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Funny girl

AUSSIE COMIC CELIA PACQUOLA REVEALS THE
LIFE BEHIND HER SELF-DEPRECATING STAND-UP

WORDS MITCH BROOK • PHOTOS DAMIEN PLEMING





FLYING HIGH
After a comedic baptism of fire,
Celia Pacquola now draws fans
here and abroad

"I like other comedians," says Celia Pacquola,

stating one of the things she likes best about being a stand-up comedian. "If I stopped doing comedy, I'd really miss hanging out with funny, interesting, often insecure people."

The life of a stand-up comedian is full of ups and downs, so it's lucky the 32-year-old has so many people around her who are full-time funny, right?

"No, most of the time comics offstage are terrible bores!" she says. "Often they're meaner – a civilian, or non-comic, might think we're being quite harsh, but we're not. It's all jokes."

"We're just normal people," she says – then, with a grin, "with some kind of mental deficiency and emotional trauma that led us to this life..."

It's clear to see that Celia has felt pressure in her personal life to be the joker, which she protests is not her style. She's a thoughtful comic, someone who puts careful planning into a punchline.

"I was never a funny kid," she says of her time growing up in Victoria's

Yarra Valley. "I liked writing, but I wasn't the goofball, the loon, the class clown."

So where does her humour come from, if it wasn't something she possessed as a child?

"My dad's very funny. My mum's funny without meaning to be – she's funny by accident. I think it is actually from them," she ponders. "I was a quiet, sensitive kid."

She's still sensitive in the way she sets up her jokes. In her dry, clever observational-comedy style, she takes herself as a prime target for ridicule, not only as a way to avoid insulting people but also to ensure her material is original.

"I like talking about myself, I like self-deprecating stuff," she says. "So many people have been doing comedy for so long... Most things have ➤



been thought at some stage. What hasn't been thought is: me."

One of her popular shows, *Am I Strange?*, used her relationship status as joke fodder – she had boyfriend troubles, she said in the show, which she first noticed when he gifted her the book *He's Just Not That Into You*. More problems arose because they were just too different: "I was allergic to cheese and he hated me," she said in her routine. "Allergies, what can you do?"

Self-deprecation continues in her current show, *Let Me Know How It All Works Out*, which Celia brings back to the Melbourne International Comedy Festival this month, after touring it internationally and appearing at the invite-only Just For Laughs festival in Montreal. Doing the show at MICF last year got her nominated for the Barry Award – the gong for the most outstanding performance at the festival.

"That was the biggest deal in my whole life!" she says. "It's my favourite show. It's a secret shame of mine that for the last 10 years I've been going to see psychics. I went to see a palm reader at a festival in the UK, and he told me something I didn't want to hear. I got into a fight with him; the show is about the first time I said to myself, 'What have I been doing?'

"The show is about fate and all that new-age stuff, but from a real cynical point of view," she says.

"There'll be no group hugs and we're not making dreamcatchers."

After school, Celia dreamed of becoming an actor, and studied writing and drama at university. What she enjoyed most was the writing, and that's how she tackled her first gig – by focusing heavily on writing strong jokes with the hope that "no matter how bad I was, they were still good".

She explains, "I started dating this comedian and he signed me up for Raw Comedy, which is the open-mic national stand-up competition, without telling me! I had two weeks to prepare. It was perfect, because I don't know if I would have signed myself up for it." ➤

Celia mines uncharted ground in her comedy: herself



See Celia here

- For updates on Celia, find her at twitter.com/CeliaPacquola and/or look her up on Facebook
- Celia will tour nationally in 2015, and appears at MICF this month. For the full line-up go to comedyfestival.com.au
- The second series of *Utopia* will air on the ABC later this year
- Find more comedians at comedy.com.au



A BIT STAGEY
Celia mid-routine;
the comedian with
Working Dog's
Rob Sitch in
Utopia (below)



Whatever she did worked. "I won best first-time entrant and I thought, 'Oh, I've accidentally done pretty well at this.'"

