

My eyes are up here

ELLA GAUCI SPEAKS to stand-up comedy star Sarah Keyworth about top surgery, TikTok and being a role model

I'm used to seeing comedian Sarah Keyworth phone-screen size. The British stand-up star has gained a cult following online after they started posting the hilarious interactions they have with the audiences at their shows. From finding out that a Butterfly Therapist is in fact in a real job to shutting down drunk hecklers, I have joined in with Sarah's 380,000 other followers to laugh along at their ingenious wit.

So it is a little disorientating to see Sarah human-size, in the bar of the Soho Theatre, on a Tuesday afternoon. As we order a drink, one of the bartenders coyly mentions that they'd seen Sarah's most recent show and had thought it was hilarious. We get a Soho Theatre discount on the drinks.

Sarah began their comedy career doing bad dad jokes at their university comedy club in Leicester. Their breakout moment came when they were nominated as the Best Newcomer at the Edinburgh Comedy Awards in 2018, and they have been doing comedy full time ever since. From touring around the world to appearing on shows like Mock The Week, Sarah has become one of the hottest names on the comedy circuit.

This year Sarah took their brand new show, My Eyes Are Up Here, to the Edinburgh Fringe, and now they're gearing up to take it on tour. Tracking their journey to getting top surgery, the new show delves into all the "absurd things" they had to go through to make a choice about their own body. However, Sarah is quick to point out that this show is not gloomy. It is entirely cheerful.

"It's trickier in some ways, because it's harder to get people to laugh at you when you're happy because a lot of comedy is self-deprecating," Sarah explains. "It's so nice to not meet those

stereotypes of people thinking it's going to be a queer trauma show about rejection or struggling to come to terms with something. There's none of that in it."

While Sarah came out as non-binary in 2022, they always knew from a young age that they were "queer in some way". Even in childhood, Sarah didn't feel like a girl, and instead spent their childhood dressing like a boy and emulating what their brother did. Now Sarah is able to live authentically both in their personal life and in their comedy routines.

Throughout their career, Sarah has spoken openly about their queerness to audiences, often achieving an impressive levity on some of the most serious topics. Whether it be talking about queer foursomes to shocked mothers or discussing the current political debate about trans people in toilets, Sarah has used their platform as a unique opportunity to reach audiences who may never have met a non-binary person before.

"Comedy is the best way to level people's opinions about things. If you're laughing with somebody, then you're understanding their point of view," they continue. "I think that's really valuable, especially with things being so fraught culturally at the moment for queer, trans, and genderqueer people. My favourite thing about this show is seeing older, cis men who maybe have come with their >>

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Photos Matt Crockett

"If you're laughing with somebody, then you're understanding their point of view"



“My younger self would be really pleased that we figured it out”



» non-binary children laughing at the jokes about my top surgery.”

“A lot of the people who have prejudices about trans people or non-binary people have never actually met a [trans or non-binary] human being who is kind and polite and engaging. They haven’t spoken to someone on a human level. Sometimes they just picture this non-existent, rampaging activist who can’t engage in any other conversation.”

The power of Sarah’s comedy is perhaps best exemplified in the cult following that surrounds them. Blowing up on TikTok and Instagram, snippets of Sarah’s shows often showcase the closeness between Sarah and the audience. From interrogating couples about how they met to finding out more about bizarre job descriptions, Sarah’s crowd work has set them apart on the comedy scene. While the clips they post online look effortlessly smooth, I want to know whether it’s ever gone wrong...

“I was teasing this guy once about having a posh name, and teasing him about his parents calling him a posh name,” Sarah laughs. “Later on in the show I had a joke about Sandi Toksvig, and his friends started nudging him. It turns out he was Sandi Toksvig’s son! I fell to my knees and begged him for forgiveness. Then he came back a few days later and brought her with him. I got to do my Sandi Toksvig joke in front of Sandi Toksvig. She gave me a hug.”

From performing stand up as a university student (using way too many puns) to performing jokes in front of the icons that inspired them, Sarah’s trajectory to stardom doesn’t seem to be slowing down anytime soon. Having spent their childhood with a steady diet of sketch shows and sitcoms like *Absolutely Fabulous*, Sarah’s dream was to become a full-time comic by 30. They did it by 27.

Now Sarah sits amongst comedy giants like Dara Ó Briain on panel shows, gaining laughs for jokes about their mum’s boob on episodes of *Mock The Week*. Sarah laughs when I ask how different it is being on a panel show versus doing a stand up set.

“It’s way worse than stand up,” Sarah says emphatically. “Being a stand up is fun because you can set the tone and the pace. Panel shows are hard because they’re very

competitive. They’re very daunting. You’re just surrounded by people who you used to watch on the telly all the time. You’re basically in the telly from your childhood, trying to keep up with everyone.”

While Sarah has found a captive audience online, they admit that it is daunting for new comics coming into the scene. With the added pressure to not only make the audience in front of you laugh but also millions of people on the internet, Sarah tells me that apps like TikTok have changed the game. “I think it’s so hard to start out right now because it’s so tiring,” they explain. “My advice to young comics would be don’t feel a pressure to put stuff on social media before you feel ready to do it. I’m really glad I didn’t have to put anything online when I was starting out. I could just get better quietly in the shadows.”

Although Sarah’s new show *My Eyes Are Up Here* is imbued with pure, queer joy, there is a hint of sadness about lost time. I ask what their younger self would feel watching the show. “They’d be really pleased. There’s sometimes a bit of sadness about wasted time,” Sarah admits. “I am so pleased when I meet people who are in their early twenties, who are so understanding of themselves and they know exactly what they want. I wish that I could have spent my twenties this way [rather] than how I did. My younger self would be really pleased that we figured it out.”

At the end of their most recent shows, Sarah has stayed behind at the end and spoken to members of the audience about top surgery. Giving advice and support, *My Eyes Are Up Here* is more than just a comedy show. It’s a space for dialogue. It’s a space for trans people to be seen. “I think I’m a horribly awkward role model. It’s when my dad voice comes out,” Sarah jokes.

Whether Sarah wants to be a role model or not, their new show is not only hilarious but also desperately needed. At a time where trans lives are continually being used as political pawns, we all need to be reminded that queer joy is not tangible but thriving... and on tour. **D**

You can see *My Eyes Up Here* on tour. Book your tickets at [sarahkeyworth](https://sarahkeyworth.com)