

The free birds of paradise
in Amsterdam
long live the eccentrics of this city!

The free birds of paradise in Amsterdam

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“The free birds of paradise in Amsterdam” highlights the unique and colourful individuals who embody the essence, the freedom of Amsterdam. Written by authors from diverse backgrounds, the book explores the city's identity through the stories of artists and other notable individuals of different times and cultures. The result of sociological research, based on interviews and contributions from hundreds of Amsterdam residents, this book project offers alphabetically arranged listings of more than 100 people who have made Amsterdam more beautiful through their liberal choices. This is also true today: there are still free birds and birds of paradise in the city! They, too, get their say. The book is introduced by Dutch “art and culture pope” Rob Malasch. The very first copy was received by drag-artist Dolly Bellefleur.

We did our very best to translate the original Dutch version. We choose not to translate all of the original Dutch names, to keep the heart of the book intact.

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The book comes in 2 languages: Dutch and English.

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Contact and orders through physical or online bookstores or through our own website:

www.devrijevogelsvanamsterdam.nl

What actually is a bird of paradise? A true free bird?

Better said: who is actually a free bird, or if necessary: a bird of paradise? The first who is invariably mentioned is: Fabiola, he called himself (in recent years also: she/her) a living work of art and managed to get this status recognized through the municipality. There were more living works of art in the 1980s and 1990s: much more unknown is the group of artists from the Haarlemmerpoort who walked around the city like space aliens: Jacov Valentine, Jenny Hazenberg (with partner John, sister Julia and fellow resident Chiko). Of course Mathilde Willink, the first human artwork in Amsterdam (and the Netherlands). And who came after them? In putting it together, the concept of who is a free bird or bird of paradise was quickly stretched. Artists. Performers. Eccentrics. People who went their own way and became “world” famous in the city. People who coloured the city, then and now: the Christmas Twins with their Back Stage store in the Utrechtsedwardsstraat, Ramses Shaffy, Zwarte Riek and many others. But also actors and their creations that became bigger than themselves: Willem Parel (Wim Sonneveld), Opa (Leen Jongewaard), Dorus (Tom Manders), Snip & Snap. Colourful people. Performers who regard the street as their stage. The book also has a deeper layer: during all conversations the key word fell: *Freedom*. The freedom that Amsterdam promises the wayward can nestle. *Free as a bird!*

Freedom

This insight made for us as authors even more interesting. Because hasn't the city traditionally always been a safe haven? When we talk about the history of Amsterdam, we often start in 1275, but actually that history starts some 3,700 years earlier. Around 2,500 BC people lived near today's Rokin. Amsterdam archaeologists found a number of artifacts from that time during the construction of the North/South Line.

Just a little history lesson: In 1170, a major flood occurred, the All Saints Flood. This flood determined the development of Amsterdam. The North Sea broke through the dunes, creating the Zuiderzee and the Waddenzee. Around 1275, a dam was built on the Amstel River. On either side of the river were dikes: the Nieuwendijk, the Warmoesstraat, further on the Zeedijk and the Haarlemmerdijk. Near the Dam came a harbour. At the Dam, goods were stored and traded. Across the Amstel, trade went to the hinterland. Via the Zuiderzee and the North Sea, extensive grain trade with the Baltic grew. Amsterdam probably received city rights in 1306. This meant that urban society could develop into a self-confident, independent city-state, dominated and governed by wealthy citizens. In 1795, the Netherlands became a unitary state. Amsterdam lost its privileges and became subject to central authority in The Hague. From 1860, the capital became an important industrial city. A large, modern city grew along the monumental ring of canals. First these were the 19th-century working-class neighbourhoods like the Pijp and the Kinkerbuurt and the chic Vondelpark neighbourhood. Later came the expansions of Plan Zuid, Nieuw-West, Buitenveldert, and the Bijlmer. This book also intentionally shows some people who may be called birds of paradise in the years before 1960. They are often familiar names like Hadjememaar and Kokadorus. Again colourful people, each with fascinating stories worth retelling. We also mention them.

