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Alumni Engagement

5-1-2023

Redbird Buzz Episode 23: Jane Lynch, May 1, 2023

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Recommended Citation

Kobus, Rachel and Lynch, Jane, "Redbird Buzz Episode 23: Jane Lynch, May 1, 2023" (2023). *Redbird Buzz*. 23.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/redbirdbuzz/23>

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 23: Jane Lynch

May 1, 2023

Rachel Kobus 00:09

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm Rachel Kobus from Alumni Engagement. Today we're sitting down with Emmy and Golden Globe award-winning actor, comedian, author, producer, singer, Redbird alum, the one and only Jane Lynch. Jane is known for her many television and film roles, including *Glee*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *Two and a Half Men*, *Only Murders in the Building*, *Julie and Julia*, *Best in Show*, and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. She debuted on Broadway in the production of *Annie* in 2013, and recently finished her stint in the revival of *Funny Girl* this past year. Her work on and off camera has earned her many awards, accolades, and a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. And now she can add ISU guest artist in residence to her credentials to.

Rachel Kobus 01:00

So without further ado, what's the word, Redbird? Can we discuss the reason we're fortunate enough to have you here in a School of Theatre and Dance studio with us today, Jane?

Jane Lynch 01:09

Well, I am directing a staged reading of Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers*. And this was all my idea, I called Al Goldfarb, who used to be the dean and he was also the president, or the head, of the Department of Theatre Arts, and I was a student in his theater history class. And we've kept in touch and I said, what can we do about maybe getting me in there for, you know, a few weeks to do this? And by the next morning we already had it scheduled.

Rachel Kobus 01:38

And here you are.

Jane Lynch 01:38

And here I am.

Rachel Kobus 01:39

So why now? Why did you want to share your expertise with our School of Theater and Dance students?

Jane Lynch 01:43

Well, I was in *Funny Girl*, and I hadn't done theater in a long time - I mean a really long time, and I was talking to some of the people who are in the chorus, and they're, you know, wonderful dancers, and, but they, I noticed they didn't really have any acting technique. No offense to all these people, because

they did such a great job, but I thought that might be a really fun thing to do is to be with some young folks and take a play apart and - because I learned at ISU how to think like an actor and how to take a play apart and I learned how to act here, so I learned the technique. So I thought I would share my expertise, which sounds rather highfalutin, but I did want to, you know, kind of take apart a good old American play, something that stood the test of time, nothing new and weird and avant-garde, but kind of straightforward, with, you know, with a lot of pathos within the comedy and *Lost in Yonkers* is certainly that kind of play.

Rachel Kobus 02:44

And so in three weeks you'll have how many students performing a stage reading of *Lost in Yonkers*, then?

Jane Lynch 02:49

We have two casts.

Rachel Kobus 02:50

Oh, all right, okay.

Jane Lynch 02:50

Yeah, so there's a - one cast will perform on Friday and one cast will perform on the Saturday, the 5th and the 6th of May. And so there - plus the narrator, who reads the edited downstage directions, we have 15, because someone's doing, in two casts. So there's 15 actors, and we have three folks doing, you know, stage management and assistant directing. So it's just been a joy. Small group. And, you know, it's been kind of our time together, those four hours every night, to just take this thing apart and we're having a really good time. And, I mean, there's, it's just a joy. I mean, the talent here has kind of blown me away. I wasn't expecting this level, I really wasn't.

Rachel Kobus 03:31

And that's amazing for us to hear too. And like you said, our students are so talented, and they want to show, they see you do great things and they're hoping, I think, to be like you someday. So to have you back here, it's truly amazing.

Jane Lynch 03:41

Yeah, well, they'll be their own version of themselves, for sure.

Rachel Kobus 03:44

Love to hear that. And, but so now a different version of you, how's it feel being in the director's seat? You're in a whole 180 now, you were a student here and now a director. So what's that like?

Jane Lynch 03:52

I like it. I like - not that I like being the boss or anything, I don't necessarily like that, I have to kind of step into that and have a little more confidence in myself, because indeed, the director is the captain of the ship. But I'm really enjoying working with the actors, and I love to analyze, I love to take things apart and I love to talk to actors about acting. So I get to do that and it's, you know, I'm not, I don't have that

white-hot ambition that I used to have to act, to, like, do another role. And like, people will say, what is your, what will be your next big role? And I don't know, and I kind of think my next big role is to be a director.

