his wife. She confessed: "I wrote it."

Does Brown think Miles will ever marry again, thus ending the alimony payments? "Unfortunately, Godzilla wouldn't have her," says Brown, "though she'd marry him if she thought it would get her a part."

Longtime friend Paul Morrissey says that behind Miles's ambition is a kind-hearted soul, not at all the monster that Brown conjures up. "Once Sylvia's working, she is extremely mild and meek," he says. "For her the tough part is going to parties and getting jobs." Miles's close friend, movie critic Judith Crist, says she's "crazy about Sylvia, but it took me a long time not to throw up when I was around her. Although I always admired her as an actress, I thought she was freaky. But that's not true. Beyond the outlandish exterior is one of the brightest, best, most loyal people I know."

And persistent. There is always one more photo to show, one more press clipping to read from, one more story to tell. As a visitor bids adieu to Sylvia's world, Miles follows him to the elevator without interrupting the flow of anecdote. Finally, a ringing telephone compels her exit. "When you write about me, and I know you will, be kind," she says, shutting her door. From the hallway the eidetic presence can be overheard talking on the telephone: "Have you seen me in *Crossing Delancey*?" □