



Bryan Batt. Publicity photo courtesy bryanbatt.com

Batt, Bryan (b. 1963)

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Broadway veteran Bryan Batt became famous beyond the world of theater as a result of playing a closeted advertising executive in AMC's acclaimed television series, *Mad Men*. In his own life, however, he is anything but closeted.

Although his own coming out was not without its struggles, in 2005 he told Wayman Wong of *Playbill.com* that while he used to worry that openness would harm his career, "now I don't give a rat's ass. It's normal to be gay."

Indeed, the civic-minded Batt has become something of a gay activist. In addition, Batt has also earned recognition as a designer and interior decorator, as well as co-owner of a high-end gift and home decor business.

Batt was born on March 1, 1963 into a prosperous New Orleans family, at once socially prominent and artistic. His paternal grandfather, a noted businessman, was the founder in 1928 of the Pontchartrain Beach Amusement Park, which became the largest such enterprise in the South before closing in the 1980s.

Batt's handsome but somewhat ineffectual father John managed the amusement park, which was located on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. His maternal grandmother was a dance teacher, and his mother Gayle a glamorous socialite.

During his childhood Batt was cosseted within an extended family of dotting grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins, who delighted in his theatrical flair and love of costumes.

But his strongest bond was with his mother, whom he has described as "the steel magnolia from whom I was fortunate to come forth into this world, made me the man I am today, and although I am still discovering who and what that is, she gave me--or rather taught me by her example--some great life lessons: 1) defeat is not an option; 2) be happy in your own skin; 3) there is great beauty in great strength."

Despite Batt's father's reservations, his mother encouraged the boy's interest in fashion and makeup and the performing arts. As Batt has observed, "The rite of passage for most Southern boys entails hunting and killing a deer or a duck or another random woodland creature. Mine involved pink satin, a glittering papier-mâché float, and a dozen young girls in hoop skirts."

As a child he participated in the Spring Fiesta debutante season, various Mardi Gras balls, and assorted parades and celebrations, frequently wearing outlandish costumes, including, memorably, a Rudolph-the-Red-Nosed-Reindeer outfit in which the battery-operated shiny clown nose blistered his face.

When, at the age of nine, Bryan made a dramatic entrance at a cocktail party given by his parents dressed in a hoop skirt, he was promptly sent to a child psychiatrist.

Luckily, the experience was a good one, for the psychiatrist taught him that he and his father did not have to like the same things: "We were just different. Dad and Jay [his older brother] were football and sports; Mom and I were theatre and fashion, and that was all right. All men didn't have to like sports."

As a teenager, the precocious boy became his mother's prized advisor as to her own dress and jewelry and make-up choices. Poring through her fashion magazines and accompanying her to high fashion shows at the leading stores in New Orleans, he made updating his mother's look a personal crusade, becoming an expert on the different styles of designers and the use of fabric.

At the age of 13, he could "identify an Oscar de la Renta even among a grouping of Yves Saint Laurent [and] Scassi evening gowns, and could tell the difference between Calvin and Annie Klein."

At the same age, he became aware of his own attraction to men, furtively indulging his taste for muscle magazines and soft gay porn. But he soon attempted to deny the implications of that attraction. He retreated from the world represented by the porn magazines "to the world I thought I should live in, the one I was raised to live in, the only one I knew."

As a student at the prestigious Isidore Newman School, he desired to be a "cool kid" and sought help from a trusted classmate to tone down his suspect mannerisms.

Batt thrived at Newman, where he participated in the theater program, an interest that was solidified when his mother decided they should take a trip to New York to see Broadway shows and shop for clothes. The first Broadway show that he attended was *Gilda Radner Live from the Winter Garden* (1979).

Still, his youth was shadowed by worries about his parents' health--his father suffered a heart attack and complications of alcoholism and his mother her first bout of cancer while he was in high school. Because of these concerns, he decided to remain in New Orleans for college.

He dutifully entered Tulane University, where he studied theater and dated wholesome blonde co-eds. Among his roles while in college was that of Billy Flynn in Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* in Tulane's Summer Lyric Theater in 1984.

Although his mother encouraged his amateur theatrics, both parents hoped that he would not pursue a theatrical career, which they deemed too risky. His choice of a career as a professional actor was facilitated by the unsolicited help of someone he did not even know: the legendary "first lady of the stage" Helen Hayes.

When she was in New Orleans to headline a benefit for the French Quarter's famous community theater, Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré, Hayes attended a production of Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell* in which Batt starred. Later, during the same trip, she met his parents. When they asked that she try to discourage their son from a career in show business, she not only refused, but also peremptorily invited them to brunch the next morning where she convinced the young man's father that he was sufficiently talented to support himself as an actor.

In September 1985, soon after graduating from Tulane, and soon after his father died at the age of 55, Batt moved to New York to pursue his dream of becoming a professional actor. He succeeded in securing jobs in small productions quite quickly, but his goal was to be in a Broadway show.