Rachel Kobus 04:32

And so here's a great place to start at ISU [cross talk].

Jane Lynch 04:34

That's exactly what I wanted to do, kind of brought two of my desires together in one candy bar, as they say.

Rachel Kobus 04:41

I love it. So while you're back on campus, is there anything fun you have to do, right, like, do you have to go to Avanti's? I saw, yes, right, because you were our unofficial tour guide for Illinois and that was the only thing you did mention, was Avanti's, but -

Jane Lynch 04:53

I did, yeah. I haven't been to Avanti's yet, but we're going to do that next weekend. I think on Saturday I'm going over to Al's house and we're going to some Avanti's, and I discovered a terrific coffee shop called Coffee Hound. I'm there every morning, I highly recommend it. And I also recommend that you don't add a shot to your drink because I am so wound up right now, you guys. I'm doing everything I can to restrain myself.

Rachel Kobus 05:22

You're doing great job then, so -

Jane Lynch 05:23

Thank you. Well, I'm holding on to a bottle of water but it's shaking, you can't see it.

Rachel Kobus 05:27

Acting, I love it. So, going back then, you're a director now, but your time as a student - so what was that like? What was a typical student life for Jane Lynch when you were here in the 80s?

Jane Lynch 05:38

I don't remember -

Rachel Kobus 05:39

Okay, we'll move on to the next question -

Jane Lynch 05:40

Honestly, well, no - but I will, I will elaborate and pontificate, as is my wont. It's so funny, it was over 40 years ago.

Rachel Kobus 05:49

No, it wasn't.

Jane Lynch 05:50

40, I think it's 41 years ago. And it's almost like it didn't happen. But I walked on campus and I go, I'm having a faint remembrance of this, of the quad, where I lived at 211 North University, which is now a ROTC building.

Rachel Kobus 06:09

Yes, it is, yep.

Jane Lynch 06:09

And I was at Hamilton-Whitten, which doesn't exist anymore, I used to live in Hamilton. And I, of course, I walk by Centennial West and lots of memories will pour forth, but for the most part, I feel like it's, I'm experiencing it anew and I will say this, it's cleaner. It's sparkling!

Rachel Kobus 06:31

Good job ISU, yeah.

Jane Lynch 06:32

Yeah, I'm wondering - it's, like, it's sparkling, even Watterson looks good and I used to think that it was such a kind of a an ugly part of our landscape. But it looks, it looks great. It looks like they cleaned it up or something, I don't know.

Rachel Kobus 06:45

Yeah, no, I love it. So 40 years, we don't age, we just get better and better.

Jane Lynch 06:48

You just get better and better. Yeah, it's really - and the students are - there's a maturity and a self-possession about even, like, freshmen - I meet a freshman and I don't remember being or at least feeling that confident and that sure of myself. If I do have any memories, it's of feeling kind of small and hoping that, you know, I get cast in the next play and that I make friends.

Jane Lynch 06:48

A typical college student.

Jane Lynch 06:51

Yeah, I guess, yeah. But I don't see it in them, I'm just, like, wow, these, the, I'm sure they've got it somewhere, but these kids are really, like, more evolved than I was.

Rachel Kobus 07:11

Well, and I have to - being from the Alumni Engagement office, your sister was here overlapping times, Julie. So did she - I mean, first off, first question, how was that, having a sister here? And then second off, did she influence you in being a Redbird legacy? I've always been curious.

Jane Lynch 07:38

We - everybody - I had a group of girlfriends, and my sister was one of them, in high school, and we all came here. With a few exceptions, all of us that went to college came here. So this was the place to go. I actually - and at the time it was easier to get into ISU than it is now, but this is the only school that accepted me. I was turned down by - I was waitlisted at Carbondale and ISU accepted me and my father breathed a huge sigh of relief because I didn't have great grades. I was like a solid C-minus student and my ACT I think was like 13. Yeah, that's pretty embarrassing.

Rachel Kobus 08:15

That's okay, you grow as a person.

Jane Lynch 08:17

Yeah, exactly. So my sister had come before me - and it's funny because we couldn't be more close now, but she would walk right by me on campus.