Haven for newcomers

As it turns out, Amsterdam has always been a haven throughout history. Migration is deeply embedded in the DNA of Amsterdam. Ever since the sixteenth century, thousands of

newcomers, both from the Dutch countryside and far beyond. At the same time, many are leaving the city, sometimes after having lived there for generations. In the conversations we have had it turns out that many older city residents have a romantic image of how the city once was. Partly true, partly not entirely true. At least not when it comes to the lives of “birds of paradise” like Fabiola or Jenny Hazenberg and later ‘string-skater’ Henri Pronker. It is often said, “That was only possible then, but should you see the city now!” It is often said that the freedom in the city has disappeared, because of the rules of the municipality and city councils and because of the new residents coming from new cultures and religions, not to mention the expats and companies with their money. It is an idea that is not entirely true is evident from the words of the birds of paradise at the time, a time described as “freedom-loving”. They too were scolded then. Fabiola was called after. Jenny Hazenberg meditated for a reason before she took to the streets. Mathilde Willink was taken for a fool. The Christmas Twins were sneered at because they were black. Henri Pronker reported how he was harassed while skating. In this book, Diana Ozon looks back and calls the city not always “sweet.”



Photo: Jacov Valentine (in white) belonged to the Haarlemmerpoort group.

Freedom is mentioned as the condition for doing your own thing in the city. We have come across that word many times. Freedom. It is the magnet of the city. We also know this ourselves: we are both Newcomers in the literal sense of the word. Sajad has lived in the city since 2021 and is from Iran, Tehran. Bamber has lived in the city for 20 years, eighties and nineties, coming from the old village of Egmond aan Zee. We discovered in our research on free birds and birds of paradise of Amsterdam that most of them were newcomers. Just those people who are now referred to as a symbol of how-the-city-ever-was. Fabiola came from Belgium. Ramses Shaffy from France. Mathilde Willink from Zeeland. Gary and Greg Christmas from America. Jenny and Julia Hazenberg from Dedemsvaart. The city embraced them, they went their own way, showed their feathers, after which the city remembers them. To this day. To that memory we want to contribute with this book: the free birds and the birds of paradise are worthy to be described and recorded.



Photo: Dolly Bellefleur kissed by Mayor Eberhard van der Laan.¹ Van der Laan passed away in 2017. He was mayor of Amsterdam from July 7, 2010 until his death. Dolly Bellefleur is a well-known drag queen in the Netherlands.

Big thanks to Dolly Bellefleur for accepting the first copy of this book: Thanks for thinking with us about the people who should not be forgotten in this book!

¹ Photo: Eveline Renaud

Fable

In our eyes, free birds and birds of paradise are people who make the city more beautiful. Of course, the city has changed. The places to nest have changed. There are hardly any free places anymore, where the free birds can live and grow. In the 1980s, those sanctuaries were the squats where studios flourished. Government regulation (Anti Squatting Law, hospitality policy, Enforcement – ‘Handhaving’ in Dutch -) has made much impossible. The city's caverns have been bricked up. The city (especially the downtown) has degenerated into a commercial centre, where money prevails and not creativity: the food of birds of paradise. There is literally and figuratively little space left. But it is a fable (to stay in animal language) that because of the current new residents, the city is no place for free birds. Because: there are still free birds flying around the city: Splitter Splatter, Beppy Viergever, Fardad Dadvand, Bas Kusters.

Anyone who sees all the portraits in this book also knows that sometimes you have to be a little crazy to become a bird of paradise. It's true, you have to be a little crazy to be as free as a bird. That certainly applies to the street performers featured: Blind Bennie, Robert Jan Grootveld, Hilmano van Velzen. Also, as a reader, you will notice that we made a choice among the many street artists mentioned in Amsterdam residents' Facebook groups, among others. There were so many at one point that we picked out the most colourful ones. Sometimes we describe someone who had a questionable career, such as Pistolen Paultje and Zwarte Jopie de Vries. Did they make the city more beautiful? Mwâh ... we like to leave the judgment to the memory of the city.

(Missing many names: we know! On to part 2, there are still so many special people to describe)

Any tips? Gladly! We can be easily reached at: contact@bamberdelver.nl

Happy reading. Remember the free birds that have flown out and escaped the earth!

