

Q&A with Actress/Comedian Wanda Sykes

Written by Stacia Affelt

Whether she's playing an elderly sloth in "Ice Age" or pulling from her own life experiences in stand-up, the well-loved actress and comedian Wanda Sykes continues to make us laugh. AFM was lucky enough to speak with Sykes, who proved that no matter what age you are (she recently turned 50), peeing your pants from laughter is always a good thing. Sykes will be coming to Phoenix Celebrity Theatre on Friday, Oct. 17 for her comedy tour.



AFM: Other than your show in October, do you plan on doing anything exciting while you're in Arizona?

WS: The last time I was there, it was right in the middle of summer so I was trying not to have a heat stroke. You know what, I get in usually, you know, late morning and I kind of rest up a little bit, do the show, and after the show we go grab something to eat. I always look forward to a nice dinner after the show.

AFM: Is there anything in particular that you like to have?

WS: Not necessarily. I like farm-to-table type. Then again, I love good Mexican food. That is one of my favorites. You definitely have some good Mexican food there.

AFM: What can guests expect from your upcoming show?

WS: They can expect to laugh a lot. I'm going to try to make you pee your pants, that's what I'm doing. My comedy is mainly about me. You're going to walk away knowing a lot about me. I talk about what's going on in my life and the way I look at things, the way I look at the world. My kids are taking up a lot of my time and my attention, so I talk about that a lot. I just turned 50; that's hot and sexy. There's a lot of things that I'm dealing with right now.

AFM: Do you still get nervous before performing?

WS: I wouldn't say nervous; it's more anxious because you still don't know. You don't know what the crowd is going to be like. You have to feel it. Your rhythm has to be on, and who knows how it might go. So there's still that anxiety until I get that first big laugh. Once I get that first laugh then, hey, I'm on a roll.

AFM: Where do you grab inspiration for a joke?

WS: I draw on real-life experiences, or stories I may have seen on the news or something that people are talking about. Usually...I'm probably thinking what most people aren't saying, but I'm the one who will actually say it.

AFM: How does doing comedy on stage compare or differ from doing comedy in a film? Which do you prefer?

WS: It's totally different. There's nothing like doing a live show and getting the immediate laughs and energy from the audience. There's nothing like it. When you do a comedy in a film or TV, especially in a film, it's like the crew —no one gets to laugh. You have to be quiet or you ruin the tape. And it's not spontaneous, you have to wait around forever to get to stage, and then once you do it's just a different energy. If I'm on stage and a joke doesn't go that great, I don't get to repeat it and try it again. It's live, that's it, you move on. [With] film, you do things over and over again.

AFM: You graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree. How did you end up in comedy?

WS: I always wanted to do something in stand-up. I just didn't know exactly how to do it or how to go about it, you know. I didn't know any stand-up comedians, never been to a comedy club, but I had seen Moms Mabley, Joan Rivers and Whoopi Goldberg. I've known women in stand-up on TV, so I figured you know what I should try it. And I did. And it was great, I loved it. It all just kind of made sense to me when I went up on stage. I was like, oh OK, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.

AFM: Was there a specific show that solidified your confidence as a comedian?

WS: You're always working on that. I can say, hey, I'm really funny, and then go on stage tonight and have an awful show. Yeah that gives you your confidence, but I've done it enough to know that you're going to have some off nights. I can process it and figure out what went wrong, but as far as a moment when I said oh OK, confidence, I think we still work on. It's a show by show thing.

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AFM: You were one of many celebrities to speak out in the midst of Joan Rivers' passing. How do you believe she helped pave the way for your career as a comedian?

WS: She was a trailblazer —the only woman who still had a network late-night talk show. She was out there doing the dates, doing the shows. It opened the door —like clubs, yeah okay let's book some women, you know, theaters, okay yeah women could headline a theater and fill it. To have her out there, she did it. And that opened the door for the rest of us.

AFM: What do you hope to do for future female comedians?

WS: The best thing that I can do, and that's what Joan did, was just be really funny. To be great at it.

AFM: What is it like being a woman in comedy, have you experienced any setbacks or discriminations?

WS: This is the only thing that I know. This is my only experience. I don't know what it's like to be a man in comedy, you know. With all of the outlets and internet and everything that we have, I think it's gotten better. At the end of the day, it's about being funny. If you're really funny, it'll happen, somebody's going to want to laugh.