



POSITIVELY AWARE

HIV Treatment and Health

TRANSGENDER AND HIV

*Alexandra
Billings*

ON HOLLYWOOD, HIV,
AND HER CHICAGO ROOTS

**HORMONE THERAPY AND
DRUG INTERACTIONS**

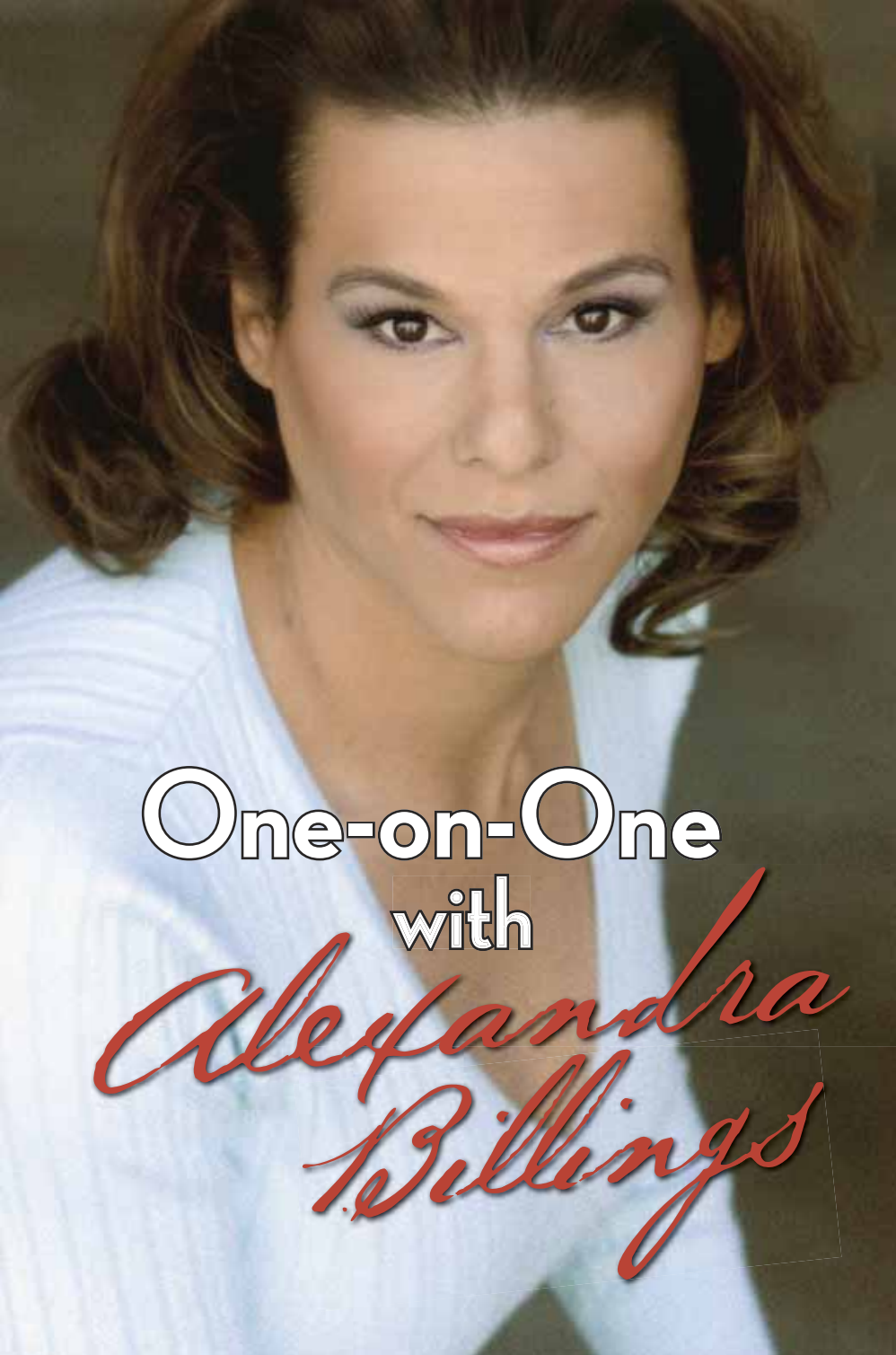
**PROFILES AND
PERSONAL STORIES**

HAART 2.0

JULY / AUGUST 2008

THE JOURNAL OF TEST POSITIVE AWARE NETWORK

plus



One-on-One with *Alexandra Billings*

The star of stage and screen talks to PA about the importance of love, humor, and her Chicago roots

Interview by Jeff Berry

SHOULD I CALL YOU ALEX, OR ALEXANDRA—WHICH DO YOU PREFER?

