

WANDA SYKES

RELYING ON HUMOR TO MAKE HER WAY THROUGH



by
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I'm not going to lie. I thought Wanda Sykes was gonna kick my ass. Figuratively, of course. She's tough! Have you ever seen her perform?

Syking Myself Up to Interview Wanda!

But hey, I'd done my research. I had my questions ready. And when the phone rang, I found a down-to-earth, very genuine woman on the other end of the line. A real Girlfriend! She was approachable and forthcoming. All my apprehensions faded away and we dove right into the interview. And yes, we laughed. A lot!

TSC: You're a screen writer, an author, a movie and TV actress, a voiceover artist and a standup comedian. Which one is your favorite way of relating to your audiences?

WS: I got my start doing standup and I've been doing it for 25 years, so standup is where it all started for me. I've got TV and movies and all that other stuff you named, and there's nothing like it. I got the TV and the movies because of doing well with the standup. But there's nothing like standing up on that stage and saying something and having a room full of people fall (down) laughing. You know, tears and stomping their feet. It's just the best. It really is. There's nothing like it, to make people laugh like that.

TSC: On *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, you worked with Julia Louis Dreyfus. Had you known each other prior to this? Was this role written for you? How did it come about?

WS: That was the first time meeting Julia. I know the creator of the show, Kari Lizer. She had me in mind when she created the show, but didn't really figure out where I'd

come in. And so I started off in the first season as a guest, and it just grew from there. I loved working with those people.

TSC: You've even conquered the world of TV commercials with your spots for Gain! How did that come about?

WS: (She laughs.) Gain reached out to me. They had this campaign and they pitched it to me and I said, "Wow! This sounds like fun!" And also to have a company like that want you to be involved, I said, "Why not? Of course! Let's do this!" And I had a lot of fun with it.

TSC: When I interview celebrities, I like to give them the opportunity to discuss and promote the cause that is most dear to their hearts. What cause is closest to your heart?

WS: Closest to my heart would of course be Breast Cancer Awareness Month because that's something that has affected me. I'm a survivor, so I just like to remind women to get checked and stay on top of their appointments.

And also very close to my heart is the



MAY 9, 2009: (L TO R) WANDA SYKES DELIVERS A COMEDIC MONOLOGUE IN FRONT OF US PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA DURING THE WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS' ASSOCIATION DINNER IN WASHINGTON, D.C. REUTERS/JONATHAN ERNST / LANDOV



MARCH 10, 2010 (EPISODE: GET SMARTER): CHRISTINE (JULIA LOUIS-DREYFUS) HAS MATTHEW (HAMISH LINKLATER) AND BARB (WANDA SYKES) THROW HER A "SURPRISE" ENGAGEMENT PARTY SO SHE CAN GET TO KNOW MAX'S (ERIC MCCORMACK) FRIENDS. SHE BEGINS TO FEEL INTELLECTUALLY INFERIOR TO ONE PARTICULAR GUEST, DRIVING HER TO MAKE A "SURPRISING" DECISION, ON THE FIFTH SEASON FINALE OF THE NEW ADVENTURES OF OLD CHRISTINE. CBS/MICHAEL ANSELL/LANDOV

work I do with the Ruth Ellis Center. It's a place that serves young LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) people who've been kicked out of their homes or are having a hard time with their families because of who they are. A large population of these young people identify as LGBT and Ruth Ellis is the only place like it in the Midwest that provides services for these people. They do long-term housing; they have a drop-off center where kids can come in and hang out and get some advice. They help them with school. I can't imagine as a kid being kicked out of your home because of who you are and who you love. I was 40 when I came out to my parents and I think my parents would have loved to kick me out of the house (laughing). Nah, they never would have done that. But, just to be a kid and the one unit that is supposed to protect you and be there for you no matter what, to have them turn their backs on you, is heart-breaking. We have a gay and lesbian center in LA that does the same thing, and there's a center in NYC that provides the same great care for the community, but the Ruth Ellis Center is the only one in the Midwest, so that's why it is very important to me.

Family Life

TSC: You married Alex in 2008 and you have twins—boys, girls, both? Ages?

WS: One of each. They're 3.

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TSC: Could life *be* any more hectic?
WS: Uh, no! It couldn't! Honestly, no it could not be.

TSC: Everybody's mom said to them, 'I hope you have children just like you.' Did your mom ever wish that on you?
WS: (Big laugh) She just said, "You'll see." And she's right!

Her Encounter with the President

TSC: What was your reaction to finding out you'd been chosen to be the featured performer at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2009?
WS: My first thought was, "They really aren't vetting anyone these days." (Big laugh)

TSC: You really thought that?
WS: I really did! I asked my publicist. I said, "He knows that I came out, right? They know I'm out?" And she said, 'Well this is the correspondents. It's *their* association and they get to pick the entertainment, but I'm sure they get approved by the president. And I thought, 'Wow! Ok!' I was blown away!
My wife was in her third trimester. Well all I know is, I thought, please let her have the baby so I can go prepare. Because they didn't want it until the 27th of April so I didn't have much time to go out to the clubs and put the act together.