Rachel Kobus 08:25

Stop it!

Rachel Kobus 08:26

She'd just walked right by, she'd be like, uhhh, like, a little embarrassed of her goofy little sister. And then she was in a sorority, she was a Delta Zeta, so I never saw her. So it was funny that, you know, we were sisters, we never saw each other, never the twain shall meet. She's a teacher now. She's retired, but she learned to be a teacher here and she taught, basically, kindergarten and first grade. She loves the kiddos.

Rachel Kobus 08:50

Well, so, do you in your own way too, so you both have that, you know - that's great to hear that -

Jane Lynch 08:53

We do. We're both Cancers too, which is the astrological sign of the mother.

Rachel Kobus 08:58

That's perfect. And so, besides, you know, maybe your sister didn't have that kind of inspiration now - then - but she has it now. And you were inspired by other people when you came to ISU. So can you talk about what it means to find that mentor and who your mentors were? I know you talked about Al already, but how that helped you through your college career and maybe into where you even are now?

Jane Lynch 09:18

Well, Al has become my mentor and good friend in the last like 20 years, so not necessarily - he'll tell me stories, though. Remember when you came to my office? And I don't remember. And you said you were upset about this, and I told you this and you felt better. And I don't remember. I don't remember. I do remember being scared to death of Jean Scharfenberg. She was a teacher in the Theater Department, a legend. She was wonderful but she could also be kind of cruel and I wanted her to pay attention to me and then I didn't want her to pay attention to me.

Rachel Kobus 09:51

One of those.

Jane Lynch 09:51

Yes, and I remember a couple of actors to this day and I bet if I saw their work now with 40 years of experience under my belt, I would still say they were amazing actors, Karen Hott and [Denise] Leigh Ebdon, great actors. Yeah, so I learned a lot while I was here watching people who do it well.

Rachel Kobus 10:12

What great advice for then our current students and prospective students, just to sit back and watch and not always have to be -

Jane Lynch 10:18

Yes, exactly, because, you know, if you're not cast - and I was, but usually in smaller parts, and then I'd go semesters without being cast. So you end up doing something else, like being an assistant director or working, you know, in the costume crew or something like that. And, you know, I would much rather have been on stage, but I learned so much watching and I did something that I think was unique and couldn't have been a bigger lesson for me. The URTA auditions, which are the regional auditions for the summer theatres and the graduate programs, one year it was at ISU, so that meant all these kids from the Midwest came to ISU to audition for all these programs and I volunteered to be the timer. You get two minutes, three minutes, or something like that, and I was terrible at it because I didn't call anybody on time because I felt too bad. But I got to watch all the auditions, so I got to watch a variety of people at a variety of levels and I learned so much. And I learned so much about how to present yourself in an audition. The ones that you go, wow, was that great, and the ones who go, oh, wow, they missed an opportunity here, they looked scared or they looked like they didn't care, they didn't prepare, they didn't do their work. So I learned a lot watching.

Rachel Kobus 11:31

Yeah, okay, so, really, everyone, take advantage of the outside opportunities. It's - no matter where you are in your career, really, too, I would say, please take advantage of your opportunities.

Jane Lynch 11:39

Oh, absolutely, of watching people.

Rachel Kobus 11:40

You never know what's gonna - yes, yes.

Jane Lynch 11:41

Yes. Oh, absolutely. And, you know, we're, right now we're in closed rehearsals, but we're going to open them up starting Monday, or whenever we go to the theater, I forget if that's Monday or not. So, you know, if you're in the theater department, I think we're going to restrict it to the theater department.

Rachel Kobus 11:55

That makes sense.

Jane Lynch 11:57

Come on by if you're an acting student and watch, just watch people working, and you learn so much.

Rachel Kobus 12:04

And you've learned a lot since 1982 being at Illinois State and I mean, from that point, you just rose to fame right away, right?

Jane Lynch 12:10

Yeah, right. It just happened like that [snaps fingers], my friends.

Rachel Kobus 12:13

Straight up!

