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AFTER DECADES IN HOLLYWOOD, MELANIE LYNSKEY FINALLY BLEW UP AS ONE OF THE LEADS IN SURVIVALIST DRAMA *YELLOWJACKETS*. NOW THAT SHE'S IN THE SPOTLIGHT, SHE'S MAKING SURE HER MESSAGE - ABOUT SELF-LOVE AND STICKING TO YOUR GUNS - IS HEARD, FINDS **JESSICA PRUPAS**

PHOTOGRAPHS:  
GIZELLE HERNANDEZ







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elanie Lyskey knows the world is unfair and she hates it. She tells me as much when I reach her via Zoom in Vancouver, where she's filming the second season of *Yellowjackets*. "I think the world is set up so unfairly. It's so unfair towards women. Women are made to feel bad about everything," she says. "You're supposed to be sexy, you're supposed to bounce back from having a baby, you're supposed to do all these things. It's like, do you even understand how much help you need to even continue to work after you have a child?"

After 30 years as a working actor, she has a lot of experience with the acute unfairness of Hollywood. She has spent most of her career playing memorable supporting roles in iconic films like *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999) and *Coyote Ugly* (2000) - but, because of the way the industry was, or continues to be, she didn't get a lot of lead offers. That slowly began to change a few years ago with beefier roles in projects like cult TV show *Togetherness* (2015). Flash forward to now and you'll find Lyskey in *Yellowjackets*, a psycho-horror-cum-mystery about a group of high





schoolers who are left stranded in the wilderness after a plane crash. The show is an epic hit and Lynskey is the undisputed star, having scored an Emmy nom, a Critics' Choice Award and a lot more attention than she's used to.

So, what changed? The industry has shifted, sure, but part of it is Lynskey herself – throughout her career, she's always stuck to her principles, and it's finally paying off. Take one example: Lynskey didn't exactly roll over immediately when the show's creators, Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, offered her the part. "My process [before I committed to the show] was just to make sure they had a plan going forward – and they had such a strong idea of what they wanted to do." They gave Lynskey the hard pitch, outlining in detail how they saw the plot unfolding over a five-season arc. It was ultimately their clarity of vision that made Lynskey sign on the dotted line.

From above: Juliette Lewis, Tawny Cypress with Melanie Lynskey in *Yellowjackets*; Lynskey and hubby Jason Ritter

Being an in-demand actor in LA who can afford to be picky about the work she takes on wasn't a likely future for Lynskey, who grew up in a small, isolated town called New Plymouth, on New Zealand's north island. She is the oldest of five siblings, with parents who she describes as "big personalities". "If there was a *Real Housewives of New Plymouth*, my mother would be the first person they would cast," she says. "She's very different from me. Lots of long blonde hair, lots of jewellery and high heels all the time no matter what."

Her version of teenage rebellion was rejecting make-up and refusing to buy into a beauty industry she believed was harming women. This outlook was bolstered by New Zealand society (which she calls "very feminist") and a formative relationship with a painter she babysat for, whose book collection included incendiary classics from Margaret Atwood, Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. "The kids would go to bed and I would just read. She'd come ▶



**"WHEN I HAD TO DO PUBLICITY FOR *HEAVENLY CREATURES*, I WOULD NOT WEAR MAKE-UP AND I WORE SNEAKERS TO THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL"**



home from dinner a bit tipsy and I'd talk to her about what I was reading. That was kind of my education."

These early encounters left a lasting imprint on Lynskey and as her career progressed, she carried these principles with her. "When I had to do publicity for *Heavenly Creatures*, I would not wear make-up and I wore sneakers to the Venice Film Festival. [My mom] was literally weeping and saying, 'Please, don't do this!'"

That was Lynskey's very first professional role. Directed by Peter Jackson, the film stars a 15-year-old Lynskey opposite a then unknown Kate Winslet. The whole thing was a crazy chance: Lynskey was scouted by Jackson when he was doing the rounds at New Zealand schools, searching for the right young actor to play Pauline Parker, the real-life Kiwi girl who, with

the help of her best friend Juliet Hulme (played by Winslet), plotted to kill her own mother. It launched Winslet's film career, but for years after, all Lynskey got was... crickets. Any comparison stung a little. "It just didn't feel fair to me. We just don't get Kate Winslets every day. Even I at the time was like, 'That's a movie star. Leave me alone. I have my own path.'"

Eventually, that path led her to *Ever After* - her next big role, playing Drew Barrymore's stepsister in a pseudo-Cinderella story. After that, work was steady and she eventually moved to Los Angeles when she was 22. But there were aspects of her adopted city she found challenging, to say the least. "Everyone was so tiny. I didn't know people could be so thin," she recalls. "I was skinny in New Plymouth. I'd go into rooms that were just filled with the tiniest and most beautiful people from

## "WHEN I LOOK BACK AT HOW SMALL I WAS AND HOW I'D CONSTANTLY GET OFFERED THOSE ROLES... I HAD TO FIGHT BACK AGAINST THAT"

every town in the world." She tells me that, at the time, she had suffered from disordered eating for many years. It became a real challenge "not to get thrown off course".

It certainly didn't help that she was being put up for roles as the "fat friend", in her words. "When I look back at how small I was and how I'd constantly get offered [those] roles..." she trails off. "I had to fight back against that for many, many years, saying I'm not willing to do that. And for a long time I was with an agency that was like, 'Why not?' It's, like, because these roles shouldn't exist."