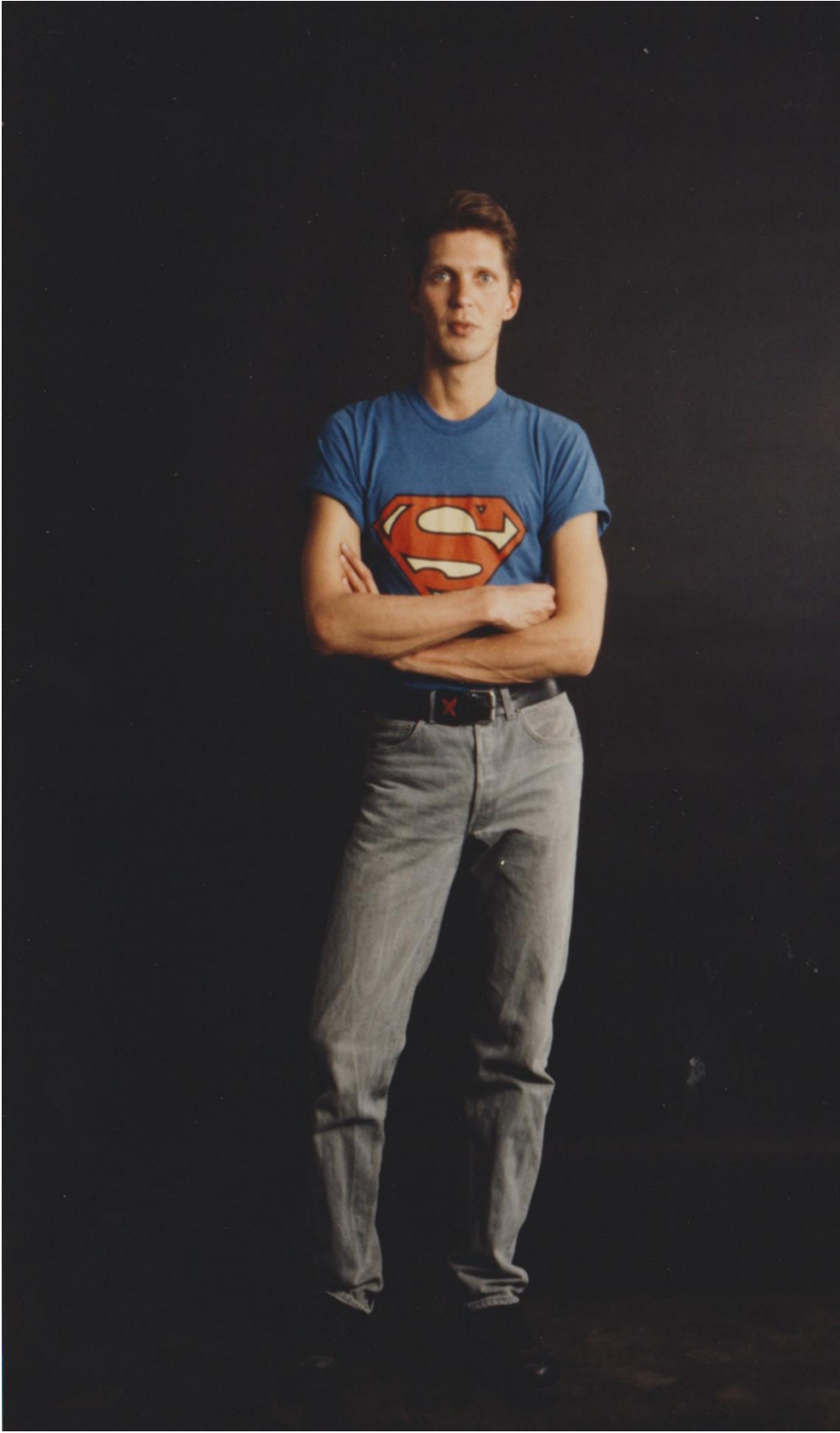
p.s. The content is mostly in alphabetical order. Due to the alternating pages in terms of images and text, this may sometimes vary.

This book is dedicated to Erwin Olaf, court photographer of many birds of paradise.

