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# The naked man: why composer Andrew Batt-Rawden was nude at his own premiere

Beetroot juice drips; the string quartet plays. And a canvas is created as this composer bares all. Amanda Hooton looks on in wonder.

Amanda Hooton

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Composer Andrew Batt-Rawden, 31, and I are at a cafe on the edge of Sydney Harbour. Batt-Rawden is saying no to a muffin with his mineral water. "Are you sure?" asks the cafe person. "Look, they have choc chips!"

"Wow!" enthuses Batt-Rawden in his very clear voice. "But I've got to be naked tonight, so I can't."

I can vouch for this. I met Batt-Rawden – composer, festival director, arts administrator, magazine owner, and once-was-oboe-player – last night, at the world premiere of *27*, his work for string quartet. And he was, indeed, naked.

Actually, "met" is not quite the correct term.

I was in the audience for the Australian Art Quartet's Butt-naked Salon concert at Sydney's Yellow House. As the show began, the quartet came in and sat down. Nearby, multidisciplinary artist Clementine Robertson was lying motionless on a dais with vials of beetroot juice dripping all over her. Then, in the silence, Batt-Rawden entered wearing a fluffy bathrobe, à la Muhammad Ali. With him came Archibald Prize-winning artist Wendy Sharpe. Batt-Rawden walked to a low white box, took off his robe, climbed onto the box, and struck a pose. The quartet played, Robertson dripped, and Batt-Rawden stood starkers while Sharpe painted him onto the walls.

I can't tell you how weird this was. Wonderful, and weird. But not as weird for me, I'm guessing, as it was for Batt-Rawden. "Yes," he agrees, sitting down at a sunlit wooden table. "At one point, I thought I might actually be having a heart attack."

I don't really know the etiquette for interviewing someone in whom your main interest is that you've recently seen them naked. I'm conscious of an ignoble desire to ignore Batt-Rawden's many claims to legitimate fame, and just keep talking about the naked thing endlessly. In a supreme effort of will, I ask him about his background as a composer.

"I decided to be a musician at eight, because mum had a recording of Ennio Morricone's *The Mission*," he smiles. "*Gabriel's Oboe*. I got spine tingles. But my school didn't have an oboe, and my parents couldn't afford one, so I didn't actually hold one 'til high school. Then I realised I wanted to be a creator rather than a performer." So he became a composer. "Then I realised, 'No one's going to produce what I create.' " So he became an artistic director, of events including the Bellingen Music Festival and the Aurora Festival. "Then I thought, 'Who's going to protect the government funding that allows the production of creations for performers?' " So he took on roles with Arts NSW and the Sydney Arts Management Advisory Group. "And then I thought, 'Who's going to communicate about music and foster the audience?' " So he bought *Limelight*, a classical-music magazine.

It would be easy – oh, so easy – to despise someone with such extraordinary levels of millennial chutzpah. But perhaps Batt-Rawden knows this, because he charms you by being both frank and self-deprecating. "I bought *Limelight* by taking on the subscriber liability and 20 grand's worth of credit card debt," he says wryly. "But I did it because it's important to the arts scene in Australia. And also because," he switches to self-parody, "a world without *Limelight* is a world without a magazine that could put me on the cover!"

I laugh, and he adds quickly: "Of course I would never do that. I'd never say to my editor: 'Have I got a story for you!'" Then he laughs. "The sad thing is, I really do have a story now."

Hurrah! A legitimate segue into nakedness! So how on earth did it happen? "Well, I got a call from James Beck [artistic director of the AAQ], and he said, 'Mate. We want to do *27*, and it's in collaboration with Wendy, and she's agreed if there's a life model.' And I was like, 'Great! So you're going to get a nude model?' And he was like, 'Well, actually ...' And I cut him off and said, 'Yep, I'll do it.' "

No hesitation at all?

"Not a second thought."

Why not?

"Well, I did think, 'Hmm, I could be accused of narcissism here.'" Batt-Rawden smiles. "It's my music, I'm the model, I'm naked, and I'm being painted! 'Me! Me! Look at me! And here's another aspect of me!'" He laughs again. "But professionally, I've been exploring the idea of identity for a long time, and having that reflected in multiple ways was intrinsically interesting. Plus the emotional athletics of being nude, in front of an audience, at your own premiere.

I mean that's like, 'Can I actually do that?'"

Now, of course, he knows he can do that, as well as everything else.

You still have two naked concerts to go, I reflect as he drains his mineral water. Then what?

"Oh, well, I'm talking to people," says Batt-Rawden blithely. "I think we should take it on tour."



Australian composer Andrew Batt-Rawden. Photo: James Brickwood