Oh, please, call me Alex—Alexandra has way too many syllables in it.

AND CAN I ASK HOW OLD YOU ARE, AND HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN HIV-POSITIVE?

Sure, you can ask. Can I lie? I'm 26. Not really, I just turned 45. And I've been HIV-positive—gosh, you'd think I'd know this—for 20-something years.

ARE YOU ON ANY THERAPY?

Should I be? Do I sound like I need therapy?

NOT THAT KIND OF THERAPY!

Okay, you scared me. Yes, I am, and I've only changed medications twice. But here's the interesting thing—I was on one of the early clinical trials, a [placebo-controlled] study where everyone was on AZT. And they either gave you a sugar pill or Norvir, and I came to find out later I was [in the placebo group], so I was [basically on AZT mono-therapy].

SO DO YOU FEEL THAT LIVING WITH HIV HAS GIVEN YOU ANY INSIGHT OR UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE IN YOUR WORK AS AN ACTOR, OR THE ROLES YOU'VE PLAYED ON E.R. OR GREY'S ANATOMY? [ON BOTH SHOWS SHE GUEST-STARRED AS A PRE-OPERATIVE TRANSEXUAL, ONE WITH TESTICULAR CANCER AND THE OTHER WITH BREAST CANCER.]

Well, that's an interesting question—no one's ever asked me that before. It's not something that I consciously think about, but I'm certain that it has. When I was diagnosed, my wife was with me at the doctor's office when the doctor came in and told me, and at that time it was most assuredly a death sentence, there was no ques-

Photo courtesy of Alexandra Billings

tion about it. You had a certain time to live, and these medications, these brand new things that were coming out, they had no idea whether they were going to work, or what they were going to do to you in the long run, they still really don't know that. But at the time there was a huge question mark that we were living under. When I was twenty-something and diagnosed—being told that my life was going to be cut short by a matter of half my lifetime sort of stays with you. But I think, in a roundabout answer to your question, absolutely it informs my acting in the sense that I was very young—I'm still very, *very* young—and having been told that you have a fatal illness, you don't ever forget that. So I think I understand more than actors who haven't been through that sort of situation what dire circumstances really are. I think in that way, yes. I don't necessarily go into any scene taking that with me. I try not to consciously do that, because I want to be present in the scene that I'm attempting to play. But I think I carry it with me all the time—not only in my acting life, but in my [personal] life as well.

HAVE YOU EVER ENCOUNTERED ANY STIGMA OR DISCRIMINATION WHEN SEEKING ROLES, EITHER AS A TRANSWOMAN OR SOMEONE LIVING WITH HIV?

You know, I really haven't. But here's the difference—you know, it's funny, because people tend to think that show business is extremely different than any other kind of business. And it really kind of isn't, in the sense that when I go in for a job interview, it's not something that I talk about in the interview, which is basically an audition. So it's not something that I bring up. If I were asked, I certainly would, but it's never something that comes into play. Now, I have been on sets where I've talked to the crew, or even occasionally to other actors, just because most everyone now either knows someone or has someone close to them who is HIV-positive. And so inevitably in the artistic community, sometimes it comes up. And if I feel the situation is right I'll say something, but usually when I say something about my own HIV status, it's very rare that I'm faced with any opposition or negative feelings.

Now that's changed, because 16 years ago, it was a very touchy subject. I was still talking about it, because I have a big mouth, and I was in rehearsal for a play, and I was talking to a friend

of mine about it, and another actor had overheard. And he was very social with me up until that point, and he literally, physically, steered away from me, and pretty much didn't talk to me through the run of the play. But it's different now, it's very different now. And I'll tell you, it's different in a good way, and it's different in a bad way. It's different in a good way because I think everybody is familiar in some way with it, sadly enough. But in a negative way, I think people tend to think we're cured. I think that people

WE'RE KIND OF THE POSTER CHILDREN FOR WHY THIS BAN AGAINST GAY MARRIAGE IS ABSOLUTELY RIDICULOUS.

assume that these pills are magic bullets, and that everything's peachy. And thus, as I'm sure you're aware, the rate of infection is back up. They're having unsafe sex, and people think, especially the new generation that's coming up, they think, "Well, we're just taking pills, which is like aspirin, I can just pop these pills—I mean, even if I get it—it's fine." It's strange, it's a double-edged sword, I don't think people hear it very well, but I think the acceptance people feel is some kind of casual relation to the actual disease, which I think is the negative part of this—attitude.

