



Xena, Warrior Princess

January 1999

MY FOUR-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER said, 'Don't go. She'll kill you.' A male friend reminded me that she'd once crushed a Cyclops's head between her thighs. 'But hey,' he said cheerfully, 'there are worse ways to die.' My female friends viewed my assignment with a mirth bordering on derision. Here at last, they seemed to be suggesting, was evidence of my profound weakness for what? The leather-clad, breast-plated dominatrix? No matter. I remained undaunted. I remained wedded to this perilous path. I needed answers. I wanted to meet Xena, Warrior Princess for myself. I knew there were risks attached to the venture and that if I engaged her in a trial of strength, I could lose, and lose badly. But still I pressed on.

In fact, within 15 seconds of meeting the so-called 'Princess of the Zeitgeist', I had challenged her to an arm wrestle. Many of you who have seen this nearly 182-centimetre (six-foot) swashbuckling adventuress perform backflips onto horses, fight with swords, staffs, tridents, knives, crossbows and a circular metal ring known as a chakram, would appreciate the folly of this approach. Many of you who have heard her blood-curdling banshee cry—Ai yi yi yi yi!—or know how she disarmed Ares, the God of War, and Hades, God of the Underworld, with her two-fingered Mr Spock-like touch, would know this was sheer lunacy.

As it happened, she didn't fix me with her baleful glare, nor did she breathe fire into my face. She just laughed uproariously. 'You want to do an arm wrestle now?' she asked. 'Right down and dirty on the ground like a mud fight?' Yes, I nodded coolly. 'I might have to draw the line at that,' she said. 'You name the time and the place,' I countered with mock courage. 'Tomorrow morning,' she said. 'My place. 9 am.'

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LATE LAST YEAR A TEAM of archaeologists working on a dig near the Russian city of Voronezh uncovered the 2,400-year-old burial mounds of five young Scythian women with their spears, quivers and bows and arrows. The discovery suddenly lent credence to claims by the Greek historian Herodotus that a mythical race of women warriors, the Amazons, had left their homeland by the Black Sea, travelled north and founded a new society. They were said to be part of a string of sister cultures stretching from Hungary to China.

History, you might say, had finally caught up with art. (And none too soon for the purposes of this story!) Perhaps, if you have no children, no television or no interest in being glued to the screen on a Saturday night, you might still be unaware of who or what *Xena: Warrior Princess* seems to represent. Let me explain. Xena is the eponymous hero of an American-produced television series now seen in more than 60 countries; a piece of popular culture that has taken the world by storm. In Australia, Xena's ratings among children between the ages of five and 12 reach as high as 58 per cent in metropolitan areas.

In Turkey, with a population of about 50 million, the program commands a phenomenal 60 per cent of the market. There is no program there more popular. The same is true in the Philippines. Iran also seems to have caught on to the fad. Early last year, Red Cross workers in Afghanistan were amazed to discover that the program was being beamed into northern Iran via satellite from Russia.

In America, it has become the highest-rating syndicated drama on television, spawning a national craze. There are more than 100 Web sites dedicated to the show, including Whoosh: Journal of the International Association of Xena Studies (<http://whoosh.org>), named for the sound Xena's chakram produces as it slices through the air.

There are on-line Xena chat rooms where fans can swap gossip or explore the meanings and metaphors of various episodes. There are Xena 101 courses at American universities. There are newsletters and fan conventions around the country. The fans have a name for the world she inhabits, Xenaverse. It is a place where anything can happen and where anyone from Jesus Christ to Julius Caesar can—and does—make an appearance.

At Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, selected members of the audience are encouraged to dress up in costume and, with the help of computer-graphic imaging, step into roles alongside the Warrior Princess. There is a merchandising campaign which has generated novels, comic books, magazines, games, calendars, glassware, Christmas ornaments, videos, CDs, jewellery and a Xena doll, which sheds its clothes at the touch of a button.

