

ILLINOIS

STATE



Hollywood's vixen

Fans of *Glee* love the Sue Sylvester character, played by Jane Lynch '82.



KNO

CK IT OFF!

Glee's bruiser Jane Lynch got started at Illinois State

by Tom Nugent

It could be the funniest scene ever presented on television.

In this classic screamer from the current TV mega-hit series *Glee*, superstar actress-comedian Jane Lynch '82 (while playing a tyrannical high school cheerleading coach named Sue Sylvester) confronts her nemesis—actor Matthew Morrison (playing a dweeby Spanish teacher who's just agreed to serve as director of the school's glee club).

"So you're starting a glee club?" barks the six-foot-tall Lynch, looking thoroughly pugnacious in her gleaming, cobalt-blue sweatshirt.

The dweeb nods uneasily.

"Let me demonstrate something for you," says Sylvester. A moment later, she's placing an apple on her desk. Then, while glaring fiercely at the dweeb: "This is the self-esteem of your average glee-clubber.

"And this...[while lifting a huge trophy from a nearby shelf] is me—the internationally ranked cheerleading coach, Sue Sylvester."

Using her trophy as a hammer, she crushes the defenseless apple into fragments.

"Get the picture?"

The dweeb stares forlornly at her.

"I think you missed a piece," he finally says woodenly.

She glowers. "Did I?" Grabbing one of the larger apple fragments from the desk, she slowly and triumphantly eats it.

Welcome to the hilariously entertaining world of Lynch—the former Illinois State School of Theatre undergrad who went on to become one of the funniest and most successful TV and movie performers in the world of contemporary showbiz.

After starring in half a dozen smash-hit motion pictures, including 2000's *Best in Show* and the 2008 blockbuster comedy *Role Models*, the 50-year-old Lynch now ranks as one of the most accomplished screen stars in Hollywood.

Having nailed down a shelf full of acting awards—including a coveted 2010 Emmy and a Golden Globe earlier this year for Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for the Fox chart-buster *Glee*—Lynch has become an entertainment supernova. But she's a star who remains singularly unimpressed by her own success.

Although she's deadly serious about her acting, Lynch maintains a refreshingly light-hearted outlook on the subject of her own achievements, while frequently guffawing out loud at the thought of her own undeniable stardom.

Take that thrilling moment in Los Angeles last August, for example, when they handed Lynch one of television's most striking symbols: the gleaming silver trophy with the word Emmy carved across its glittering surface. The euphoric Lady Jane told a worldwide TV audience, "I'm an actor, and we do it because we're compelled to do it. We have no other choice—or marketable skills."

Just before thanking "my wife Lara"—she's very proud of her same-sex marriage to Florida psychologist Lara Embry last year—Lynch triggered roars of laughter by also thanking the Illinois folks who brought her up.



"I want to thank my parents on the South Side of Chicago for raising us," she clamored to surging applause. "Yeah, South Side! I want to thank my parents for raising us to the sounds of musical theater, and for being so unintentionally funny."

Lynch was born and raised in Dolton, just south of Chicago, as the daughter of a hard-working banker and a homemaker. They gave her a keen appreciation for Broadway musical comedy and the joys of unbridled laughter at the dinner table.

A born entertainer with a knack for breaking her friends up with zany one-liners, Lynch descended onto Illinois State's campus in 1978. It wasn't long before she fell under the sway of legendary ISU theatre professor Jean Scharfenberg.

"She was wonderful," Lynch recalled in a recent interview, while describing the terror that the ISU "Dragon Lady" inspired in her acting students. "She wore layers and layers of clothing, and she had a big voice. When this woman walked down the hall, the kids would

part like the Red Sea!"

