

Minx' Reveals That All Nudity Is Not Created Equal

Even at a time when naked men have become more commonplace on TV, a scene in the pilot of this HBO Max comedy stands out for its variety and realism.

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A year and a half ago, when it came time to cast a particular scene in the pilot episode of “Minx,” the showrunner Ellen Rapoport sifted through hundreds of photos of background actors, which had already been sorted into piles.

“Like: small ones, big ones, crooked ones, foreskin,” Rapoport recalled. “I just wanted it all.” (The photos were not of the actors’ faces.)

“Minx,” a cheeky comedy set in 1970s Southern California, swaggers onto HBO Max on Thursday. It stars Ophelia Lovibond as Joyce, a hard-line feminist who becomes enmeshed with Doug (Jake Johnson), a publisher of soft-core magazines like *Secretary Secrets* and *Feet Feet Feet*. Doug convinces Joyce that they should collaborate on a new one, *Minx*, an erotic magazine for women modeled on real ’70s titles like *Viva* and *Playgirl*.

An erotic magazine needs a centerfold, of course. “Not like a schvantz right in the face,” Doug says. “Classy.” So the pilot includes a minute-long scene in which about 18 men audition, bottomless, for the privilege. As Jean Knight’s “Mr. Big Stuff” plays, the men strip off. They strut. They dance. They karate chop.

The montage is charming. It's funny. It's as sophisticated as any sequence that includes what Luke Persiani, a participating actor, called "helicopter tricks" can be. But even at a moment in which male genitals have become more commonplace on prestige television, the scene stands out for the variety of the display, as well as the unusual degree of realism.

"If anyone needs me I will be recovering from the 18 penises I met this week," Rapoport wrote on Instagram once the shoot had finished.

An audition scene in the pilot involves a procession of aspiring centerfolds. Katrina Marciniowski/HBO Max

While network television has strict rules about what it can and can't show, breasts and bare bottoms have long been staples of premium cable. But until recently, full-frontal male nudity remained rare enough, especially compared to the preponderance of breasts on shows like "Game of Thrones" and "Boardwalk Empire," to inspire a 2013 College Humor sketch called "HBO Should Show Dongs."

HBO obliged, as did other services and channels. “I thought that peak penis was 2014, because I had just seen so many instances,” said Maria San Filippo, the author of “Provocateurs and Provocations: Screening Sex in 21st Century Media.” “It’s just kept accelerating and ascending in amount and sheer variety.”

Tanya Horeck, a professor who studies gender and sexuality in contemporary media, briskly listed recent series that have shown full-frontal male nudity: “Sens8,” “Euphoria,” “Scenes From a Marriage,” “Sex/Life,” “Succession,” “Pam & Tommy,” “The White Lotus.” (She could have added “The Leftovers,” “Looking,” “Outlander,” “Shameless,” “Togetherness,” “Easy” and “The Affair,” too.)

How to explain the onslaught? In interviews, academics and intimacy coordinators listed reasons including the ubiquity of pornography; the uptick in queer, female and nonbinary showrunners; the impact of the #MeToo movement; the presence of intimacy coordinators; and the need for attention grabs in a saturated media landscape.

While several people I spoke with unthinkingly used the term “tit-for-tat” in describing this proliferation, all nudity is not created equal. While breasts are a common locus of desire, a flaccid penis often has a more comic or pathetic aspect. (“They’re kind of funny,” Rapoport said.) And current standards permit that only flaccid penises can be shown in any sexual situation. Which means that while naked women have largely been used for decoration or titillation, naked men generally deepen character and drive story. Or at least help to land a punchline.

Asking an actress to go topless may seem like a milder demand than asking an actor to go bottomless. But while nearly all of those breasts are real — if artificially enhanced, in some cases — those penises are not. Most of the ones that appear in mainstream TV or film are silicone prosthetics, and they are often oddly large.

“It’s very rare to just see a normal penis,” Horeck said.

Enter “Minx.”

Part of the work of the pilot is to introduce Joyce to the world of Doug’s Bottom Dollar Publications and the content it produces. Some of this is achieved when Joyce walks into the office for the first time to see a woman wearing nothing but chaps. (And a merkin.) But a lot of that story is told via the montage.

“It’s necessary,” Rapoport said. “It helps you get into her head and almost takes you on a penis journey with her.” The montage allows Joyce to understand the variety and even the appeal of male genitals. Could that journey have been made without nudity?

“Sure,” Rapoport said. “I just don’t think it would have been as good.”

To create the scene, the producers contacted agencies that specialize in background actors and asked for men who were comfortable with nudity. Stephen Conte chose to submit.

“I saw this as an opportunity to express myself in an artistic way,” he said. He and the other candidates uploaded explicit photos to a secure portal.

The photos were a way to ensure that the men’s genitals could look era-appropriate — grooming standards have changed over the years. They also helped producers to guarantee a range of shapes and ages and shades. Perfection was never the goal.

“I just wanted to make the whole show feel grounded and real,” Rapoport said. “I tried to do that with the penises as well.”

A publisher played by Jake Johnson provides Joyce’s introduction into the world of soft-core magazines. Katrina Marcinowski/HBO Max

And they are real, though “Minx” does use prosthetics elsewhere in the series. “Penises are delicate and annoying,” Rapoport explained. “You have to maintain the continuity from shot to shot.” But as each montage penis receives less than a second of screen time,

there was no need for expensive, outsized prosthetics.

Once hired, the actors each received a call from the pilot's intimacy coordinator, Liz LaMura, who talked them through what would be required. When it came time to shoot that scene, in December 2020, the men arrived at the Southern California set and were given groovy 1970s costumes. Makeup was applied as needed.

"I got on my knees to powder penises," Carleigh Herbert, the head of makeup, said. "It just was kind of part of the process."

When time for the scene came, at the end of a 16-hour shoot, the set was closed, meaning that all but essential personnel were asked to leave and external monitors were turned off. "Everyone was very respectful," LaMura said.

The men lined up. Some asked if they could have a minute to warm themselves up. (It was cold on the set.) Conte volunteered to go first. "I'm the first one to show his cannoli," he told me proudly, clarifying that he is in fact Italian.

"My heart was beating a little faster than normal," he added. "So sure, there was a little stage fright. Did I hesitate? Absolutely not. I'm a professional."

Lovibond, Johnson and three other actors were in the room for Conte's bit, which goes on longer than the others and involves some dialogue. Then they left. (Their reactions to the other men were edited in later.)

At that point, the producers had only half an hour left at the location. Quickly, the men were sent in and asked to strip down. Persiani described it as a relief. He had been put in some very tight '70s underwear. "It was freeing," he said.

LaMura and the episode's director, Rachel Lee Goldenberg, encouraged the men to perform in character and helped them to relax. "We had some fun with the guys, saying, 'Can you shake it? Can you swing it? Can you dance?'" LaMura said. The schedule was so tight that the last three men went in together, in KN95 masks, and were shot only from the waist down.

Nudity for its own sake had never really been the goal, Rapoport said. "It just never crossed my mind to want more penises on TV," she said. But the story called for them and she is glad that she has them.

Persiani is glad, too. He had noted a past disparity in female and male nudity. “So if I can do some part, big or small — hopefully, most people think big — to bring a little more balance to that, I’m happy to do so,” he said.