This milestone was reached on March 15, 1987, when he opened in the Broadway production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express*, a "monstrously overproduced mega-musical retelling of 'The Little Engine That Could.'" Batt, dressed as a train with five-pound roller skates on each foot, sang and danced a grueling

routine that eventually caused him to tear a cartilage in his knee.

On opening night, he received a telegram from Helen Hayes: "Welcome to Broadway. May you have a triumphant stay."

Although *Starlight Express* received some of the most scathing reviews in theatrical history, it ran in New York for more than a year. After the show closed, Batt supported himself briefly as a "fragrance model" at Bloomingdale's department store.

During this period, he also began surreptitiously exploring New York's gay scene, picking up other young men in gay bars but never revealing his real name. As he recalled many years later, "There are quite a few willing men who may fondly remember a midnight tryst with the elusive and tipsy Brad, Rick, or Craig."

These encounters, while they were thrilling, were also the source of guilt and shame. At the time, "Being outed seemed a fate worse than death; coming out was utterly unimaginable."

Just after Batt was fired from Bloomingdale's for making a questionable joke about Perry Ellis's perfume line soon after the designer's death, he received an offer to play Che in a production of Lloyd Webber's *Evita* at an Akron, Ohio dinner theater.

The job in Akron not only kept Batt in show business, but it introduced him to the man who would become his partner, Tom Cianfichi (pronounced Chee-on-FEE-kee), a handsome Pennsylvanian who was an ensemble actor in the company.

On April 1, 1989, the two men shared a kiss, and soon became lovers, though Batt remained closeted, fearful that coming out might harm his career or, more likely, disappoint his family and friends.

As Batt facetiously recalls, "From December of 1990 until December of 1992, I was the biggest pussy on Broadway." The dates are the two years he appeared in Andrew Lloyd Webber's long-running musical, *Cats*. It had already played on Broadway for nine years when he joined the troupe. He was grateful for the well-paid job, but he eventually tired of the role, in part because it was exhausting, but also because he yearned for an opportunity to act in a serious play.

That acting opportunity came when he was cast in Paul Rudnick's AIDS comedy *Jeffrey* (1993). Batt played Darius, a naive Liza-loving HIV-positive chorus boy. (The character was originally conceived as appearing in *Grand Hotel*, but after casting Batt, Rudnick rewrote the part to have Darius appearing in *Cats*).

Batt knew that if he took the role, he would have to come out to his family. Having accepted himself as gay, he had overcome much of the guilt he had previously felt, but he had become acutely conscious of an element of hypocrisy, or at least inauthenticity, in his life, one that would be exacerbated by playing a gay character while pretending to be straight.

By this point, most of his friends and colleagues knew that he and Cianfichi were lovers, but his family was led to believe that they were merely roommates. When his mother and other family members came to New York to see *Jeffrey* after the play had opened to rave reviews, Batt, over a bottle of wine, told her that he was gay and that he and Tom were a couple.

Although there were tears, Batt's mother reassured him that she loved him and that she loved Tom as well.

The person Batt feared telling most was his "good ole boy" brother, Jay. But Jay's response was both funny and accepting: "You're gay? Thank God, I thought you just weren't getting any!"

In the 1990s, Batt was very busy. He appeared in several Broadway musicals, including the 1993 revival of Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and the same composer's *Sunset Boulevard* (1994), where he understudied the role of Joe Gillis and was a member of the ensemble, as well as in Frank Wildhorn's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1999), where he understudied the lead role and appeared more than 30 times. He also scored as Monty the DJ in Nan Knighton's musical *Saturday Night Fever* (1999-2000).

During this period he was also busy in several off-Broadway and regional productions of everything from *Forbidden Broadway* to *Romeo and Juliet*.

Batt also made several appearances in films, reprising his role as Darius in the film version of *Jeffrey* (directed by Christopher Ashley, 1995) and playing small parts in the gay comedies *Kiss Me Guido* (directed by Tony Vitale, 1995) and *Hit and Runway* (directed by Christopher Livingston, 1999).

Batt had earned a reputation as a journeyman character actor who could also sing and dance. He was also known as a fast study who could on short notice "cover" other actors, yet create his own interpretation of the characters, as when he took over roles in Stephen Flaherty's *Seussical: The Musical* (replacing Rosie O'Donnell) and Alan Menken's *Beauty and the Beast* (replacing Gary Beach).

He had not, however, achieved the kind of breakthrough that would make him a star. When his career hit a lull in the early years of the new century, caused largely by the collapse of several projects to which he had committed, he and Cianfichi began thinking of redirecting their lives.

After much thought, they decided to open a gift and home accessories store on Magazine Street in New Orleans. Although Batt knew little about the business end of such an enterprise, he welcomed the opportunity to use his design and fashion talents. In 2003, with the understanding that Cianfichi, who had worked in retail in New York, would manage the business, they opened Hazelnut, named for Batt's beloved maternal grandmother whose name was Hazel Nuss.