Rachel Kobus 12:14

So, but I think I, you know, I did my research, and you went to Chicago, you did Steppenwolf, you did Second City, and then there was a Frosted Flakes commercial. So let's talk about, I mean, I'm sure some have heard about Frosted Flakes, but where did Frosted Flakes and Tony the Tiger -

Jane Lynch 12:14

Right.

Jane Lynch 12:30

Fit in with my trajectory? Well, I was auditioning for commercials in LA a lot, like four or five times a week, and I auditioned for a Kellogg's Frosted Flakes commercial, and it was basically improvisation. And I got called back and when I went to the callback, it said Director: Christopher Guest, so he was directing that commercial but we didn't know when we did the initial audition. So I did, I, he cast me and so I did this Kellogg's Frosted Flakes commercial about Tony the Tiger with an actor named Sean Masterson, who I had known for years too as an improviser, a really great actor. And we played husband and wife and Chris came up to me at lunch and he said, you know, I do movies. And I said - you know, he had just done *Waiting for Guffman*, and I was like, yeah, yeah, I know, because I fell out of my seat laughing watching that movie and had a preposterous fantasy that one day I could be in a movie like that. And he said maybe we'll work together again and we did, he cast me in Best in Show, yeah.

Rachel Kobus 13:31

And then it all took off from there. 230 credits on your IMBD -

Jane Lynch 13:35

Is that right?

Rachel Kobus 13:35

Maybe I went and counted, Jane, I -

Jane Lynch 13:37

Maybe - did you? That's great.

Rachel Kobus 13:39

You don't have to, I did it for you.

Jane Lynch 13:41

Thank you so much.

Rachel Kobus 13:43

But no, truly, though, you have so many big and television screen credits. You've been on Broadway, you have your own traveling holiday show, you've done *See Jane Sing*, you, I mean, you've done so much. So how does that make you feel knowing that you have all this underneath your name now?

Jane Lynch 13:59

Yeah, I guess I don't think about that too much. But it is, you know, I think it's, someone would say why do I have so much? Because you'll notice that some of its, you know, it's like a guest spot and you won't recognize the name of the character because I was in for, like, just a scene. And I think this works for me, this might not be somebody else's way of doing things, but I said yes to everything because I love doing it. I never wanted to do anything else. I'm not qualified to do anything else. But it was a really-

Rachel Kobus 14:31

Listen, you can listen, watch [cross talk].

Jane Lynch 14:33

Exactly. And the reason I listened and watched was because I'm, even though maybe I wasn't getting the roles that I - I never thought I deserved anything, but that I wanted, I had this compulsion. And if you've ever heard of a weeble, those toys when I was growing up, it says, "weebles wobble but they don't fall down." And I was a weeble.

Rachel Kobus 14:56

That's a good analogy, I love it!

Jane Lynch 14:58

Get right back up, [imitates weeble].

Rachel Kobus 15:01

And you know, going with that, everyone knows you as Sue Sylvester from *Glee*. I mean, and we love that, but I will say, *Only Murderers in the Building* with Steve Martin. Gosh, I laughed so hard when you were the person that came out as his stunt double in that show. You've been on *Criminal Minds*, you've

been on, you know, just even shows like *Psych* and then like you said, *Two and a Half Men*, you just go and say yes. How do you decide on those roles and how do you figure out your character so quickly, then?

Jane Lynch 15:27

Well, I never decide on a role. If it's offered to me, I say yes.

Rachel Kobus 15:30

You say yes, okay.

Jane Lynch 15:30

And I think anybody that is in the position, you - if you're an actor, you understand this. Unless you're a star, if you get offered something - I remember George Clooney said a story about some stupid thing he did that people said, why did you do that? He said, when I got the phone call I jumped up and down. Same thing. You get really, really thrilled that they invite you, you know, you go off and you do the audition and there are many people auditioning. And if you're the one that they choose it's a big deal. It's a big deal. So I choose nothing, I am chosen. Oh, that's a beautiful thing, someone write that down.

Rachel Kobus 16:06

Yeah, no kidding. It's all right, it's on camera now.

Jane Lynch 16:07

I choose nothing, I am chosen. Yeah, so I didn't choose anything, but I do, I make decisions fast. So I don't like to be in that position of pondering what I'm going to do.

Rachel Kobus 16:25

You don't have the time to do it when you get offered, you have to get into that character.