YOU AND YOUR WIFE CHRISANNE [BLANKENSHIP] DID A ONE-WOMAN SHOW TOGETHER?

Yes, Chrisanne and I wrote a show called "Before I Disappear" which is an autobiographical piece that also had original music in it, and she not only helped develop the piece, but also wrote all the lyrics to the original songs. We did it in Chicago, Boston, off-Broadway, and in Hollywood.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRISANNE?

We met when I was 14. We were both in high school, and we've remained best friends ever since, so we've known each other 31 years. We've been married for 11 years, and we were engaged for

a year.

I HAVE READ THAT YOU HAD A COMMITMENT CEREMONY, BUT ARE YOU LEGALLY MARRIED?

I love when people ask me this question, this is my favorite question. Well, see, here's the thing. No, we're not—we can't be, because we're two females [Editor's note: This interview took place several weeks before the recent ruling on same sex marriage by the Supreme Court of California.]. Which is kind of astounding, when you think about it, because had we gotten married when we were both 19 or 20 years old, we would be legally married. So we're kind of the poster children for why this ban against gay marriage is absolutely ridiculous. Because if you say to us, "Well, you could be legally married at 19," and then you fast-forward five, six years, and all of a sudden you say, "No, we have to take your marriage license back, I'm sorry, you're female now." It makes no sense, we're still the same people. It literally makes absolutely no sense at all. What would they have done, revoke our license? It's not a fishing license, for heaven's sake, it doesn't expire—it's crazy. It's absolutely insane.

YOU CAN'T SURVIVE—YOU CAN'T BE IN THIS LIFE—AND NOT HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR.

IT WOULD BE REALLY INTERESTING TO HAVE THAT TESTED AT SOME POINT.

You know, we thought about this, we thought really hard about this. Because there was a time when it was legal in certain states. And then five, six years ago Bush was trying to make his amendment to the constitution, and all that crazy stuff. When you're transgender, they don't change the sex on your birth certificate—that usually remains the same. So whatever it says on your birth certificate is what remains there. Now if I wanted to try and challenge the law, I could say to the state of California, which is where I was born, "Look, I was born male, I want to get married. So I want you to make my marriage license from the facts that you have on my birth certificate." Now this was before I got my name changed, of course. I could have, I think, said, "It says male, that's what I am, here's my wife, and we want to get married." And see if they would have actually married us. I don't know. But then, in a sense, it would be denying who we really are, because that's not who we are.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU CREDIT FOR YOUR SUCCESS AS AN ACTOR, FOR YOUR LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP, AND YOUR CONTINUED GOOD HEALTH? SOME OF THOSE THINGS PROBABLY SOMEHOW TIE TOGETHER, I WOULD IMAGINE.

Oh, absolutely. You know, when you said that I was thinking: luck, and hard work—and that's really it for all three of them. Show business is 80% luck, and a relationship is 80% luck, and the rest of it is hard work. Both of them take work. But in my view, they don't take as much work, as, you know, a little bit of magic dust, I think.

HOW IMPORTANT IS HUMOR TO YOU?

You can't survive—you can't be in this life—and not have a sense of humor. I don't like people who don't have a sense of humor. And it's not necessarily about, "Oh, I find that thing funny." It's more about—you have to be able to laugh at yourself. You have to. If you don't find parts of yourself funny, you need to get off the boat.

WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU VALUE MOST IN OTHER PEOPLE?

A sense of humor, most definitely, that's the first one; honesty; and humility. I like people who are humble. Not false humility, because I've seen that, a lot. But true humility, where you realize your own gifts, but at the same time you don't take them so seriously that they bring you charging head first into the middle of the room screaming, "Look at me, I'm fantastic!" Those kinds of people drive me crazy.

WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU DISLIKE MOST IN OTHER PEOPLE?

Ego. Negativity, I don't particularly like negative people. I don't mind realists, because I married a realist. But I don't like negative people. I don't like people who look at every situation and are, you know, like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh? "We'll never make it." I don't know—it doesn't solve anything as far as I'm concerned. You don't have to look at the bright side of everything, but I don't like negative people. And I don't like people who form an opinion before a situation has happened—any kind of opinion. I like people who sort of wait until the situation happens, live in the situation, and then figure out the outcome as they go.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS, ESPECIALLY YOUNGER FOLKS, WHO MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR IDENTITY, OR JUST COMING OUT?