Erwin passed away in 2023, just 64 years old.

Erwin: "Do I have to? I'd rather be behind the lens than in front of it."

Photo: Pjer Vriens, taking during the nineties for an interview in Maänner Aktuell.





Left to right:

Rob Malasch (entrepreneur), Rob Jurka (gallerist), Peter Klashorst (painter), Bart Domburg (painter), Jurriaan van Hall (painter), Paul Groot (curator), Adriaan van der Have (gallerist). Peter, Bart en Jurriaan were members of artist collective *After Nature* (1987-1995)

Rob Malasch: Self-will is the key to innovation

If there is anyone who has experienced virtually every art and cultural trend in the city up close, it is Rob Malasch. In circles that know, he is called the Dutch art pope. This book portrays one hundred performers, artists and other cross-thinkers, many of whom he has known personally. Rob closely followed the creation of this book; I could always contact him to verify names and reminisce. As an introduction to this book offers a conversation about the city and its quirky residents, who have initiated changes in fashion, art and music worldwide. Like stones in a river, Rob Malasch can interpret the movements of that river.

One of the funniest quotes I found from you is that there has to be chaos before anyone can be creative, and that the most artsy people in particular embrace that chaos. Rob Malasch: “Yes, too many people stick to the rules. How it should be done, how it should be done. You don't get anywhere with that. That's the most interesting thing about the angle of this book: individuality is the key to arriving at something new. Dare and guts.”

The same goes for you yourself; you're not exactly known as someone who colours within the lines. “I have the great good fortune of not being born in the Netherlands, but in Bandung, Indonesia. It is an advantage for your worldview to experience things and experiences from a completely different culture than the good Dutch one. I have always known a certain relativity, not that cozy, small-scale of Holland. Moreover, I was the darling of my mother, and that in a large Indian family, which means so much that I was raised and also grew up like a little prince. I could really afford almost anything. Fear of failure? I have no notion of that.... I am always inclined to jazz things up and see how far you can go. Such deviant, displaced behaviour I also recognize in many of the people in this book.”

Shall we discuss some of the people who have influenced global art from the city? Like Jenny Hazenberg, the artist who had a live-work studio in the Haarlemmerpoort and walked around the city like a space creature. “Yes, I knew that wonderful Jenny well, a very interesting and gifted artist. She was fascinated by architecture and created her own art personas as if she were her own architect, complete with the appearance of a space creature. Her concept of presenting herself she called PARA.... At the time, *David Bowie* was living in Amsterdam. He was staying at the Amstel Hotel with that dancer from the dance group *La La La Human Steps*. Later Bowie starred in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which figures in the hallucinatory dream-sequences roamed around that were derived/picked directly from the creations of Jenny and her sister Julia. Bowie took a good look at them.”

Richenel, you will soon be organizing a tribute for this talented singer. “So much talent that boy had. Unfortunately, he was ground down by the music industry and limited to disco, when he could do so much more, like soul and jazz. A voice like a bell and an aura that made *Boy George* pale. Gender-bender, as it was called back then. What I now call the 'letterbox generation' with all those LGBTQ+ letters: Richenel was a forerunner and combined with his look and voice what we mean by masculinity and femininity.”

As a final example: Peter Rozemeijer, fashion designer. “Very young and talented. I think he came from Wormer and was the first one to walk himself in his own fashion shows. I organized his very first big fashion show in the metro, which was not even open to the public at that time. Models arrived in those subway cars! No one had ever seen anything like it. You understand, the Amsterdam fashion status quo, like a Frans Molenaar and Frank Govers, had to piss in their outfits

from envy.... His fashion ideas, had he lived, would have been comparable to those of Jean Paul Gaultier or an Alexander McQueen.”