The Whites of their Eyes

'Xenamania' began five years ago when Xena, played by New Zealand actress Lucy Lawless, was introduced to an unsuspecting world in an episode of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*. Two years later, she had become the star of her own series. It was, as *Ms* magazine in America described it, the beginning of a 'delightfully cheesy schlock drama that often looks like *Spartacus*, *American Gladiators* and *Mad Max* rolled into one'. Born in Thrace, in ancient times, Xena appeared as the leader of an army hell-bent on killing Hercules, the son of Zeus. Her aim was nothing less than absolute power. Needless to say, she was a bad girl. She was merciless. She was wanton. She pillaged and plundered. Then, suddenly, her life took a dramatic turn. She rescued a baby and lost the support of her troops. They'd never seen her maternal side before. In their shock they abandoned her and she became Hercules' ally and lover, although not for long.

Racked by guilt about her marauding past, aware she'd had the devil on her shoulder for far too long, she set out on her own, on what was to become a journey of redemption. Through time zones and continents she travelled, defending the downtrodden, giving hope to the faint-hearted, doing battle with sea monsters, gods, demigods, warlords, mere mortals and, of course, her own internal demons. She was the superhero who, to use the American parlance, kicked butt. Particularly male butt.

'Many feminists have been dreaming of mass-culture moments like this since feminism came into being,' gushed *Ms* magazine. 'But we've almost never seen these fantasies realised. *The Bionic Woman* smiled too much.' Australian writer Richard Neville explains Xenamania this way: 'Without trying to be strident or polemical, without talking about the empowerment of women, Xena is just a big, brassy pseudo-Greek legend waylaying everything in her path, especially men.'

'Since the suffragettes began their journey, nearly everything has been scaled, except that in a back-alley punch-up between a man and a woman, most people would still expect the man to win. The Xena creation overturns that last impediment to a world of total equality. She is invincible. She has not fallen victim to male advances, either military or sexual.' For some reason, this threat to male power has not detracted from the program's popularity—at least half the audience is said to be male.

'What's not to like?' asked one of them, an on-line devotee. 'The show is a scream. Xena's a total babe. Not only that, she's a babe who likes other babes. It's a babe-fest.' And so it is. When Xena began her odyssey she met an irrepressible young woman named Gabrielle (played by Texan Renee O'Connor) who decided to follow the Warrior Princess in search of adventure. Along the way, they were forced to outwit a staggering array of enemies, including a man-eating Cyclops.

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Not surprisingly, the two women became devoted friends. They saved each other's lives. (In fact, Xena rescued Gabrielle from a forced marriage.) They refused to abandon each other for men. They shared a hot tub. They had a roll in the hay. In one dramatic episode they even kissed. (Actually Xena was dead at the time and inhabiting a man's body. Okay, the plot is complicated.)

The creators of the program were happy to allow the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle to remain ambiguous. Yes, they loved each other, but, as executive producer Rob Tapert said: 'Xena has had a string of lovers in her life and now she is trying to get control of her emotions.'

Forget the dissembling, it was as plain as day to lesbians that Xena and Gabrielle were on together. ('You are the best thing that ever happened to me,' Xena told Gabrielle. 'You gave my life meaning and joy.')

Xena was very quickly elevated to lesbian icon status. At New York's Meow Mix, a popular nightspot for women, fans began convening regularly for their monthly *Xena*-viewing nights followed by the brandishing of toy swords. It became only one of a number of venues for Xena's growing band of female followers.

At last year's Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 122 Xena look-alikes stormed up Oxford Street, to rapturous applause. Xena was the invited guest of honour but was unable to make it. (Lawless hopes to get to Australia this year.)

'I know lots of girls who are huge fans of Xena's,' says Susannah Hayward, editor of Sydney's monthly magazine *Lesbians on the Loose*. 'That's because she's sexy and sassy and very good-looking. The kids seem to miss the sexual side of her relationship with Gabrielle, but lesbians don't. We know they're more than just good friends.' Lucy Lawless herself credits the lesbian community in New York with having first triggered Xenamania, although at first she thought they were joking. 'I read this article about the whole lesbian thing and I said, "What?" I didn't get it. Now it's totally obvious why they would seize on two women travelling alone . . . They [the lesbians] were the first ones to hook into Xena and make it culty. I owe them a debt for bringing it to people's attention, for creating the buzz.'