TSC: Were you nervous coming up with jokes for the president?
WS: No. Once I came up with the jokes and went out to the clubs and tried them out, I thought, "This is going to work. I like where this is going." Once I had the material I felt pretty good about it.

TSC: What inspires your comedy? Where and how do you get your ideas?
WS: Life.

TSC: Yours or everybody else's?
WS: Everybody's. Just life in general. My comedy pretty much comes out of what's going on in my life and the world. So it's all grounded in reality.

Getting Through the Tough Times

TSC: Does your sense of humor get you

through the tough times?
WS: Oh, definitely. Okay. Here's a funny story. I was going in for surgery for the double mastectomy. My brother and mother were there and of course my wife, and one of my closest friends. So just before the surgery, we all said a prayer. My brother said a prayer and it was really nice and so I said, "Okay. See you guys when I get out." And my mother said, "Wait. Let *me* say a prayer." And my brother said, "What's wrong with *my* prayer?" You know, it was so funny! It's like my mother had to out-pray my brother. It was the funniest thing, and I knew she wanted to do it because I could just tell by the look on her face after the prayer he said. It was just not good enough for her. She was like, "Mmmmm....I don't know about that prayer." I could just see it and I was just waiting. And sure enough, she said it. "Let's pray again."

TSC: ...because we *all* know God listens to mothers more than He listens to brothers.
WS: Exactly! Exactly! And I said to my brother, "Well, she's known him longer, so just think of it like that."

What's Next?

TSC: You're appearing at the Borgata in Atlantic City this month. Have you played the Borgata before?
WS: Several times. At least once or twice a year for the last five, six years or so. I'm there a lot.
TSC: Why the Borgata?
WS: I think the Borgata is the nicest casino in Atlantic City. I've looked at the other talent they have coming through, and they're great acts as far as musicians and other comics that perform there, so you're in good company. And also, the clientele they draw is a nice crowd. They like a nice dinner, they like to drink, they like to have fun and of course you can gamble, too.

TSC: So what's next for Wanda?
WS: More standup, which I love doing. I'd like to get back into TV, especially because of the kids. We're about to have some real stability with school and everything, so I'd like to get back into TV. As far as the work hours and all, it's more stable. And I love it! **g**

Wanda: "I'm a Survivor"

In August 2011, Wanda Sykes had a difficult decision to make. Diagnosed with DCIS (ductal carcinoma in situ), "My first thought was, 'Really? Me? Breast cancer?' I just couldn't believe it, but I knew it was doable."
Doable in the form of a bilateral mastectomy. "Every day I had to change the bandages and look at it, and it was not pretty at all. I just wanted my life back."
And she got it, with the help of her wife Alex and their twins, Olivia and Lucas, two years old at the time. "We never hid anything from the kids. They were a huge part of my decision because I wanted to be around for them. And now I feel whole again. I really do. I've told them, 'Mommy's boo-boo is much better now.'"



Wanda's Startling Lineage

Early this year, Wanda Sykes was presented with an astonishing reality—she is not a descendant of slaves, but rather, free people. The story begins all the way back to her ninth great-grandmother—Elizabeth Banks—a white woman. Though Banks was an indentured servant, she was considered to be free, as was her biracial daughter, Mary Banks, who was conceived with an unknown slave. The information was uncovered by professional researchers for the show *Finding Your Roots*, a limited PBS series hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard.
Gates explains that because slaves were considered property, it is much more difficult to trace their roots. But because her descendants were not slaves, "Wanda Sykes has the longest continuously documented family tree of any African-American we have ever researched."
Adds Ira Berlin, University of Maryland professor, renowned for his work on slavery and African-American history, "This is an extraordinary case and the only such case that I know of in which it is possible to trace a black family rooted in freedom from the late 17th century to the present."
The discoveries, however, were bittersweet. Gates told Wanda that two of her relatives had, themselves, owned slaves. For instance, the tax records from 1788 and 1789 listed distant great-grandfather John Banks as the owner of Tab and Fanny. "Are you surprised to see that your free black ancestors owned slaves?" Gates asked.
"What the hell?" Sykes was crestfallen, but quickly recovered. "They were just trying to fit in, that's all. They were like, 'Come on, honey, everybody else has them, it's how we fit in.' Ah, this is awful. Poor Tab, poor Fanny. I just hope Fanny and Tab's family don't trace their roots and come and whop my ass."
For the whole story, visit www.pbs.org/wnet/finding-your-roots/video/john-legend-and-wanda-sykes.