Unfortunately, the names we mention have almost all died young. “That’s also the sad thing about creative people. Look, the city has always been a haven of drink and drugs. I’ve seen it myself; the city was once known as the Magic Centre, with the hippies and the Provos. Then as a squat and punk town and then with the rise of house culture, all steeped in drugs. I don’t know if Amsterdam’s liberalism and drug use are inextricably linked, but the fact is that so many people died from drugs. Their young lives and careers were demolished. And let’s not forget AIDS, the silent killer of the 1990s. Many artists are gay (like me) and can look at society from their position as outsiders in an original way. Look, as an ordinary heterosexual you basically don’t have to think about anything: your life is arranged from the cradle to the grave.... house, tree, beast or baby, etc. With homosexuals it’s obviously different, because you have to plan everything out from within yourself.... Thank the gods. You used to be able to go out to places like the DOK, the Schakel, the Oxhooft and, of course, not forgetting Akhnaton. For the diehards among partygoers, after closing time there were also semi-secret pubs like De Witte Ballon and on the Zeedijk Tante Riekje.... At the DOK, you’d suddenly find yourself sitting next to the entire cast of the musical *Hair*, or Elton John would ask you to dance, and you’d see Mick Jagger and David Bowie fondling each other. Pop stars came to Amsterdam for inspiration, but the city has lost that central role. An eternal shame.”

How do you see Amsterdam as a place where free birds and birds of paradise can nest? “Amsterdam before Provo was a boring, neat city. The quirky came out of that playful movement, as a protest against the bourgeoisie. In a city you can go into hiding and live a quirky life without anyone calling you on it. At least, that was once the case. You could safely hide in anonymity. But with the growth of the city, new residents and the regulatory push of the municipality, the free spaces have disappeared. Open places to create are rare and often unaffordable. The curiosity to create has waned, and what is still original? In the late 1960s, we bought fantastic clothes for a trifle on Waterlooplein and turned them into something extraordinarily new and different. Now the square is a tourist store. The free character of Amsterdam has diminished; there is more social control which makes people fall in line.”

When you look at the names in this book, more than a hundred quirky people, cross-thinkers and doers, what do you think? “This is how the city used to be. Think back to my early years in theatre: we pretty much all started at the Shaffy Theatre, and there was a nice, interested audience for that. After I did two sold-out performances in the Zuilenzaal and the Concertzaal, I thought I was ready for the big time. So I simply called Carré with a proposal for a unique performance. The director, Van der Linden, answered and gave me a chance, even though he barely knew me. I was granted the opportunity to perform the performance *Attaca* with music by Philip Glass on the vacant days. By the way, the performances were also sold out. That freedom, trust and room for creativity no longer exists. The never-ending programming with those awful Van der Ende musicals and cowardly cabaret is now just death in the pot. What creative mind still goes there? Yes, I’m bold, I don’t suffer from fear of failure and above all I just have guts. If I can’t do something, I go right ahead and do it, and if it fails, I learn from it. Surprising yourself at first is the most fun there is. Everything is experience. Many of the people in this book have that same attitude: do, not think, but do. Not bothering about what others think, it increases your own freedom. The bizarre thing is that what is first considered idiotic, goofy and unfeasible is later rediscovered and experienced as new. Those artists, performers and sleepers are the greatest inspirations, even if they are not always recognized. And that, I think, is the beauty of this book: it will be a standard work for many generations to come.”

Rob Malasch: www.serieuzezaken.art



**STOP
MAKING
STUPID
PEOPLE
FAMOUS**

DOOR

PROFESSOR BEN=ALI=LIBI

HUMORISTISCH GOOCHELAAR



Aan de trouwe Luistervinkjes aangeboden door de
„A.V.R.O.” Keizersgracht 107, Amsterdam-Centrum.

Ben Ali Libi, magician

When Dutch actor Joost Prinsen and poet Willem Wilmink read the name “Ben Ali Libi. Magician” during their visit to a literature exhibition, Prinsen says, ‘Such a magician, was Hitler really in the way?’ Wilmink decided to write a poem about the life and death of Michel Velleman, the real name of magician Libi.

On a list of artists killed in the war is a name I have never heard of, so I look at it with wonder: Ben Ali Libi. Magician. With a smile and an excuse and a magic box and an alibi he chooses carefully, he scavenges a living: Ben Ali Libi, the magician.

Then the Widow Rost's friends think the Netherlands must be urgently rid of the worldwide Jewish-Bolshevik danger. They mean, of course, that magician.

