

## Nat Chats: Natalie Abbott on her new cabaret at the 2026 Sydney Festival



**Singer, actor and now cabaret writer, Natalie Abbott, talks to Theatre Thoughts about creating her latest work *Bad Hand* which premiered at Adelaide Cabaret Festival in 2025**

**Natalie Abbott** had an incredible professional debut playing Muriel Heslop in *Muriel's Wedding the Musical* in 2019 which earned her Helpmann and Greenroom award-nominations. You may recognise her from ABC's latest season of [Austin](#) or [Aftertaste](#) which is now on Netflix, or most recently on the Theatre Royal stage where she's just finished performing the role of Helena in [The Lovers](#). On set for *Muriel's Wedding the Musical*, Abbott met her partner **Ryan Cuskelly**, a production runner who worked in the film and theatre industry. Tragically, Ryan passed away unexpectedly in 2024, and Abbott was later approached to write and perform a cabaret for Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2025 about the experience.

Now, she's bringing it to the Sydney Festival in 2026, and I had the privilege of talking to Natalie ahead of her cabaret debut on Gadigal land.

### **Creating Bad Hand**

When she was first grieving Ryan, Abbott says she wasn't able to listen to [music](#) for a long time. "So when I did start allowing myself to listen to music again, everything hit me with a different meaning. Songs that I had heard forever, for my entire life, I just felt like I was listening to them again with brand new ears." She says, "I just wrote a whole bunch

of stuff down and the more I wrote, the more songs I added that I thought was speaking to me at the time, or reflected what I was feeling at the time.

The more I thought about what I actually wanted to say or what I wanted to talk about, the more the cabaret evolved into *Bad Hand*“. She arranged feedback sessions with industry professionals, allowing me insight by explaining, “I couldn’t really conceive a world where I write it in the confines of my bedroom and then I am all of a sudden just performing it in front of an audience. That was so spooky, so I organised notes sessions and some incredible people came and gave me some feedback. I loved the feedback and a lot of it focused on wanting more dialogue.”

When discussing the difference between performing the role of a character versus performing as yourself and how exposing and vulnerable that is, Abbott showed the speediness of the process. “It all happened quite quickly – adding more dialogue, really like exposed more of me.” Nat also talked about the benefit of the cabaret genre saying “the audience are right there and they’re interacting with you and laughing with you – you can go down into the audience and talk to them which at one point I do.” In structuring the work she explained about the collaborative process with her musical director, **Benjamin Kiehne**, and how organically the piece evolved into what it is now.

*Bad Hand* wasn’t an overnight journey for Abbott. In fact, when we brought up the subject about writing for the first time in a mainstage performance, Abbott believes that “creative writing has always been a part of my life, but I haven’t done it publicly for a really long time. I used to write short stories and poetry, but at some point I just stopped doing it, probably when I started going to University.” She adds, “writing has always been a way for me to process, and that was a realisation I came to when I was doing the cabaret.”

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*Natalie Abbott performing Bad Hand at Adelaide Cabaret Festival 2025*

## The Adelaide Premiere

Bad Had premiered at the Adelaide Festival in 2025, something which she says helped a lot instead of premiering it on her home soil in Sydney. “I think that something that really helped was that I didn’t have every single person I know come to the show. I was nervous about doing my first run and I think that just the fact that it was to total strangers definitely helped me”

Chatting about other cabaret artists who have inspired and impacted Abbott’s work, she says “one that has changed my life is **Christie Whelan Browne**, who is a very dear friend of mine. Her work is such a beautiful example of comedic cabaret that has you laughing one minute and crying the next. Especially her second piece that was in the Sydney Festival a couple of years ago – that was a deeply personal story and I loved every second of it. Again, it was hilarious, it was hard, it was heart breaking. She’s an amazing storyteller and I think everyone in the audience felt as close to her as I did in that moment.”

I asked Natalie about how she gets through the cabaret without sobbing through the whole thing, especially as singing and crying don’t usually work well at the same time. “That was actually a big worry of mine. I think the anxiety of breaking down into tears when I was performing kind of scared me enough to not do it”. She explains that there came a point before the first performance in Adelaide where she found herself having to reshape her thinking to focus on telling this story, one she feels so deeply about, the best way she can. Thankfully, Abbott reinforced that it’s not just a sad cabaret all about grief. “I also want people to know that this is a comedy show. It’s going to be uplifting and I hope that it’s a celebration of life as opposed to a reminder about the loss.

It’s definitely a tribute for [Ryan], but it’s also written in a way that it’s not telling his story without his permission. I wanted it to be about my journey through grieving him.”

Have a listen to what Virginia Gay had to say about the cabaret ahead of its’ premiere at Adelaide Festival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xdf0vNA52vQ>

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