Jane Lynch 16:27

So right, right. So I make quick decisions. And that's why I'm really grateful for the technique that I learned here, because they're usually, those decisions are based in something. They're based in the character and the given circumstances, because that is now second nature to me. So, and that's why you said why do I, how could I, how do I build the characters for each one, and it wasn't really even building, it was just kind of [snaps fingers] things just snap in. I go, okay, this, oh, this is how this character is, oh, and this is how this character is. And you do it fast and you make a strong decision because they want to see these strong decisions. They don't want to see like kind of mealy-mouthed stuff. And I'm just not, I'm not, I don't tend toward the mealy-mouth, I kind of go fast.

Rachel Kobus 17:11

Well, and that's why they keep telling you, asking you to come back and do guest roles and do this and do that. And it's [cross talk] say yes, see, and that's, it's working well, yep.

Jane Lynch 17:16

It's certainly one trajectory in an actor's life is to do that, and it's mine.

Rachel Kobus 17:19

I mean, I, like we said, you've earned a lot from it, so you, kudos to you, you do amazing work, so -

Jane Lynch 17:25

Oh, thank you.

Rachel Kobus 17:26

And then with that, though, what has been your most memorable moments, whether it's on screen, off screen, personally, what's something in your life that you are most proud of that you look back on?

Jane Lynch 17:35

I forget.

Rachel Kobus 17:37

All right, moving on from that one.

Rachel Kobus 17:38

No, no, I will give you an answer. I really do - it's not that I have a bad memory, but I'm not really sentimental.

Rachel Kobus 17:44

Yeah, that's okay!

Jane Lynch 17:45

But no, let me answer it in a way though. Don't move on so quickly, young lady!

Rachel Kobus 17:49

So sorry!

Jane Lynch 17:51

I think, you know, in a general sense, when I think about being in this business, and in not just film and television, but the theater, it's being a part of a group. I love ensemble work. I love where one of the things that we do right before rehearsal is everybody closes their eyes and we talk about how we are all one cell of one entity. And there really is no one more - like, is the liver more important than the heart? No, they're, they build this body politic. So though you might have a role in this project, you're not more important than the stage manager. We're all the same, but we do different things. And that is my favorite thing, is, you know, like, when we do those comedy improv - those comedy ensemble films like *Talladega Nights*, or *40-Year-Old Virgin*, or *Role Models*. You know, Paul Rudd might be in it and Will Ferrell and, you know, Steve Carell, but the best joke always wins. And they were mostly improvised too, a lot of it was improvised. You know, we, good solid scripts, but they let us add stuff and everybody was equal even though it was Steve's film or, you know, so, and I love that.

Rachel Kobus 19:08

Glad I didn't jump over that question then. So, okay, maybe - this, hopefully this isn't too sentimental either, but what's your biggest life lesson you would share either to someone maybe starting out in acting, someone that's looking into theater as a prospective student, someone that's been in it for a while, what kind of advice do you, or biggest thing you've learned so far?

Jane Lynch 19:28

I would say, don't have goals, like, I want to do this by this age and I want to play these kinds of roles. That - cause then you paint yourself into a corner and there might be something right in front of you that you, that passes by you that you don't say yes to. So I think ultimately the thing I would say is just relax and be kind to yourself and don't try to push yourself too hard. Don't try to push the river as the mystics would say, and kind of just flow with it, and you're taken care of, everything's gonna be taken care of. And your part is to allow and, you know, to do your work and be prepared.

Rachel Kobus 20:03

Yeah, great. So with that, let's, I'm gonna flow right into what hopefully is a little fun for you.

Jane Lynch 20:07

I kind of like hope it's fun for me too.

Rachel Kobus 20:09

I hope it's fun. We're not wasting her time, she loves being here on Redbird Buzz podcast. So, just a few things, just because we like to get to know our alums better and our guests better, so let's start off with just some easy questions. First thing that comes to your mind -

Jane Lynch 20:23

Okay.

Rachel Kobus 20:23

Favorite animal?

Jane Lynch 20:24

Dog.

Rachel Kobus 20:25

[Whispers] yes! When I'm not at work, I'm -

Jane Lynch 20:29

Drinking coffee.

Rachel Kobus 20:30

We heard, no double shots, guys, you know it.