He who has so often hidden a dove or a flower cannot hide himself, if there is a loud knock. A robbery truck is already waiting for Ben Ali Libi, the magician.

In 't concentration camp he might still show his nicest tricks with a smile and an excuse, a deceptive gesture, Ben Ali Libi, the magician.

And always when I see a screamer with an alternative to democracy, I think: your paradise, how much room is there for Ben Ali Libi, the magician. For Ben Ali Libi, the little schmuck, he rests in peace, God rest his soul.

Michel Velleman was born in Groningen on January 5, 1895. In the early twentieth century, he moves to Amsterdam where he finds work as a “humorous magician” under the name Professor Ben Ali Libi. He is quite popular, evidenced by the fact that he performs for such prominent figures as Prince Hendrik and Wilhelm II, the German emperor who is in exile in the Netherlands. In the 1920s the family lived in Tweede Boerhaavestraat, later moving to Biesboschstraat 7. A month before the occupation, April 1, 1940, they move into a house at 59-II Merwedeplein, a few doors down from Anne Frank and her family. From here, Velleman runs his Amusement Bureau.

One of his first known performances takes place on September 7, 1910. An impression of it can still be found here: At two o'clock in the afternoon, the then still youthful Ben Ali Libi gives a children's performance in the Tolhuis over 't IJ. Admission is 15 cents. During his performances for children, he conjures up candy or a present for everyone. The highlight is the act in which he turns “ordinary paper into a delicious glass of lemonade.” When two children are called onstage and confirm that it really is lemonade, it seems as if the room is too small, “such a cheer goes up”. Ben Ali Libi also performs for adults, as one of the performers in a cabaret show. He shares the stage with the popular elocution artist Marie Hamel, accordionist John de Leeuw and the singing duo Johnny and Jones (see later in this book).

During World War II, the artist works for the Cultural Department of the Jewish Council, an organization created by the occupying forces to administer the Jewish community in the Netherlands. He also gives home magic lessons and publishes a booklet with simple magic tricks. During a raid by the Germans in Amsterdam on June 20, 1943, he was arrested together with his wife and daughter. Via camp Westerbork they ended up in Sobibor. The three were murdered there on July 2, 1943. At the time of the raid son Jacques was not at home. He is warned in time not to come home and survives the war as the only one of the family.^[1] Ben Ali Libi is not forgotten.

^[1] <https://historiek.net/ben-ali-libi-michel-velleman-goochelaar/70877/>



Bet van Beeren, café owner

Café Het Mandje was the safe haven for the city's birds of paradise. In 1927, owner Bet van Beeren, also called the queen of the “Zeedijk” (the Amsterdam red district), was at the helm in the place where gay men and women could openly express their orientation. Bet was a standout. Despite her abundant drinking and openly free and promiscuous lifestyle, she was also criticized, including by Major Bosshardt of the Salvation Army, who regularly visited to 't Mandje to sell the Army magazine, However, this didn't not hinder the friendship between the two women.

Elisabeth Maria (Bet) van Beeren is the eldest daughter in a family of fourteen children from the Jordaan. She takes over Café 't Mandje on February 24, 1927, then only 25, from her uncle Toon Engelen. The café is called “Amstelstroom.” Bet changes the name to “'t Mandje” because her mother brings her food in a basket every day. Bet is already known on the Zeedijk as “Betje Bokkum.” After all, she fishes. From an early age, Bet knows she is attracted to women. For her, everyone is equal and the café, at a time when homosexuality is not accepted and even illegal, is open to gays, lesbians who can be themselves, along with sailors, prostitutes, local residents, actors, painters and intellectuals who also come there. Bet is a legendary bouncer. In a leather jacket, she tears through the city on her motorcycle, sometimes with a new conquest on the back. In 't Mandje, gay men and lesbian women are safe. There is one but: kissing is not allowed from Bet, because of the vice laws and the liquor license that could be at risk. Only on Queen's Day (at the time on April 30) everything is possible, there is dancing by men with men and women with women. Bet has its customs that have become legendary to this day. Visitors are asked to leave a souvenir. This could be a business card, a photo with a date, a greeting written on a felt, a shoe, a stroller wheel, a flag, a bra, dentures, a tiger's head, a stuffed iguana, or a tie cut by hand. Even today, these souvenirs still hang in the café.^[1] ^[2]

