



## Sykes, Wanda (b. 1964)

by Linda Rapp

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A stand-up comedian who has never been shy about addressing sensitive or controversial issues on stage, Wanda Sykes has also become a spirited advocate for glbtq rights.

The daughter of an Army colonel, Wanda Sykes was born March 7, 1964 in Portsmouth, Virginia and grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. while her father was assigned to the Pentagon and her mother worked in banking.

Upon graduating from Arundel High School in 1982, Sykes continued her education at Hampton University, a historically black institution in Hampton, Virginia, and earned a degree in marketing there in 1986.

She immediately secured a job as a procurement officer for the National Security Agency (NSA) but quickly realized that her career did not lie in a government office. In 1987 she went on stage for the first time, doing a stand-up routine in a talent contest in Washington. Although she did not win, "a light went on" and she saw her destiny. That her second outing was a complete failure made her understand that pursuing a career in entertainment would be challenging, but, she stated, "It gave me a sense of how much I wanted to do it."

While developing her skills at stand-up on nights and weekends, Sykes retained her job at the NSA until 1992, when she moved to New York to work on the comedy circuit there.

Shortly before the move, Sykes married David Hall, a record producer. In a 2009 interview she stated that she had recognized at a young age that she was a lesbian but, she explained, "Early on I knew [being gay] wasn't going to fly. No way. And from teachers and church and all it was, 'This is wrong! What's wrong with me?' And you pray and ask God to take it away, and you bury it and bury it, and you shut that part of yourself off. Then you try to live the life that you're supposed to live."

The marriage ended in 1998 for reasons that Sykes said were unrelated to her sexual orientation; nevertheless, she called her divorce "a defining, liberating moment" after which she "started actively dating women."

Meanwhile, she had been finding success in stand-up comedy in New York, where one of her gigs was as an opening act for Chris Rock at Caroline's Comedy Club. When Rock secured his own television series, *The Chris Rock Show*, he brought Sykes along as a writer and performer. Sykes was on the team honored with four nominations for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music or Comedy Program (1998-2001) and a win in 1999.

Sykes ventured into film in 1998 with a role in Louis C.K.'s *Tomorrow Night*, and she also worked in two Chris Rock vehicles, Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz's *Down to Earth* (2001) and C.K.'s *Pootie Tang* (2001), a spin-



Wanda Sykes in 2004.  
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off of Rock's television show. She appeared in several other mostly forgettable movies and also did voice-overs in animated features.

Sykes had continued her work in television, serving as the host of the 2002-2003 season of Comedy Central's *Premium Blend* and appearing in recurring roles on *The Drew Carey Show* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. She also parlayed heckling sportscaster Bob Costas at a party into a role doing comedy skits on the HBO series *Inside the NFL*, for which she won Emmy Awards in 2002 and 2004.

Sykes starred in two television series, neither particularly successful. *Wanda at Large* (2003-2004), on which she played a stand-up comedian turned political correspondent, failed to find an audience, at least partly because it was continuously bounced around the time schedule. Only six episodes of the second series, *Wanda Does It* (2004), were aired on the Comedy Central channel.

Sykes joined the cast of *The New Adventures of Old Christine* in a recurring role in 2006 and in the same year starred and was the executive producer on an HBO special, *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, in which she did a typically acerbic stand-up routine, tackling subjects including politics, race, and same-sex marriage. In the 2008 season of *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, the characters played by Julia Louis Dreyfus and Sykes, though heterosexual, decided to get married.

Sykes meanwhile continued her career on stage, and she attracted a considerable glbtq following through appearances at pride festivals, on a gay cruise, and on Cyndi Lauper's True Colors tour (2008). She also did a public-service announcement for the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2007 and spoke out against California's Proposition 8, the goal of which was to end marriage equality in the state, during an appearance on Ellen DeGeneres's show shortly before the November 2008 election. Because she referred to her heterosexual marriage in her comedy routines, however, she was perceived as an ally until she came out publicly shortly after the election.

In Las Vegas to perform, she attended one of the many rallies held around the country during the weekend of November 15 to protest the passage of Proposition 8. When an event organizer mentioned that Sykes was said to be in the crowd, she took the stage and gave an impassioned and emotional impromptu speech.

"I don't really talk about my sexual orientation. I didn't feel like I had to. I was just living my life, not necessarily in the closet, but I was living my life," she stated. In the aftermath of Proposition 8, however, she felt compelled to speak up, and she told the crowd, "I'm proud to be a woman. I'm proud to be a black woman, and I'm proud to be gay."

Sykes also revealed that she was a married woman, having wed in California in October 2008. She has identified her wife only by her first name, Alexandra (or nickname, Alex), noting, "She's not in show business. I want her to have as much of her private life as she can."

The couple, who met on Fire Island in the summer of 2006, married at a small hotel in Palm Springs with about forty family members and friends in attendance. They have since become parents; in April 2009 Alexandra gave birth to twins named Olivia Lou and Lucas Claude.

Sykes was chosen to perform as a headliner at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in May 2009, the first African-American woman and the first openly glbtq individual to be so honored. Her edgy routine, which included barbed shots at Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and, especially, at right-wing talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, drew criticism from some but praise from others. Her unrepentant candor on that occasion recalls the title of her book of comedic commentary, *Yeah, I Said It* (2004).

Sykes' HBO comedy special, *I'ma Be Me*, premiered in October 2009. The next month, *The Wanda Sykes*

*Show*, a talk show, premiered on the Fox network.

Sykes has shown courage in speaking out on social issues, and it is to be hoped that she will continue to use her voice, her intelligence, her wit, and her humor to advance the quest for equality.

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