Rachel Kobus 20:34

Game show you would want to be a contestant on?

Jane Lynch 20:37

Oh, 25 Words or Less, and I have, several times. I love that game so much.

Rachel Kobus 20:43

Favorite ice cream?

Jane Lynch 20:44

Mint chip.

Rachel Kobus 20:45

Oh, okay, I've had that twice now. Favorite actor you will work, you'd like to work with?

Jane Lynch 20:51

Well, I've worked with Meryl Streep, so that's great. And I worked with Steve Martin, so there you go.

Rachel Kobus 20:56

There you go. How can you give up that? Favorite podcast?

Jane Lynch 21:00

Oh, *JeffMara Podcast*. Look it up, near death experience.

Rachel Kobus 21:05

Okay. I was gonna say, so not *SmartLess* by Sean Hayes, we'd love to see you on this podcast next!

Jane Lynch 21:10

Oh, I'd love to be on his podcast too. Is he still doing it while he's on Broadway doing *Good Night, Oscar*?

Rachel Kobus 21:15

Yeah, I don't know about that but I just had to put, throw that out there to see who you're actually going to say, but now I have to look up that podcast, so thank you for sharing, amazing. I'm very big into *Crime Junkies* right now. Favorite place at ISU?

Jane Lynch 21:30

Coffee Hound.

Rachel Kobus 21:33

I don't even have that one on there, I feel like we've - she really likes Coffee Hound, okay. And how about a piece of advice you'd give to your younger self?

Jane Lynch 21:41

Oh, just, I think what I just said, I hate to repeat myself but I will.

Rachel Kobus 21:44

No, no, that's fine.

Jane Lynch 21:45

Just relax and don't tug on the roots, which is another thing mystics say.

Rachel Kobus 21:50

I love though that you've gone from this young, you know, 40 years ago at ISU to now and you're living by the goals that you - or, by the advice that you said -

Jane Lynch 21:58

Well, I've learned them, I've come to them. They've kind of found their way, they blossomed inside of me.

Rachel Kobus 22:02

Well, and the other thing too, is you know, I've talked to so many students and faculty and staff that all have interacted you with you in this, you know, short week you've been here, you have two more weeks, two more weeks to go, I think. And everything I've heard, Jane, is amazing, I've heard, you know, you've been networking students with people in New York, you are helping them with their resume. Oh, yeah, uh-huh, I've heard -

Jane Lynch 22:19

You have some great people here, our stage manager, yeah, I hooked him up with somebody, I'll tell you what happened.

Rachel Kobus 22:24

Just things like that, though, so, learn, you know, teaching the students, again, skills that are off-stage, talking to faculty, you know, bringing, I think, some positive and there's some refreshment to Illinois State, is just you being here. It's just great to have you and so I have to say that, just cause when I started hearing all these stories I was like, all right, I get to talk about all this, this is great. So, we -

Jane Lynch 22:44

You've been wonderful, by the way.

Rachel Kobus 22:45

Oh, well, thank you!

Jane Lynch 22:46

You're very good at this. You know, someone said to me, remember this is a small-town university, which, oh man, she's the top!

Rachel Kobus 22:51

Yes. Yes. Yes. But, no, and we couldn't do it obviously without all of our team from our University Advancement department, so - and without you. That's why we love to talk to alums and guests like you, we love to hear your stories and whatnot. So before we end, I, you kind of answered this, but I'm going to phrase in a different way. So what's next for actor, performer, host, ISU lecturer, Redbird, Jane Lynch. Maybe not a role, but is it, you know, directing, is it, you know, like, what you talked about earlier?

Jane Lynch 23:21

I don't know.

Rachel Kobus 23:22

I love it.

Jane Lynch 23:22

And I never do. I'm right here and right now, I truly am. I'm at ISU and I'm doing *Lost in Yonkers* with about 18 to maybe 20 people.

Rachel Kobus 23:33

Yep, and we love having you, so -

Rachel Kobus 23:35

I love being here.

Rachel Kobus 23:35

Thank you for being with us today, Jane.

Jane Lynch 23:37

It's been a pleasure.

Rachel Kobus 23:49

And that was School of Theater and Dance 1982 alum, the iconic, the talented Jane Lynch. Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.