I HAVE JOURNEYED THROUGH MY own time zone—in this case across the Tasman—to meet the Warrior Princess. Although her presence here appears to attract little interest among her compatriots (the program's ratings are among the worst of any country), New Zealand happens, proudly, to be her home, her hunting ground.

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It is also the location for the filming of both the *Xena* and *Hercules* series. Exquisite scenery. Low production costs. A sophisticated film industry.

We meet down by a lake, on a 70-hectare farm in west Auckland. The medieval castles and the Moroccan marketplaces have been dismantled. Xena is down at the water's edge grappling with an eel that somehow turns into a demon. She is all boots, leather and breastplates. She carries a sword at her back, a pickaxe in her hand. Her mane of blue-black hair shimmers in the pale sunlight. Her eyes glint like lapis lazuli.

As she strides towards me I recall how Ares, the God of War, once warned that 'when Xena starts to move, nothing is safe'. I brace myself. She looks at me, smiles, and says: 'Hi, welcome. Thanks for coming.'

Okay, I admit it. I'm thrown. I'm spoiling for a challenge. I'm expecting the heavens to start cursing and the lake to begin boiling and she's talking to me as if she doesn't give a fig about all that; as if she's, well, just a normal Kiwi gal. I accept the ruse, for the moment, partly to collect myself in the face of an uncertain fate, but also to allow Xena the opportunity to reveal the other side of her character.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS BORN Lucy Ryan 30 years ago in Mount Albert, a typically middle-class suburb of Auckland, is, in fact, nothing like her menacing alter ego, except she does happen to be rather tall and fetching.

Her accent is broad New Zealand, her humour irreverent and self-deprecating. Her hair is red in real life and her knowledge of myths virtually non-existent. She does, however, speak German, French, Italian and a mid-American dialect. She is also a trained singer, having studied opera for several years, and she has a passion for jazz.

Lucy was the fifth of seven children, the first of two girls, born to Frank and Julie Ryan. Frank Ryan was the mayor of Mount Albert for 22 years, Julie his mayoress, a redoubtable, slightly eccentric woman known for her hospitality and free spirit. She was also a feminist well before it was fashionable—she organised the construction of a bronze statue in a local park in honour of Mount Albert's suffragettes.

Lucy Ryan received a good Catholic education. She says now it gave her a sense of purpose and ambition. 'I just knew I wanted to be respected. I wanted to be good at sport. I wanted to be pretty. I wanted to be head librarian. I wanted to be good academically. But I didn't think of myself as pretty or clever and I was never good at sport.' (This is the trouble with meeting actors. They're never who you think they are.)

Lucy Ryan left school with a burning ambition to act. She took a part-time job as a waitress at Club Mirage, then Auckland's most

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fashionable nightclub. Her former employer, Don Fletcher, remembers her as 'a man's woman. She had a real sparkle about her.'

Fletcher doesn't remember throwing \$5 bills at Lucy's feet in the hope that she would bend down and pick them up. Which she always did. 'That's bullshit,' he says. Not according to Lucy. 'Actually, he was so drunk he didn't realise they were \$50 bills,' she says with a big grin. It was at Club Mirage that Lucy Ryan met barman Garth Lawless. Together they travelled to Italy where Lucy pursued her interest in opera singing. Then they moved to—wait for it—Kalgoorlie and were married.

Says Lucy: 'We were in Europe and wanted to go on a trip through Russia and I thought, "I've got a brilliant idea. Let's go to Kalgoorlie to earn the money to get there." That's how dullwitted we were.'

'I started working for a gold-mining company sawing core—this poor, stinking Kiwi in need of work. I was there at 7 am in the freezing desert sitting at this diamond saw with water spraying all over me and I'm freezing and wearing garbage bags. I felt like the girl from Rumpelstiltskin who used to spin mountains of straw.'

After taking another job 'running through the outback measuring the earth and mapping it with a compass', Lawless and her husband returned to New Zealand where their now 10-year-old daughter, Daisy, was born.

Lucy began doing television commercials until she landed her first real job as an actor on a local comedy skit called *Funny Business*.