Be honest. Don't make up a past. Don't try and fit in to a world that you're making up in your own head. If you're a male to female transsexual, or a female to male transsexual, don't pretend you're something you're not. Don't lie to people. Don't say to them, "I'm male, I was born male—this is what I am. You're not. You're a transgender male, or you're a transgender female. And that's

great. It doesn't mean you're not female, it doesn't mean you're not male. It just means you're a different kind of male, a different kind of female. And that is a gift, so accept that. Accept what you are, and think of it as a gift, think of it as a present somebody gave you, instead of this awful, terrible thing that you have to hide. It'll make life much easier, believe me—and much more funny.

CAN YOU TELL US ANY PROJECTS YOU'RE CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

I have a couple of things that I'm working on that, unfortunately, I can't really talk about.

ANY FEATURE FILMS POSSIBLY IN THE WORKS?

I'm sorry—oh God, it sounds so secret, doesn't it? *"I'm working on this experiment."* You'd think I was doing something really important, like figuring out a cure for something, it's so not that important—but legally, I can't.

ARE ANY OF THE ROLES THAT YOU CREATED ON E.R. OR GREY'S ANATOMY CONTINUING ROLES? I ONLY SAW CLIPS AND WASN'T ABLE TO VIEW THE ENTIRE EPISODE TO SEE IF YOU DIED.

Yeah, wouldn't that be nice? No, unfortunately I died, in both of them. I'm dead. Unless they figure out a way to animate me, that'd be good.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF 10 YEARS FROM NOW?

Oh dear, hopefully not getting any more Botox. This is going to sound so metaphysical and "new-agey" but, I try not to look ahead. I hope that I'm working, and that I'm happy, and that I'm well. If those three things are in play, I'm good to go. I really am. I'm fine. I have a terrible fear of being caught up in the youth-obsessed nature of this town [Los Angeles]. Every time I go out to dinner, I see women who have the exact same face—do you know what I'm saying? The same lips, the same forehead, and I keep saying to myself, "Okay, don't get caught up in that, or you're going to end up looking like Mary Tyler Moore." And we don't want that to happen, do we?

NO, WE DON'T WANT THAT TO HAPPEN.

No, we really don't, no.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE OUR READERS TO KNOW?

Yes, there is something. I have to tell you, when I was first diagnosed, I was a wreck. My life had literally fallen apart, and I mean by the seams. I don't mean something nasty had happened, I mean my world had turned upside down and split—right at the seams. And Chrisanne and I had no idea about this disease, we had no idea what to do, we had no idea where to turn to, we were completely and utterly confused, and we assumed that I was dying.

And we went to TPAN [Test Positive Aware Network], and, I'll never forget this, we went to the Wednesday night beginners meeting. And, God, I'm getting choked up thinking about it. Sitting in that room, with all those newly diagnosed HIV-positive people—with a doctor leading the meeting, who I assumed had volunteered his time—*saved my life*. [Editor's note: That was Dr. Ron D'Amico, who faithfully volunteered his time every Wednesday for years. He is now working in New York City.] It truly saved my life. And I'm not exaggerating. I went to those meetings, I think, for a good two or three years when I was first diagnosed. And TPAN, and what they did, and what they stood for, was a lifeline for me. And so the only thing I want other people to know is how important, first of all, TPAN is, as a whole, as an organization; and second of all, is that when you're newly diagnosed, the first thing that you've got to do is reach out—and talk about it.

ACCEPT WHAT YOU ARE, AND THINK OF IT AS A GIFT, THINK OF IT AS A PRESENT SOMEBODY GAVE YOU, INSTEAD OF THIS AWFUL, TERRIBLE THING THAT YOU HAVE TO HIDE.

WELL, I GOT ALL CHOKED UP.

And I'm not kidding you, Jeff, honestly. There are times when I'm in [Chicago], I'll pass that building, and I'll start to well up. It was just extraordinary. And I'll be honest with you, I didn't know something like that existed—none of us did. Ross Slotten was my doctor, my family doctor, for 15-something years—and he's now, actually, a very good friend of mine, and a very good friend of the HIV community. I think if I remember correctly, and I could be wrong about this, but I think he was the one who suggested you guys.

OH, REALLY? WOW—HE'S MY DOCTOR. TALK ABOUT SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION.

Is he really? Oh! He's terrific, isn't he? What a bedside manner, I tell ya. And you know, that's the other thing, too—find a really good doctor. And shop around. We just got really lucky. I actually got Dr. Slotten from Chillii Pepper, from the Baton [Show Lounge]. Chillii Pepper said, "I have a great doctor, he's a great guy—and he's a specialist for HIV too."

But TPAN saved my life, truly—and my sanity. ☺

Alexandra Billings currently lives in Los Angeles with her wife, Chrisanne, and their two kitties. For more information visit www.alexandrabilings.com.