

SEND TO PRINTER SEND TO PRINTER | CLOSE WINDOW

Persona: Bryan Batt

SUE STRACHAN



It was no doubt a cold winter night in 1972 when the curtain rose on the third-grade Christmas play at the Isidore Newman School theater. Amongst the cast, one boy was nervously adjusting his costume, one that included a bright red nose, as he was portraying Rudolph, the Red Nosed Reindeer – everyone’s favorite overcoming-the-odds character. It is apt then, 36 years later, to notice that Bryan Batt – Rudolph, 1972 – is now on a sound stage in Los Angeles, portraying Salvatore Romano in the award-winning and critically acclaimed TV show, *Mad Men*. From Rudolph to Romano, Batt has done something very rare in the acting world – he succeeded – and he managed the feat in three different acting outlets: theater, TV and movies. (Note: He can sing and act, dance reasonably well but alas, cannot play an instrument, according to him.)

But as any serious actor will tell you, there are no overnight success stories and Batt has worked hard to be the triple threat he is. He started performing at Newman, in New Orleans Recreation Department productions and at Tulane University, during which time he also performed at Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré. When he moved to New York City in 1986, he was drawn to the theater, first to off-Broadway, then Broadway, where some of his best-known efforts were seen on stage – *Lumiere* in

Beauty and the Beast and *Monty* in *Saturday Night Fever*. It was while doing regional theater, specifically playing *Che* in *Evita*, that he met his partner, Tom Cianfichi. They have been together for almost 20 years and have a joint project of their own, the home accessories store *Hazelnut*, which they opened in Fall 2003 in New Orleans.

Movie roles (*Darius* in *Jeffrey*) and TV (*Rescue Me* and *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*) have kept him in New Orleanians’ minds – and now with *Mad Men*, Batt has a larger stage in which the world can appreciate his singular talent and charm.

What many of his fans not living in New Orleans may not know is that Batt also has a strong philanthropic streak. I dare anyone to name a New Orleans fundraiser in which Batt wasn’t either participating in or aiding in some way post-Katrina. After the storm, Cianfichi and Batt donated a percentage of sales of the New Orleans Toile – iconic city images in a traditional black and white toile fabric designed by the duo and sold at the store – to Second Harvesters Food Bank. This month, he’s one of the honorary co-chairs of the Preservation Resource Center’s “Jazzed in January,” in New York City, and in August 2008 he was the co-host of “Encore,” a fundraiser he helped create for Le Petit Théâtre. He co-hosted the Le Petit benefit with another actor from New Orleans, Patricia Clarkson. “It’s not your typical fundraiser,” says Batt.

This activism and love for New Orleans aren’t surprising as his family has strong ties to the city. They owned Pontchartrain Beach amusement park until it closed in 1983. His brother, Jay Batt, has been a city councilman and is a

local business owner. His mother, Gayle Batt, is involved in several philanthropic and arts organizations.

The fact that he has the time to pursue these endeavors – acting, philanthropy and co-owning a store – makes me think that he might truly be the best kind of mad man.

Age: 45 (“I used to say between 40 and death.”)

Born: New Orleans

Resides: Uptown, New Orleans; Upper East Side, New York City

Family: Partner Tom Cianfichi, and Peggy, their Boston terrier; Mom, Gayle Batt; brother, Jay and his wife Andree, and their two children, Bailey and Kelly.

Education: Isidore Newman School; Tulane University

Favorite book: I love Ellen Gilchrist and anything by David Sedaris

Favorite movie: To Kill a Mockingbird and Auntie Mame (The one with Rosalind Russell)

Favorite TV show (other than Mad Men!): The Daily Show

Favorite music: I like everything. Right now I’m listening to Jamie Cullum, a young British pianist, and Lily Allen

Favorite food: A really good gumbo

Favorite restaurant: I have too many friends who own restaurants in New Orleans to answer that!

Favorite vacation spot: Florence and the South of France. And I love Hawaii. **Hobby:** Hazelnut. And when not there, I like to paint a little, and I’m writing short stories.

Did you always know you wanted to be an actor? Yes. Especially after I played Rudolph. I was shy and I guess it was a way to express myself.

What is your favorite medium in which to perform: movies, TV or theater? What’s the hardest to do? Whatever I’m doing at the moment! I’m kind of an ‘in the now’ type of person. But I’ve got to say I love theater. Every time I go to New York, I try to see as much as I can. Film is harder – we film Mad Men – and there is practically no rehearsal or control over your performance, in that you have no idea what take or what camera angle the editors choose to use. In theater you have the luxury of rehearsal and fine-tuning. If you mess it up, you can get it right the next time.

What was the first Broadway show you saw? It was while I was in high school – it was Gilda Radner’s show, Gilda Live! at the Winter Garden Theatre (where I ultimately performed in Cats). It was sold out, but my mother charmed us into getting box seats. We were all dressed up – I in my seersucker suit and white bucks, my grandmother had on white gloves – and Gilda came out and sang, “Let’s Talk Dirty to the Animals,” which had every four-letter word in it – but she was so precious and cute. I thought my grandmother was going to grab me at the throat and drag me out and into a cab. I turned around and my mother and grandmother were laughing hysterically. For years after she asked me how that “little girl” in the show was doing.

In your early years in New York, how did you support yourself between acting jobs? The worst one: I did “fragrance modeling” at Bloomingdale’s. It was in the days when you could spray a woman with perfume without asking. My favorite was teaching aerobics – I taught Mary Tyler Moore and Madeline Kahn.

If you could do anything differently with your early career, what would it been? I would have studied at one of the league schools: Carnegie-Mellon, New York University, Juilliard, Northwestern. The people who are directing you, designers you work with and others are all people that you will have relationships from the get-go and can help with your career. The schools also do showcases where all the agents go to.

So how did you refine the craft of acting? I like to say that I learned in “the streets.” But I have taken voice and

acting classes. I've had acting coaches, but not ones that teach just one technique.

Do you and the Mad Men cast socialize off the set? I love the cast. We have so much fun off the show. In Los Angeles last year [2008], we had "Mad Men Live Revue," which turned into a huge hit. I sang, Colin Hanks played the guitar... People who went even dressed for the period.

Mad Men is set in the late 1950s, early '60s. Salvatore Romano, the ad agency Sterling Cooper's art director, is a closeted homosexual. This past season, he was married. The interesting thing about his character is that in this day and age there are still people denying their natural inclinations. Some people ask me, "When is he coming out?" and I say he's probably not – remember the era. In the episode from the last season, "The Golden Violin," Salvatore and his wife had a co-worker over and he ignored his wife the whole time. It will be interesting to see where it goes.

There's a story I've heard that you almost didn't audition for Mad Men. My godchild had done so much for me during Hurricane Katrina – she got my mother out of town and boarded up the store – that we wanted to do something for her. So we decided to take her to Paris. I got a phone call about the Mad Men audition, but it was during this trip. For the first time, I said "life over work" and we went to Paris. The people casting the show didn't find who they wanted, so when I got back I auditioned. It only took one audition.

Why Hazelnut in New Orleans and not New York? The store gave me a reason to be in New Orleans more – be closer to my family. I wasn't seeing my family as much I wanted to.

You're in the new documentary Growing Up New Orleans. What is your favorite New Orleans experience? I love the sound of the first marching band coming down the street playing for Mardi Gras.

True Confession: I failed my first acting class at Tulane University. I got an F. And, I was the first male page in the Spring Fiesta – I was dressed in a pink satin Rhett Butler outfit.