



## Lynch, Jane (b. 1960)

by Linda Rapp

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Actress Jane Lynch has forged a very successful career on television, in movies, and on the stage. She has appeared in a wide variety of dramatic and comedic roles, including some memorable turns portraying lesbian characters.

Jane Lynch, born July 14, 1960, grew up in Dolton, Illinois, a small southern suburb of Chicago. She studied acting at Illinois State University in Normal, where she earned her bachelor's degree in 1982. She continued her education at Cornell University, from which she received her M.F.A. in theater.

The program at Cornell was intense but rewarding. Since there were only seven students in Lynch's class, she had an extraordinary opportunity to explore a broad spectrum of experiences as a performer. "I was just thrown into parts I would never have played otherwise; I was stretched to within an inch of my life, and it really revealed that I had more talent than I thought I did . . . I played ingénues, I played old ladies; I learned to fence, to dance, to sing," she recalled.

After graduation Lynch returned to Chicago, where she appeared in *The Real Live Brady Bunch*, on-stage performances of episodes of the television situation comedy *The Brady Bunch*, which first ran from 1969 to 1974. The show became a cult hit and, after its Chicago run, moved to New York for eight months and to Los Angeles for seven. Lynch subsequently went back to Chicago to do more theater, but she soon headed once again for southern California to pursue a career on screen.

The move was a success. Lynch made her film debut with a minor role in Stelvis Massi's *Taxi Killer* in 1988. During the 1990s she acted in several other movies, including Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive* (1993) and Carl Reiner's *Fatal Instinct* (1993). She also made numerous guest appearances on television shows.

Lynch returned to the theater in 1998, writing and starring in the comedy *Oh Sister, My Sister*, which earned the Best Comedy Ensemble of the Year Award from *LA Weekly*. The play was revived in 2004 as the initial offering of the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center's Lesbians in Theater program and was again enthusiastically received.

A cereal commercial eventually led to Lynch's break-through role in the movies. Her pitch for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes was directed by Christopher Guest, best known for his cinematic work but also extremely successful in advertising. A chance encounter in a restaurant some months later led Guest to invite Lynch to participate in his upcoming film project.

*Best in Show* (2000) is one of Guest's "mockumentaries," parodies of some aspect of society, in this case dog shows. Guest provided a script in broad outline but allowed the actors to explore and develop their own characters.

Lynch played the trainer of the odds-on favorite, Rhapsody in White (call name Butch), a female standard poodle, owned by an elderly gent and his trophy wife (played by Jennifer Coolidge). Romance bloomed



Jane Lynch at the premiere of *The L Word's* fourth season in 2007. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele. Copyright © 2007 Angela Brinksele.

between the trainer and the wife. The relationship was clandestine at first, but by the end of the film, the women were happily out. In the epilogue portion of the movie, Lynch's character describes the couple's post-dog-show activities: "We started this magazine, *American Bitch*. It's a focus on the issues of the lesbian purebred dog owner."

*Best in Show* also featured an openly gay couple (played by Michael McKean and John Michael Higgins) whose characters are among the funniest and most sympathetic of the film.

Lynch's work in *Best in Show* not only brought her to wider public attention but also earned her a special place in the hearts of lesbian fans, some of whom, she noted with amusement, have jokingly asked her where to find a copy of *American Bitch*.

In a 2005 interview Lynch stated that although she had her first lesbian relationship at the age of twenty, she did not come out to her family for another twelve years. Living far from her parents, she did not have to deal with the issue on an immediate daily basis, but the weight of it led her to seek psychological therapy. In the course of therapy, she did an exercise of writing a letter to her parents. "It just felt so right that I sent it," she said. "My parents were just wonderful about it."

As her career was taking off, she no longer felt any need to hide her lesbianism. She realizes that being out is easier for her as a character actor than it would be as a leading lady. Although she acknowledges the persistence of homophobia in the entertainment industry that has led stars from Albert Lunt and Lynn Fontanne to Rock Hudson to conceal their true sexuality, Lynch has felt free to be open and speak out as a woman-loving woman.

She was honored by POWER UP in 2005 as one of the Ten Amazing Gay Women in Showbiz of the year.

Lynch's versatility as a character actress has earned her guest roles on a wide variety of television shows, from comedies including *Frasier*, *Arrested Development*, and *Desperate Housewives*, to dramatic series such as *The X Files*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and *Boston Legal*. She also co-starred in the improvised comedy *Lovespring International* (2006) on the Lifetime channel.

Lynch is proud to have had a recurring role on *The L Word*, which she admires because "the lesbianism is a given. Sexuality is a given, and then we just tell stories about people."

Lynch describes her *L Word* lawyer character as an "old-school butch" type and has enjoyed portraying her. But she adds, "I want to be an actor more than I want to be a 'gay actor.'" She counts herself lucky not to be pigeonholed. "I don't just play gay people," she remarks, but she has never hesitated to do so.

Lynch's cinematic credits include Adam McKay's *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) and Lorene Machado's *Bam Bam and Celeste* (2005), a vehicle for Margaret Cho, who wrote the screenplay. Lynch called her character in the latter "a backwoods mountain-type woman who falls for Margaret, who, though not gay [in the film], falls for me because I treat her like a real lady."

Lynch rejoined Guest's improvisational troupe to make *A Mighty Wind* (2003), another mockumentary, this time centering on veterans of 1960s folk-music groups coming together for a tribute concert in honor of a deceased promoter. Lynch did her own singing as Laurie Bohner, the lead female vocalist of the wholesome New Main Street Singers, who, it emerged, had a second career as a porn star.

Lynch's also appeared in another Guest film, *For Your Consideration* (2006). The movie takes aim at the Academy Awards and their attendant hype. It follows the fortunes of the cast of a second-rate film who dream of glory when rumors begin swirling on the Internet that the has-been performer playing the

matriarch may be in line for an award. Lynch appears as the host of a television entertainment show contributing to the Oscar buzz.

Lynch's professional talents have been much in demand of late. Among her recent films are Alan Cumming's *Suffering Men's Charity* (2006); Greg Araki's *Smiley Face* (2006); and Steve Blair's *I Do & I Don't* (2006). Her performance as Julia Child's sister in Nora Ephron's *Julie and Julia* (2009) earned high critical praise.

In addition to her frequent guest appearances on television shows, Lynch has recurring roles in the series *Two and a Half Men* and *Glee*.

In 2009, she received acclaim (and a Golden Globe nomination as best supporting actress) for her work in *Glee*, which has attracted a large gay and lesbian audience.

In a 2004 interview Lynch lamented the lack of visibility of lesbian characters on film and network television but struck a hopeful note, saying, "Our history tells us we ultimately weave everyone into the fabric of society, . . . so I think it's just a matter of time."

Lynch has expressed an interest in directing, so it may be that she will make even more contributions to the positive change she envisions.

In January 2010, Lynch and her girlfriend, psychologist Lara Embry, announced their plan to marry.

The two tied the knot in Sunderland, Massachusetts on May 31, 2010. Among the vows Lynch made was to be a good parent to Embry's eight-year-old daughter. The ceremony was followed by a small dinner party at a local restaurant.

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