That was nine years ago, and Celia has no intention of changing direction. With rising acclaim has come her involvement with a range of side projects, including the ABC's *Mental As*, a week of programming supporting Mental Health Week. Her friend and fellow comic Felicity Ward presented a show called *Felicity's Mental Mission* about breaking down stigmas surrounding mental-health issues.

"Felicity asked me to be involved," says Celia, who has suffered from depression and anxiety in the past. "The only reason I explored mental health treatments that helped me is because I saw Hannah Gadsby talking about it onstage. She made it not a thing in a cool way... It made me go, 'Oh yeah!' and it made me feel okay about looking into it."

For Celia, comedy wasn't a way to work through her problems, and she doesn't feel that stand-up should be any sort of therapy session ("That's not fair to your audience; they've got their own problems!").

"When Felicity asked me I agreed because I feel like it's my duty," she

says. "If I can be that person [to help] someone else, that's great."

That's not the limit of her small-screen appearances, however. Her TV career started with a guest role on the series *The Librarians* and has progressed to appearances in *Offspring* and the AACTA-award-winning *Utopia*.

"It happened by accident!" says Celia of her involvement in TV. Her career seems to have come full circle after studying drama at uni, but she insists she's not an actor. In fact, being a comedian has made the whole acting thing a dream for Celia, who had no fear of auditions. Meeting her "heroes", the team behind Working Dog Productions, who created *Utopia* and Aussie hits *Frontline* and *The Castle*, was a bigger deal for her.

"If you told me 15 years ago that I'd meet them, let alone work with them..."

While TV might have been an unplanned step for Celia, she sees her future in combining it with the skills she's honed while doing stand-up.

"The next thing I haven't done is to write my own narrative sitcom," she says. "Which is terrifying. But I'm working on that." *

セリア・パクオラ

オーストラリアコメディ界の中心人物である彼女の素顔に迫ってみた。

ドライでよく工夫されたスタイルは人物観察に優れており、自身をからかいの対象にしたものが多い。それは、他人を傷つけることを避ける意味もあるが、題材の独自性を強調するためでもある。「自分について語るのが好きで、自虐的なのがいい。コメディをやっている人は多いけど、ネタはいずれかの時点ですでに試されたもの。これまで試されてこなかったものは何か。それは私自身」と語る。そして、人気の高かったショーのひとつ、『私ってヘン?』では、セリアは恋人との関係をネタにしているのだが、そこに彼女が気づいたのは、その彼が「ヤツはそれほどキミには惚れていない」という本をプレゼントしてくれた時だったとか。ネタに、「チーズにアレルギーが出ちゃって、それで彼は私が本当に嫌いになったのよ」があるが、「アレルギーじゃないの。どうしろっていうの?」と、今では冗談ばく言う。

ハイスクール卒業後、女優になることを夢見て、大学では文章術と演劇を学んでいた。文章を作ることがとりわけ楽しく、初めてのショーでは、「私自身がどんなにひどくても、ネタはウケる」ことを祈りながら強烈なジョークを多用した。

「あるコメディアンと付き合いだしてからなんだけど、彼が誰でも参加できる全国大会の『ロウ・コメディー』に私の名前で応募したんです。準備期間は2週間。結果的には勝手に応募してもらって本当によかったです。だって、自分で応募したかどうかなんて分からなかったから。そして、何をやってもウケたの。初参加者のなかから最優秀に選ばれて、『偶然だけど、結構うまくいったな』と思ったわよ。」

名前が知られるようになり、テレビ出演などコメディ以外のプロジェクトにも関わるようになっている。そして、スタンダップとして磨いてきたスキルを生かす将来も彼女は描いており、それが、自分を題材にしたホームコメディを書くことだそうで、「恐怖ね。でも、進行中です」と、話してくれた。