

# YASMIN FINNEY

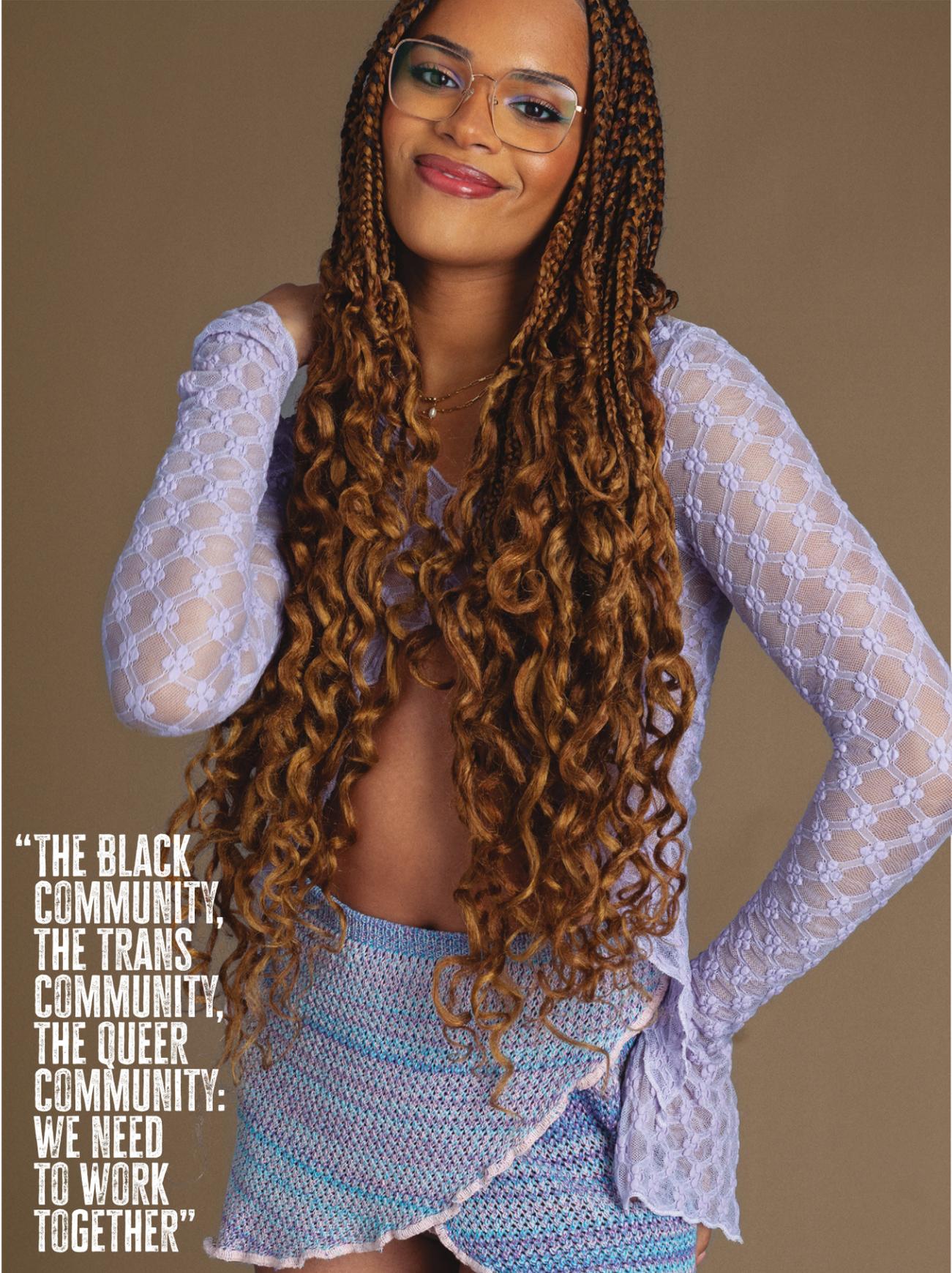
## IS CHANGING THE GAME

ELLA GAUCI speaks to the trailblazing actor about Heartstopper, representation and the power of community

Hidden under a fortress of bedsheets, a teenage Yasmin Finney has goosebumps as she watches the 1990 cult-classic documentary *Paris Is Burning*. As Pepper LaBeija, Dorian Corey and Angie Xtravaganza sashay across the screen, showcasing both beauty and the struggle of the 80s New York ballroom scene, Yasmin is wide-eyed in wonder. It is, in fact, from these queens that Yasmin first learns the power of manifestation. Tucked away in her own personal den, she yearns for a life much bigger than the confines of her makeshift fort. »