The late Scharfenberg remains an iconic figure who taught drama at ISU for more than

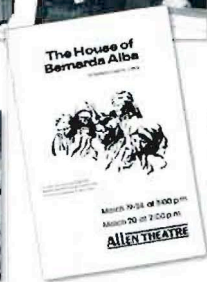
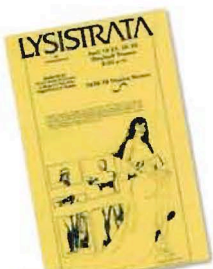
30 years. When remembering her, Lynch admits to some very mixed feelings: "She was a scary presence, but you wanted her attention, and you wanted her to approve of your acting. Sometimes, when people ask me today if I'm 'channeling' somebody from my past [while playing tyrannical characters such as Sue Sylvester in *Glee*], I think of the Dragon Lady and I wonder if that might be true."

Another major influence at ISU was longtime directing professor Don LaCasse, who remembers Lynch as having "a lot of talent and a lot of presence" in his theatre classes. "Even back then, Jane was a really funny gal," he said, "as well as a very hard-working student. I wasn't at all surprised later when her acting career really took off."

Having departed Normal in the summer of 1982, Lynch went on to earn a master's degree in theatre at Cornell. What followed were several years of struggle in which she earned her "chops" as an actress with a natural talent for comedy. An imposing presence, Lynch radiated fearlessness and soon proved to be enormously effective in roles that called for an aggressive, in-your-face female with a redwood-sized chip on her shoulder.

By the late 1980s Lynch had already debuted on the silver screen with a mini-role in a "body-switching" comedy entitled *Vice Versa*. She did stage work in the Windy City, including a scintillating 1991 performance as Carol Brady in the Chicago Annoyance

Illinois State productions are among Jane Lynch's earliest acting credits. Scenes from two, below, are from *Lysistrata* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*.



"SHE'S ACTUALLY THE SWEETEST WOMAN YOU COULD EVER MEET."



Theatre presentation of *The Real Live Brady Bunch*. Lynch also spent several years winning major laughs and making some important showbiz connections with Chicago's Second City improvisational comedy acting troupe.

Next came a minor role with Harrison Ford in the 1993 film *The Fugitive*, followed by what most Hollywood historians now clearly describe as her breakthrough picture, *Best in Show*, for which Lynch played an outrageously pushy personal dog handler.

After that 2000 triumph on the big screen, Lynch's career took off. By 2006 she would be starring opposite Will Ferrell and with fellow Redbird Gary Cole in the side-splitting parody of the NASCAR world, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Her comic star had reached its zenith. Nobody in Tinseltown was very surprised when she wound up double-billed in 2009 with film legend Meryl Streep in Nora Ephron's cinematic paean to master chef Julia Child, *Julie & Julia*.

The next step was to parlay Lynch's soaring comic stature into a TV series that would decimate the Nielsen ratings, which is precisely what happened with *Glee*. The show is built around a fictional, small-town Ohio high school where the football players—and their viciously aggressive cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester—do their best to terrorize the dorks,



dipsticks, and dweebs in the school's "show chorus." As such, *Glee* is the perfect vehicle for the scowling, sneering, maniacally belligerent persona created by Lynch.

Morrison, Lynch's costar on the show, says she's not at all like the gruff, butt-kicking Sue Sylvester that *Glee* fans have come to loathe and adore. "She's actually the sweetest woman you could ever meet," he said in a recent interview. "She's so great...I crack up in her face a lot [during rehearsals]. When I heard that we were going to improvise [during taping of the show], I was terrified. But over the last year, she's raised the expectations I have for myself."

Ask Lynch to reflect on her astonishing success in showbiz and the laughter-loving comic actor will reply by pointing out that she's managed to succeed as the coach of the *Glee* "Cheerios" cheerleading squad almost in spite of herself given she "can't sing or dance" a lick and never could.

"I have to start 10 rehearsals earlier than everyone else," she says with a jab of typically self-deprecating humor, "because I'm no dancer, for sure. But I do enjoy it. It really is the most wonderful job—even if I have to work harder than everyone else at the dancing!"



A high school is the setting for *Glee*, which stars Lynch as Sue Sylvester and Matthew Morrison as Will, left.

Music is a staple of the show, as members of the glee club "New Directions," center, perform in each episode.

Lynch has captured many accolades for her performance, including an Emmy, right, and a Golden Globe.