She then studied acting in Canada for eight months before returning in 1992 to New Zealand to take on the job as co-host of the travel magazine show *Air New Zealand Holiday*.

By this stage her marriage to Garth Lawless had unravelled and the best acting roles were somehow still eluding her. 'I didn't fit the mould of New Zealand drama,' she says now. 'I don't know why. I often thought I was too big, too in their face. I think that was part of the truth and, possibly, I wasn't very good.' With that she breaks into laughter. She can afford to now. Her role as Xena has earned her an estimated \$10 million and put her on New Zealand's rich list.

In 1995, American producer Rob Tapert had been wanting to create a female superhero character for television. He was already the co-executive producer of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Young Hercules* and had produced horror cult films such as *The Evil Dead* as well as action features like *Hard Target* and *Timecop* starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. He was also inspired by Hong Kong action thrillers which featured 'tough, strong women in very dubious moral positions'. American actor Vanessa Angel had been chosen to play the part of Xena but she fell sick in London, en route to Auckland. (Apparently she was lovesick: she'd just met Richard Gere.)

The rest, as they say, is history—or the stuff of modern mythology.

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Lucy Lawless was cast in what she considers now ‘the best [role] for a woman in the past 30 years of television’. She went on to study basic kung fu moves with martial arts master Douglas Wong (*Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*) and then, at the beginning of 1998, she married her executive producer, Rob Tapert.

In a phone interview from Los Angeles, Tapert described his first meeting with Lawless. ‘When I met her it was at a wrap party for *Hercules* and I thought, “This woman is an absolute psycho.” She was in a big fight with her then husband [Garth Lawless]. I thought, “I can’t believe we are going to make a series with this woman.” She didn’t seem at all interested in meeting me and hearing what the program was about. It was a totally different reaction from anyone I had met before.’ To make matters worse, Lawless turned up the next night at a dinner wearing ‘this totally school-marm outfit with two-toned shoes. She looked like a good Catholic lady going to church on Sunday.’

Who could have known then that she was going to become an international celebrity; named by American *People* magazine as one of the ‘50 most beautiful people in the world’, one of television’s ‘40 most fascinating stars’ and one of the ‘25 most intriguing people of the year’?

Certainly not Tapert, although now when I ask him what it’s like being married to Xena, he says: ‘An incredibly happy and fulfilling experience—not to be married to Xena but to Lucy. She has nothing to do with Xena. They are totally separate characters.’ (All right, I admit I’m confused. I’m getting Xena and Lucy mixed up. But don’t you hate the way Americans have no sense of irony!)

As Lawless explains now, it’s true, she was deeply unhappy during the early episodes of *Xena*. ‘I’ve never told anyone in an interview before, but you can tell how happy or unhappy I am by how much weight I am carrying. I had put on weight just out of sheer misery.’ (By this yardstick, Lucy Lawless is obviously delirious at present.) Her first marriage was imploding. She was living as a single mother. They were filming through the winter in the sleet and the cold, for an episode set, ostensibly, in Outer Mongolia. She was as miserable as the tundra itself. She didn’t know who she was. ‘I bought some self-help tapes off the television,’ she says now without a hint of embarrassment. ‘It was a case of evolve or become extinct. I knew I had to change or die.’

THE HERO’S JOURNEY PRESENTS ITSELF to all of us at some stage in our lives. It is the call to adventure, to the unknown zone, the place where both treasures and dangers lurk. At one level, it’s a purely physical

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challenge. At another, it is far more than that. It is the great spiritual and psychological journey inside ourselves; the ultimate search for the answer to the riddle of life.

All of the great myths and religious stories throughout history, as Joseph Campbell, the American writer, explained during a lifetime of scholarship, make reference to this kind of voyage of discovery. Prometheus's ascension to the heavens. Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Lancelot's saving of Guinevere. Moses leading his people through the desert. The Buddha's path to enlightenment. Christ's 40 days in the wilderness. And, yes, even Hans Solo's saving of Luke Skywalker in the film *Star Wars*.

'If the gods and muses are smiling, then, about every generation, someone comes along to inspire the imagination for the journey each of us takes,' the American journalist Bill Moyers surmised.

