




PHOTOS BY BENJI HARDWICK

ALL HEART

The fan-favourite star of the wildly successful *Heartbreak High* reboot, Chloé Hayden talks autistic joy, public scrutiny and the power of saying no.

by **Aimee Knight** Staff writer

 @siraimseeknight

“My emotions are like zero to 100,” says Chloé Hayden. “When I experience sadness or disappointment, it’s as if I could never and will never experience any other emotion.” The sensation is so all-encompassing, the actor says, that it becomes physically painful, which is not unusual for neurodivergent folks. And the flipside is equally intense. “When I feel happy, nothing else matters. It takes over my entire mind, body and soul. I think autistic joy is such a beautiful thing to experience,” she says, “and also to be able to witness.”

In her floral dungarees, her hair dotted with flowers to match, Hayden is a picture of Gen Z femininity – fun, funny and wholesome, but never to be underestimated. On social media, her online activism has attracted more than a million followers (her bio reads, “Crocodile Dundee but autistic+ADHD”). But she’s best known for her breakout role as Quinni in Netflix’s *Heartbreak High* – the little Aussie series that racked up over 40 million minutes streamed, and garnered global attention, in its first few weeks on the platform.

“Quinni is everything I wanted to be at 16,” says Hayden, “and, honestly, everything I want to be as a 26-year-old, too. She is so intelligent, creative and

sure of herself.” Like her Hartley High classmates, Quinni navigates the turbulent waters of friendship, dating and sex, to mixed results. “She has those *Who am I?* moments, but getting to experience that through her eyes is really important. We see a multifaceted autistic girl,” says Hayden, one of the first (known) autistic actors to play an autistic character on screen. And while Hayden and Quinni are, in some ways, quite similar, there’s one crucial difference between the two: Hayden didn’t go to high school.

In her memoir *Different, Not Less: A Neurodivergent’s Guide to Embracing Your True Self and Finding Your Happily Ever After* (2022), Hayden describes the systemic flaws built into the traditional education system, along with the chronic bullying she faced – from peers and teachers alike – when she didn’t perform as desired. After discovering she was autistic at age 13, Hayden left mainstream schooling midway through Year 8, finishing her secondary education at home. So when it came to the prospect of starring in a high school-set series – one shot on location at a real school in Sydney, during operating hours, with actual students milling around – did Hayden feel any trepidation?

“Not initially,” she says. “I wasn’t aware of how much school trauma I still had pent up.”

On the very first shoot day, Hayden arrived at 7am, backpack on. “The sky was that orange colour it is when you’re getting to school. I heard the bell ring and I was immediately transported back. I was like, *Oh, this is unsafe*,” she recalls with a nervous laugh. “But then I got to set and into the make-up truck, and did very *not* school things, and I was like, *Okay, this is safe*. I think it actually healed a lot of trauma that I had.”

When *Heartbreak High* hit screens in late 2022, the Zoomer reboot of the 90s touchstone was lauded for its realistic depiction of contemporary teen life, in all its sweaty, angsty splendour. Hayden in particular was praised for her performance, earning a Logie nomination for Most Popular New Talent and the Audience Choice Award for Best Actress at the 2022 AACTAs. With the show’s second season freshly launched on Netflix – where it debuted at #1 for local audiences – Hayden is keen for viewers to see new facets of the character.

“Quinni in season one was...safe,” she says. “We see her meltdowns and personal struggles, but [she’s] a fairly sweet, unproblematic character. We see a few more sides of Quinni in season two, which I think some people are going to be surprised at.” Hayden wonders whether audiences will feel discomfort watching an autistic 16-year-old pushing the same boundaries as her neurotypical peers. Really, it’s a treat to see Quinni using her autistic gifts (hyperfocus, pattern recognition) for espionage, not to mention her choice to “unmask” – meaning, to reveal her full, true, autistic self, who’d rather go look for geckos than pretend to be invested in someone else’s half-baked drama. Given Quinni’s relatability on screen, how much is Hayden involved in shaping the character on the page?

“As soon as I got the job, I had a meeting with the directors and the creator and the writers,” she explains. “I was able to tell them exactly what they were doing right and wrong, and I knew I wasn’t going to get fired. We had some amazing autistic consultants for both seasons as well, which definitely helps.”