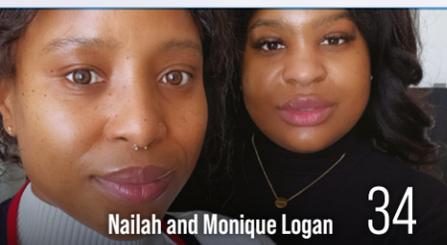
“THE BLACK COMMUNITY, THE TRANS COMMUNITY, THE QUEER COMMUNITY: WE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER”

Photo: Vic Lentaigne



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# “GENDER DYSPHORIA IS REALLY HARD SOMETIMES. IT’S REALLY IMPORTANT TO KEEP YOUR HEAD HELD HIGH”

» Fast forward to 2024, Yasmin sits in front of me with her adorable puppy. They are wearing matching pink ensembles. She tells me with an infectious smile that they’ve only just started coordinating outfits. Far from being hidden under bed sheets, Yasmin is gearing up for the release of the third season of the wildly popular Netflix show *Heartstopper*. The 21-year-old from Manchester has pretty much taken the world by storm, having also featured as Rose Noble in *Doctor Who* last year. With over one million followers on Instagram alone, you will have likely seen the young actor splashed across stunning photoshoots on the covers of *GQ*, *Elle* and *Vogue*.

Launched in 2022, *Heartstopper* has touched the lives of LGBTQIA people around the world. Based on Alice Oseman’s graphic novels of the same name, *Heartstopper* tells the stories of a group of loveable queer teenagers navigating school life. With the first two seasons racking up over 108 million hours of watch time, *Heartstopper* has quickly become the face of LGBTQIA culture today. Blazing forward on its quest to present diverse storylines that represent actual teenage lives, it’s a resounding

battle cry. In the face of the current #CancelYourGays trend, which has claimed so many of our other beloved shows, *Heartstopper* continues to flourish.

While Yasmin stands today as one of the most exciting faces on TV, before her role as Elle Argent in *Heartstopper* she was just a teenager with a dream. Raised by a single mum, Yasmin was quietly nursing her aspirations of becoming a star, studying performing arts at college. After experiencing bullying at school, she turned to TikTok in 2019 in search of escapism. Posting videos about her life as a young Black trans teen, she quickly gained a community of loyal fans. To her surprise, the videos struck a chord with queer people around the world.

“It’s really beautiful when you feel seen,” she tells me, beaming. “That first follower you get means the most. It shows that what you are, and who you are, is valid and people relate to that.”

It was these very followers who alerted her to the Netflix casting call for Elle. She didn’t have an agent or manager, but she had drive. And it’s this very passion which has spurred her on to the dizzying heights of

Photo Samuel Dore/Netflix

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# “I HOPE ONE DAY I WILL BE ABLE TO GO TO JAMAICA, BE MYSELF AND HAVE A BEAUTIFUL MOMENT WITH MY COMMUNITY”

» success that she enjoys today.

For that teenage Yasmin who was being bullied in school, a show like *Heartstopper* would have been huge. “It would have meant the world,” she says simply. “It would have meant seeing someone just like me in a show that represents who I want to be.”

Like the seasons before, this new era of *Heartstopper* is continuing to break down barriers, one storyline at a time. From landmark conversations about gender dysphoria to experiencing teenage love, Elle’s journey in season three takes audiences into new realms of her character.

For Yasmin, this was one of the most exciting parts of filming this new season. “I hope audiences can take away a sense of realism, a sense of fight and a sense of struggle,” she explains. “It’s very hard to navigate this world as is, never mind with all these labels people put on you.”

While *Heartstopper* has explored Elle’s trans identity in previous seasons, this next chapter brings about new challenges. In one powerful moment, Elle and her boyfriend Tao speak about how dysphoria may affect their sex life. “A lot of people will be able to relate to that [scene] and I hope

that it reaches out to those people. But I also hope it reaches those people who can’t relate to that,” shares Yasmin. “It’s hard for everyone to navigate a world that isn’t necessarily made for them. For trans people especially, gender dysphoria is really hard sometimes, and it’s really important that you always keep your head held high. It’s also important to realise that it’s ok not to be ok. It’s ok to just be going through something.”

Yasmin mentions that I’m the first person she’s met who has seen season three all the way through and she is eager to know what I thought of it. I tell her I cried the entire way through, which is maybe not the coolest thing to say to arguably one of the coolest celebs out there. But for those of us who grew up without a show like *Heartstopper*, there is something genuinely tear-jerking in the queer joy that it displays. And I’m not alone. *Heartstopper* has been heralded for its groundbreaking portrayal of queer characters, and when season one premiered, its young cast were turned into role models overnight.

Within the first few minutes of our conversation, it’s clear that Yasmin is incredibly aware of the

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# “IT’S REALLY BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOU FEEL SEEN”

responsibility that this part has given her. I think back to my own 21-year-old self, who was merely watching the first season of Heartstopper in my dingy university living room. It feels unfathomable to imagine what it must be like to be so young and yet have the weight of so many eyes on you.