And it is here, perhaps, more than in her status as a feminist icon, or as an object of male desire or childish adoration, that the power of Xena might well lie. Xena's battle with mythical demons and her own conflicted nature taps into the collective memory contained in all the world's myths. Yes, the plot lines are preposterous and full of camp humour and double entendres, but how else can you explain her fame? Surely it doesn't just come down to good cleavage.

AND SO WE COME AT last to the modern reporter's own hero's journey. I have struggled—manfully, I believe—with dark passions and savage impulses to arrive at this point. Now, with the hourglass almost out, there is nowhere left to turn, except to face the Warrior Princess on her own turf.

As I arrive at her Theban palace, a Georgian-style Auckland home, with its lap pool and sauna, its tennis court and sweeping lawns and barking dogs, I am reminded of the time the American journalist George Plimpton once stepped into the ring with the great middleweight champion Archie Moore in order to give the profile he was writing that extra personal dimension. He got flattened in the first round.

In my case, the situation appears more benign. Xena is wearing overalls and a white T-shirt. She is standing in the kitchen making peppermint tea and burning the bagels. Her dogs are locked in a back room. Her daughter, Daisy, is watching a video. Jazz music wafts from the stereo.

This is the moment of truth—the time for our arm wrestle. I move straight to the kitchen table and sit down. I light two candles which I place on either side of where our arms will rest. I take the view that whoever goes down first should burn a little.

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Xena takes her seat in front of me. She grins and then says something unprintable about the shortness of my arms. This only serves to increase my resolve. I flex my pectorals. We lock hands and, one, two, three . . . we heave . . . we roar . . . we splutter . . . we glower.

Then she says with a giggle: 'Hang on, what's happening? Look how close your elbow is.' Her daughter remains glued to the television screen. She can't hear the distant roll of thunder.

'It's got nothing to do with my arms,' I tell her in strangled fashion, a smile forcing its way through clenched teeth. 'Are you pushing?' she asks me. *Am I pushing?* 'Yes,' I assure her, the blood surging around my temples. 'You're not patronising me, are you?' she demands. 'No, I'm not.' 'Hang on,' she says, 'look at your elbow rocking all over the place.'

I have had enough of this 'short arms and rocking elbows' business and am about to engage in one final burst of energy when the candle beside my arm falls over. Incredibly, she claims victory by technical knock-out. I dispute the call and demand a rematch. Again, we raise our arms to each other and push. We get nowhere. We are in wristlock.

Now, of course, this is not what Xena will tell you. She will hint strongly that it was she who won the fight and she who issued the next challenge. I reject the former boast but accept the latter.

It arrived like a thunderclap. 'What about a bungee jump?' she said, smirking. A BUNGEE JUMP? ARE YOU CRAZY? Okay, it is not the swing-from-a-rope-and-plunge-to-your-death kind of bungee jump, but it is terrifying nonetheless. It is the Bungee Screamer—a Ferris wheel-type seat that the rider is strapped into before being hurtled vertically into the sky, turned upside down and then sent plummeting back to earth. This is what Xena wants to take me on. It's down at Auckland Harbour.

How can I say no? Hadn't Zeus met every challenge issued to him by the goddess Hera? Hadn't Hermes agreed to take on Argus? Besides, apart from this being part of my own heroic adventure, there is also trans-Tasman honour at stake . . . We proceed to the harbour. Gingerly, I step in and take my seat next to Xena. She looks at me pityingly. 'The second time will be better,' she assures me. THE SECOND TIME?

Five, four, three, two, one. We are off the ground . . . My stomach is in my mouth. The hideous trajectory towards Olympus has begun. I close my eyes. No good. I open my eyes. Still no good. I scream. To Ares, the God of War. No-one listening. Xena screams. Xena laughs. Death appears imminent. I try to laugh, too. I have decided, reluctantly, that if I am to die, I will die strapped in with the Warrior Princess.

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Postscript

Needless to say, the gods decided to spare us both and, without wanting to gloat, I should tell you that before I walked away on my wobbly legs into the setting sun, Xena signed my four-year-old daughter's sword, which I had brought with me specially from Australia. It read: 'If Xena couldn't kill Daddy, no-one can.'