For any actor, working on set can be a slog. For an autistic actor, the long hours, harsh lights and stop-start takes can trigger sensory overload. As Hayden notes, “it is a lot,” but the team readily accommodates her needs. She wears noise-cancelling headphones on set; a sensory-safe room is always available for downtime between takes; and her partner, Dylan, visits on days that require a lot from Hayden. “My sensory needs were never considered a burden or too much or too difficult,” she says. “It was just simply, *This is what she needs, so of course we’re going to give it to her*.” What’s more, it inspired her castmates – none of whom are exactly veterans of the industry – to ask

for appropriate considerations, too. “It wasn’t just, you know, *What does the autistic one need?*” says Hayden. “It was, *What does everyone need for this to be the best experience?*”



As a teen, Hayden started blogging about her life as an autistic kid living in regional Victoria – one who loves animals, fairytales, social justice and the Disney songbook. In 2016, she moved to YouTube, where her viral vlogs – such as her critique of the film *Music* (2021), which cast an allistic actor to portray an autistic character – caught the attention of support groups like Amaze and Yellow Ladybugs. Hayden was soon invited to present seminars on her lived experience as an autistic girl: a perspective that was then, and still remains, undervalued in broader autism discourse. “I did schools all around Australia,” she recalls. “Now it’s gotten to a point where it’s a bit too hectic to do schools, so I host my own.” In fact, it’s getting harder for Hayden to go most places unnoticed.

Not long ago, she was living what she calls her “Hannah Montana life” – doing red carpets and cover shoots in the big smoke before returning to her family homebase outside Geelong. “It’s actually so nice,” she says. “I get to go home, there’s nothing around and no-one cares who I am. I just get to hang out with my animals.” That anonymity, however, is proving tricky to maintain.

Back in February, when US megastar Taylor Swift played the MCG, the other star of the night was Hayden. In her purple spangled bodysuit and matching cowgirl hat, she traded friendship bracelets with kindred Swifties, stopping for photo ops with her own enamoured fans (a very similar assembly to Tay’s girls, gays and theys) whom, on social media, Hayden affectionately dubs her “butterflies”.

“The thing is, I grew up a fan girl,” she explains. “I was a One Direction girlie, a Little Mix girlie. I had Tumblr fan pages, wrote fan fiction, all that sort of shit. So it’s not lost on me how impactful a celebrity can be to a young person – and makes it all the more exciting and surreal that I get to be that person for someone else,” she says. “I don’t think it will ever be lost on me just how privileged I am to be in this position.” Of course, other eyes are noticing, too.



“Due to recent events, moving forward, my team will be managing and monitoring all my social accounts,” Hayden announced online last November. For months she’d been inundated with ableism, hate speech, even suicide prompts. “I posted a video last year and got more death threats for being happy than I ever have for any

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of the political content I’ve made,” she says. In said video, Hayden stands on a cliff at sunset, delighted by a pod of whales passing by. She captioned the video, “Autistic joy is the most unadulterated joy in the world”.

“To have an autistic person let you into what they enjoy is such a privilege,” she says. “It’s a beautiful thing – and something that is still so stigmatised... I was flapping my hands because I saw whales, [but] an autistic person excitedly flapping their hands is still seen as taboo, which is ridiculous... People don’t like different.

“I’ve known that for my entire life. I don’t know why ‘different’...is such a scary concept for people. Maybe it’s because they can’t experience that happiness themselves. Maybe they’re jealous of it? I don’t know. If you don’t get excited about seeing a pod of 12 whales, that’s on you. Go see a therapist,” she laughs, then gets reflective.

“I think all of us have a box we’re supposed to fit into. A lot of autistic people have decided, *Fuck it, that box isn’t mine. I’m not going to force myself into it*. It really is a very small population that does comfortably fit. So the majority of people have to contort themselves, and they *can* fit into it, but it’s uncomfortable. I think [some people] see autistic people simply refusing to even acknowledge the box, and that makes them uncomfortable: *Well, I have to fit into this. Why don’t you?* You don’t have to fit into it. The box doesn’t exist.”

Along with whales, lots of things spark joy for Chloé Hayden. She loves photography, surfing, the RMS *Titanic*, her two dogs, three cats, six horses, two axolotls and frogs. And her relationship with God. And the television series *House*. “I’m not even a medical girlie!” she insists. It’s just that, when her own life feels too unhinged, it’s fun to “tune into someone else’s drama”. Having said that, her biggest current commitments are her creative projects – she’s directing a couple of films and TV shows, and working on more books – and looking after her animals.

Hayden admits she’s still figuring out “how to be famous” while retaining her “normal life” – how to balance her mental health and her career while learning when to say, “No”. “I used to just say ‘Yes’ to everything, because I was like, *One day people won’t want me anymore*. You know, make hay while the sun shines. I’ve learned that I’m going to burn out a whole lot faster if I just keep saying ‘Yes’ to things I’m not even enjoying.

“My whole thing is preaching self-love and kindness and looking after yourself, but I wasn’t giving it to myself,” she explains. “Now I only say ‘Yes’ to things that genuinely make me happy.” ■

HEARTBREAK HIGH IS STREAMING ON NETFLIX.