Lynskey paints a paradoxical picture of her younger self. On the one hand, her self-esteem was terribly fragile, her body confidence shot; ▶



Jasmin Savoy Brown, Juliette Lewis, Christina Ricci and Lynskey at the *Yellowjackets* premiere in Los Angeles, November 2021



### CODE YELLOW THE INSPIRATION BEHIND YELLOWJACKETS

Melanie Lynskey plays Shauna in hit Showtime series *Yellowjackets*. The show explores a tense survival struggle between a team of teen soccer players forced to fend for themselves in the wilderness after a freak accident. The series was apparently inspired by William Golding's classic

novel *Lord of the Flies*, in which (as you'll recall) a bunch of schoolboys is marooned on an island together, with grisly consequences. "*Lord of the Flies* is about how socialisation falls away and how society is a facade," *Yellowjackets* creators Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson told

*The Hollywood Reporter*. "We thought, who is more socialised than women? As girls, you learn early on how to make people like



you and what the social hierarchies are." Why aren't there more female survival flicks, you might ask? *Wild*, starring Reese Witherspoon, is a noteworthy exception. And *Fall* (showing on Vera) ropes together two borderline frenemies on top of a 2,000ft radio mast.

on the other, she held strong convictions that she defended to the hilt. When I ask her how this could be, she has an explanation. “I think my feminist principles were stronger than however I felt about myself. I starved myself and was punishing and critical, but I did believe that beauty standards are unrealistic and I understood how I would be contributing to that by agreeing to play a character who’s just sitting in the corner eating a candy bar and being the butt of a joke.”

She tells me those complicated feelings that ravaged her younger years took a long time to work through. These days, she feels steadier on her feet, which she mostly credits to becoming a mother. “There really is something about having a daughter that makes me not want to waste any more time on that,” she tells me. And by “that”, she means the crippling, constant dissatisfaction many women feel about their looks. “I don’t ▶

**“I WANT MY DAUGHTER TO SEE A HEALTHY MOTHER WHO LOVES HERSELF. I WANT HER TO SEE THAT YOU CAN HAVE BREAD...”**



## SWEET DREAMS

### MELANIE LYNKEY'S CV



#### Born

Melanie Jayne Lynskey was born 16 May 1977 in New Plymouth, New Zealand. Her father is an orthopaedic surgeon and her mother is a former nurse.

#### Education

She attended New Plymouth Girls' High School, where she founded the dramatic improv team (a skill that came in handy during her *Heavenly Creatures* audition, which was improvised) before studying English at Victoria University of Wellington.

#### Fun fact

When she accepted her Critics' Choice Award for her part in *Yellowjackets*, Lynskey thanked her child's nanny in her acceptance speech, causing a stir online. “If I'm making a list of the most important people, she's top of my list,” she said later.

#### Key works

##### Heavenly Creatures (1994)

Lynskey's first professional role, in which she and Kate Winslet star as real-life schoolgirls (*left*) who form an obsessive friendship and plot to kill one of their mothers.

##### Togetherness (2015–16)

Cancelled after two seasons, this HBO series created by the Duplass brothers has since amassed a cult fanbase.

##### Candy (2022)

Lynskey received her first Critics' Choice Award nomination for her portrayal of Betty Gore, a murdered Texas housewife (*above*).

##### Yellowjackets (2021–)

This juggernaut TV series earned Lynskey a Critics' Choice Award and an Emmy nod. Its second season premieres this month.



want her to see me obsessing, looking in the mirror. I want her to see a healthy mother who loves herself. I want her to see that you can have bread... like, some people don't eat bread!"

This sure-footedness is something she wants to model for her young cast mates on *Yellowjackets* as well. When they're all on location in Vancouver, she regularly invites them over to her apartment, where everyone will have emotional heart-to-hearts under Lynskey's watch. "I feel like a mom,

**"I THINK IF I'D BEEN ABLE TO LOOK INTO THE FUTURE AND SEEN MYSELF COMFORTABLE, I WOULD HAVE BEEN SO SHOCKED"**

a big sister and a camp counsellor," she tells me. She wants her young peers to know she's there for them – even though, she says, they seem to need less help than she did. "They're so far ahead of where I was at their age," she says effusively. "Sophie [Nélisse, who plays the young Shauna] is so smart and sure of her boundaries. I love that this is what young women are like now."

She talks about her loved ones like a professional hype woman. Her Instagram grid is peppered with long, gushing tributes to her friends and colleagues (Justin Long is "one of her favourite people in the universe"; Emily Deschanel is "made of light and love and thoughtfulness"). You get the sense, speaking with Lynskey, that she cares profoundly about the people in her life and hasn't always applied that same kindness to herself.

Lynskey wants everyone to eat bread. She wants everyone to feel like their shiniest, most optimal selves: her family members, the friends she exalts on social media, the girls and young women everywhere who get all that ambient messaging under their skin. She's happy Hollywood has changed since she started out, and she hopes things keep trending in the right direction. "I think if I'd been able to look into the future at the height of my eating disorder and seen myself comfortable and in this particular body, I would have been so shocked that it was possible," she tells me. "To see myself on the cover of magazines. I really had a narrative of myself of what you should look like for those things to happen."

Recently, a fan shared a photo of Lynskey on Twitter alongside the news that she was going to play a role on *The Last of Us*, HBO's hit post-apocalyptic drama about a mind-controlling fungus that takes hold of the human race. Ex-reality show contestant Adrienne Curry commented on the post, denigrating Lynskey's body and questioning how someone of her physique could outrun flesh-eating zombies. Lynskey clapped back hard. "I'm playing a person who meticulously planned & executed an overthrow of [a government]. I am supposed to be *smart* ma'am. I don't need to be muscly. That's what henchmen are for." Looks like she finally believes her own hype.

 Watch *Yellowjackets*