“I feel a sense of responsibility for the community,” Yasmin reveals. “There’s so much grief, pain, loss and sadness when it comes to the community, which is overlooked. Elle has helped a lot of people but I do sometimes wonder whether it’s doing that much when it comes to politics. There’s so much more that we have to do when it comes to getting to a world where we are seen as equal.”

It comes as no surprise that Yasmin has embraced advocacy and activism off screen. Earlier this year, Yasmin gave a powerful speech in front of 60,000 people at London Trans+ Pride in the face of anti-trans rhetoric which had dominated the media discourse. Standing in front of a sea of pink, white and blue, Yasmin held her head high. While she may have appeared the pinnacle

of calmness, below the surface was a different story.

“London Trans+ Pride was very overwhelming for me in so many ways,” she admits. “Physically and emotionally. In ways that really pushed me, as Yasmin, to keep going. I found it really, really hard moving to London. It can be so hard just being an independent person in London and keeping a level head. So when I went to Trans Pride, that all just came into fruition.”

As she walked out onto the stage, the crowd erupted into a roar of applause and cheers. While politicians were discussing banning puberty blockers and attempting to remove discussions about trans people from classrooms, Yasmin’s bravery to stand alone with just a microphone shone brighter than ever before.

“When I stepped on the stage in front of all those people, commanding everyone’s attention, it was a feeling that I had never felt before,” she remembers. “It felt like everyone who had come before me was on that stage. It’s a feeling that I can’t explain.”

As the crowd listened with bated

breath to every word she said, Yasmin couldn’t hold back tears. Looking out at the people who had turned up in the face of such hatred, she was overcome with emotion. Taking a deep breath, she urged the crowd to look around them at the love and support that was pulsating through the heart of London.

“It’s beautiful that I could experience those feelings without any transphobes there, because it’s something that all 20-year-old trans girls should feel,” she points out. “I’m hoping that with more people speaking out and having the confidence to do so in the community within whatever role they are in, we can make a change.”

Through both her role in Heartstopper and her own personal endeavours, Yasmin has built a strong chosen family – arguably a chosen army – behind her. Like many trans youth, her coming out experience was not easy. But now, at 21, she has found peace with the support network around her. She even shares that her mum is the closest person she has. While Yasmin acknowledges the infinite power of her chosen family, she also offers sage advice about the power of independence. “I think you need to have a foundation in independence, because it’s only you really that has your back. It’s only you that will get you from A to B.” She elaborates, “Put yourself first always, because it’s so important and crucial to get to where you want to get to. Chosen family will allow you to be yourself and live authentically, but you need a good foundation of independence as well.”

In the face of the rampant transphobia that feels like it’s swallowing every political discourse, Yasmin refuses to be silenced. The power of her work cannot be underestimated. From providing fans with the confidence to come out, to starting meaningful conversations about trans rights, her portrayal of Elle is truly groundbreaking. It’s exhausting to even think about this pressure, let alone be the one to live it. But Yasmin appears unfazed, grounded, and (most importantly) confident in the power of her words.

“As I’ve gotten older, I’ve come to realise that it’s all a part of the process,” she takes a pause.

Samuel Done/Netflix

» “Heartstopper is something that I’m so proud of and I wouldn’t be here today if I didn’t have it. It’s such a special show to so many people, and it’s really helped a lot of people. There is a responsibility to always be confident and bold when answering questions around my identity because it’s what I’ve built my life on.”

From those days of watching *Paris Is Burning* as a teenager, Yasmin has turned her dreams not only into a reality, but a movement. She speaks with pride and deep admiration when discussing those who came before her. “They are beyond their time,” she says, speaking of the drag queens who starred in the legendary documentary. “I also think, in a way, that I’m beyond my time as well. A lot of them sadly passed, or were murdered, or had a very sad ending. I feel very lucky and blessed that I get to be their next generation, where I get to speak freely without their fear.”

*Paris Is Burning* has continued to be one of the most pertinent pieces of queer history that we have. For QTPOC, it has provided a lifeline, a community and a legacy. Reflecting on this issue’s theme of Struggle And Liberation, Yasmin takes a moment to gather her thoughts. “It definitely means growth. It means that for the community, it’s a time for us to remember where we came from, and how far we have to go. Within my community, like within every community, there’s things that need to be worked on. That all comes with time, and I’m so excited for what’s to come. I hope one day I will be able to go to Jamaica, be myself and have a really beautiful moment with my community.”

She continues, speaking with power and determination. “The Black community, the trans community, the queer community: we need to mesh together and work together. There’s a bigger fight and that fight is for equality. We need to stick together within this time that we’re in. We need to love each other and support each other, whether you’re a Black gay man or a Black trans woman. Life is way too short.” **D**

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All three seasons of *Heartstopper* are available on Netflix now.

