



Sally Struthers:

She Still Makes You Laugh

by Glenn R. Swift

It was the “endless” summer of 1966 and eighteen-year-old Sally Struthers found herself crying her eyes out on her living room sofa. As the daughter of a well-respected surgeon in her hometown of Portland, Oregon, young Sally had always planned to go to medical school to follow in her father’s footsteps. After all, her parents had never had a son, and Sally was determined to make her father proud. Her grades were good enough to go wherever she wanted – her path appeared certain.

There was just one problem.

“I realized how much I couldn’t stand dissecting those frogs in biology class. So how was I going to work on cadavers for three years!” cracked Struthers, 60. “I was totally freaking out. I didn’t know what to do.”

That’s when mom shared a few words of advice with her frustrated daughter.

“Sally, you’ve been entertaining people since you first learned to walk and talk, maybe you should become an actress,” Struthers recounted.

A light went on.

“I had never even thought of acting before, but it seemed like the logical thing to do.”

Sally’s despair abruptly came to an end. Before she knew it, the determined teen was enrolled at the highly-acclaimed Pasadena Playhouse College of Theatre Arts. At the time, the prestigious drama school was known as “Hollywood’s talent factory” because so many stars had been discovered there.

Struthers took to acting like a fish to water.

Within a couple years, Struthers powerful onstage personality and good looks caught the attention of a number of local talent scouts who quickly cast her in a string of TV commercials.

Then came the big break.

On Stage

"I was asked to audition for a new film, *Five Easy Pieces*, starring Jack Nicholson. Jack was an up-and-coming actor at the time who had co-starred in *Easy Rider* the year before, but this was his break-out film as a lead actor."

Struthers was not quite twenty-two and had never appeared in film before, but she got the part.

You might have thought that mom and dad would have been overjoyed, considering that the movie was a big success. But there was one little problem.

In the movie, Struthers performed a hot love making scene with Nicholson – the director required her to perform the scene topless.

"I was absolutely terrified at what my mother would say once she found out. When the movie came to Portland, I finally broke down and told her that there was a scene in which I showed my breasts. I asked her if she could just close her eyes until that part was over. Well, she wasn't very happy. In fact, after returning home from the movie mom slammed the door and didn't say a word.... We never discussed it again," recalled Struthers whose mother has since passed.

Following the release of the movie, Struthers found herself dancing on the ultra-popular *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a counterculture variety show whose writing staff included Rob Reiner. Soon after, Struthers got the gig that would make her a household name.

"I auditioned for an upcoming sitcom, *All in the Family*, and got the part of Gloria Stivic," said Struthers referring to her role as the daughter of Archie and Edith Bunker (played by the late Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton) and husband of Michael "Meathead" Stivic (played by Rob Reiner).

"The network producers were so convinced of the show's future success that they told us to be prepared to have our whole lives changed forever within just a few days. But how can you prepare for something like that? I had never thought about becoming famous. I was determined to become a good actress, but I didn't put two and two together. I just didn't realize that if I did that I would probably become well known.... Guess you can say that I'm a bit blond sometimes," cracked Struthers.

Become a star she did. *All in the Family* ran for eight years, and then after a revamping as *Archie Bunker's Place*, it ran for another four. During this time, Struthers won two Emmys (1972 and 1979).

As luck would have it, Struthers was not present to accept her award on either occasion.

"My mother was rushed to the hospital while the awards ceremony was underway, and I had to leave early to be with her. We didn't know if mom was going to pull through and the last thing on my mind was the Emmys. I found out the next morning that I had won.... I never expected it.."

Seven years later, Struthers was again convinced she didn't have a chance. So much so, she decided to stay home, cook some popcorn and curl up on the sofa to watch the awards on TV with her family.

"I nearly choked on the popcorn when they called my name.... Although this was now my second Emmy, the idea of winning awards just never occurred to me. If I had wanted a trophy that bad, I would have joined a bowling league," laughed Struthers.

Her success on *All in the Family* eventually led her to the Broadway stage where she had leading roles in *The Odd Couple* (1985-86), *Grease* (1994-98) and *Annie* (1998).

"Appearing on Broadway was the culmination of my career as an actress. There's nothing like it in my profession. A lot of movie and television stars wouldn't dare try to learn an eighty-page script. Many only know how to do a scene if they can do forty-two takes," quipped Struthers. "It takes a lot of courage to get up there knowing you've got to get it right the first time."

Since her days on Broadway, Struthers has shown remarkable versatility as an actress. In addition to performing voice-overs for a number of animated series (a teenage Pebbles Flintstone in *The Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm Show*, Rebecca Cunningham in *TaleSpin* and Charlene Sinclair in *Dinosaurs*), Struthers has performed a number of diverse roles at some of the most acclaimed regional theaters in the country. She has also shown great passion off the stage, devoting a great deal of her time to fighting world hunger with the Christian Children's Fund and Save the Children. However, in recent years she has taken a less hands-on role in her philanthropic pursuits.

"I found myself taking many a helicopter and jeep ride to a lot of very dangerous places... some of which I never should have been in the first place," said Struthers, who contracted a severe case of Hepatitis on one of her more remote expeditions.

"I played Russian Roulette for over thirty years and decided

it was time to take a step back... let someone else play that role.”

As for what she’s doing currently, Struthers is on a three-month tour in which she plays the role of Mother Superior in Dan Goggin’s *Nunsense – The Musical*, the latest in a series of award-winning plays by the renowned playwright and composer. The show was inspired by Goggin’s experiences going to parochial school in Alma, Michigan, and each of the play’s nuns – even Sister Mary Amnesia, who lost her memory when she was hit on the head with a crucifix – is based on a nun Goggin knew.

“I absolutely love what I’m doing right now. The show is the perfect ensemble, and the cast is top-notch. Every night they challenge me to be my best,” said Struthers, who was quick to dispel any possible misconceptions with regard to her latest gig.

“The show in no way parodies or mocks religion. In fact, references to faith are always done in a respectful and endearing manner.... On the other hand, you don’t have to be knowledgeable about the Catholic religion to enjoy the show.”

For nearly forty years, Sally Struthers has brought immeasurable joy to countless others, both on stage and off. But as for what’s coming next, Struthers hasn’t a clue.

“In this business, that’s the way it is. You never know what lies ahead.” **PBG**

Emmy Award-winning and Broadway actress Sally Struthers will perform in Dan Goggin’s Nunsense – The Musical on Sunday, November 23 at the Sunrise Theatre in historic downtown Ft. Pierce. There will be two performances, one at 3pm and the other at 7pm. For tickets or more information, call (772) 461-4775 or visit www.sunrisetheatre.com.

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