The new business meant that Batt and Cianfichi made New Orleans their principal residence, though they kept a small apartment in New York.

Batt continued to accept acting assignments, as when he understudied Gary Beach as Albin in the 2004 revival of Jerry Herman's *La Cage aux Folles*.

Although he felt that he was miscast in the role, believing that he was too tall for the part, he loved being able to belt out "I Am What I Am," which he described as "this great soaring, affirmative anthem."

In addition, Batt made his directorial debut in the summer of 2005, when he was asked to direct the season finale of New York's Town Hall series *Broadway by the Year*. The year specified in his program was 1962, which gave him an opportunity to feature songs from shows that have been largely forgotten as well as songs from shows that were great hits.

In August 2005, soon after *La Cage* closed, New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Batt and Cianfichi were on vacation in Sonoma, California when the disaster struck. Their store and house suffered only minor damage, and his mother's home was unscathed. However, the lakefront home of his brother--then a New Orleans City Councilman--was ruined by eight feet of toxic water.

Batt, a veteran of AIDS fundraisers and benefits in both New York and New Orleans, supporting such organizations as Broadway Cares / Equity Fights AIDS and N.O. AIDS Task Force, threw himself into relief efforts for his wounded city.

He appeared in numerous benefit concerts, including the "Broadway Celebrity Benefit for Hurricane Relief," "HeartSong: The Concert for New Orleans," and "With Love, From Broadway to the Bayou." He co-chaired a benefit at the Museum of New York that raised \$150,000 for post-Katrina rebuilding and preservation efforts in the crescent city. In nearly all these events, he mournfully crooned, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?"

Not only did he use his theatrical gifts and contacts to help the recovery of New Orleans, he also utilized his decorating talents. He frequently appeared on television design shows promoting the recovery of New Orleans and participated in a program called "Pimp My [FEMA] Trailer" in which he decorated the temporary home of a woman displaced by Katrina.

In the wake of New Orleans' recovery from Katrina, Batt developed a cabaret act, premiering it as a fundraiser for the New Orleans cabaret Le Chat Noir then taking it to New York's Metropolitan Room and reprising it later as a benefit for Le Petit Théâtre in New Orleans.

In 2007, Batt was cast in the role that made him known far beyond Broadway, Salvatore Romano, the closeted art director in *Mad Men*. When he was first asked to audition for the role, he turned it down because he and Cianfichi had promised to take his goddaughter to Paris to repay her for various aid she rendered in the aftermath of Katrina, including evacuating Batt's mother from the city. Luckily, the role was still available when he returned from Paris, and he eagerly accepted a renewed invitation to audition.

The series, which has been awarded numerous Emmys, Golden Globe Awards, and Screen Actors Guild Awards, as well as a Peabody Award, is distinguished by its attention to the details of its period setting in the early 1960s.

The ensemble acting in the series has been particularly praised, and as part of that ensemble Batt has shared in several awards. His portrayal of Romano, an Italian-American outsider in the waspy world of the Sterling Cooper ad agency, is subtle and richly layered.

The story line featuring Romano during the series' first three seasons emphasized both Romano's homosexuality and his attempt to repress it. In the second season, the character marries, but in the opening of the third season he has an encounter with a hotel bellhop, which is observed by the head of the agency, Don Draper. At the end of the season, however, Draper fires Romano at the behest of a client whose advances the art director had rejected.

It is unclear whether Romano will return in the fourth season. Although Batt's contract has not been renewed, he has observed that the character has been fired not killed, so there may be hope that he will return either to the Sterling Cooper agency or, perhaps, open his own agency.

During his run on *Mad Men*, Batt also made appearances on other television shows, including a recurring role in ABC's *Ugly Betty*, as well as guest segments on home decorating shows such as *Martha Stewart*.

In 2010, Batt published an affectionate memoir, *She Ain't Heavy, She's My Mother*, which emphasizes his mother's charm and courage. He does not shy away from the pain his father's infidelity caused or the shadow cast by the ill health of his parents, but the book is optimistic and funny. He also has a contract for a forthcoming book on design.

As one of a limited number of openly gay actors, Batt was asked to comment on Ramin Setoodeh's controversial April 2010 article in *Newsweek* alleging that gay actors cannot convincingly play straight roles. Observing that the article was "self-loathing," Batt went on to refute Setoodeh's premise by defending the acting abilities of the gay actors maligned in the article, especially Sean Hayes.

There have been recurrent rumors that Batt and Cianfichi either had married or were intending to marry. When asked about these rumors, Batt confirmed that they had considered marrying in California before Proposition 8 passed, but that the illness of his mother made it impossible. He added that they had now decided against marrying until they could do so in their own state: "I'm not going to haul my cookies to another state to enjoy a right that should be enjoyed in all states."

Batt is active in numerous charitable, civic, and political organizations, including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), the Human Rights Campaign, the Point Foundation, and N.O. AIDS Task Force.

Batt and Cianfinchi live "tri-coastally," splitting their time between New York, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

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