Especially after the war, it seems to be one big party at Café 't Mandje. The café rolls from one anniversary to the next. When Bet is no longer in the last years of her life, sister Greet stands behind the bar and Bet sits at the corner of the bar. On July 16, 1967, Bet dies at the age of 65. She is laid to rest for two days at the café-billiard. After Bet's death in 1967, her 21-year-old sister Greet continues the business. Until 1982, when she closes the café, due to the drug nuisance on the Zeedijk, she keeps up the honour for 15 years quite successfully. From then on, the café has been closed.

In 1998, during the Gay Games in Amsterdam, Greet opens the café for a week in tribute to her legendary sister Bet. For the occasion, the café is provisionally reopened. After extensive renovation, repair and cleaning, Café 't Mandje was restored to its former glory and reopened to the delight of the gay world, the city of Amsterdam and the neighbourhood on April 29, 2008. With the reopening of the café, Aunt Greet's wish to keep everything as it was during Aunt Bet's time is an important guideline. She preserved, maintained, guarded the café. Without her, for example, all those neckties would have perished....

[1] <https://atria.nl/nieuws-publicaties/bijzondere-vrouwen/vrouwelijke-pioniers/bet-van-beeren-biografie/>

[2] www.cafetmandje.amsterdam/geschiedenis
Photo © Amsterdam Archive



Ruud Douma - Dolly Bellefleur, beauty with brains

Photo by: Piek

How would you describe Dolly Bellefleur to someone who has never met her?

Ruud Douma: “As a ‘beauty with brains.’ It’s a nickname I use to get rid of the prejudice that exists about high-heeled ladies like me. As if I were just a pretty little doll without substance. ‘Transformational art, misunderstood muse’ was not for nothing the title of the lecture I delivered in 2004 at the Moses and Aaron Church in Amsterdam. It was immediately clear to me that I wanted to develop a style all my own that deviated from the cliché image of transvestite theatre. Away with cheap sequin dresses, exaggerated bosoms and the calibrated feather boas. Dolly was to have a sophisticated look comparable to that of my style icons Jackie O. Kennedy and Audrey Hepburn. Dolly’s colourful creations and positive disposition make people dare to turn to her for advice, for example. Sometimes cuddly, sometimes vicious, but always stylish, Dolly fights discrimination, prejudice and a stifling spirit of compartmentalization. With the ultimate goal: to make ‘heavy’ subjects ‘lighter’ by means of an idiosyncratic visual language and also to ‘seduce’ people who at first seem to want nothing to do with the rainbow community, to win them over and win them over to the good cause.”

An open door question: why did you start Dolly?

“After singing solos as a boy soprano with the local children’s choir, I was looking for an art form to express and shape my feelings until I was twenty-eight years old. When I walked into the Amsterdam Anthony Theatre in 1989, I was sold. The tiny pipe bowl filled to the brim with kitsch breathed the atmosphere of 1920s Berlin. When the theatre director asked me if I wanted to put on a drag revue, I answered without hesitation: yes. I had not seen a single transvestite show before this. Let alone performed as a woman myself. I began the absolutely fabulous adventure that Dolly has been for thirty-five years with a blank stare. Just as one artist chooses paint and another chooses marble, I discovered at the Anthony Theatre that having and developing a female alter ego was the best means of expression for me. The first few times I was purely a lady speaker. I grabbed the white wig that was in the dressing room, not knowing that white hair would later become my trademark. I found myself holding a kind of magic wand. Especially the interaction with the audience was magical. The transmitter of my youth I have always remained. Religion can be traced back to the word *religare*, which means to bind or connect together. Which I see as my main mission.”

You are from a small village called and found freedom in Amsterdam.

“As a boy I was incredibly bullied at school for being ‘different’ from the rest. The cheerful, open and spontaneous child I was by nature crawled back into his shell out of survival instinct. My bedroom became my escape room. Music was my lifeline. For example, I often listened to *Ding-a-dong*, the song with which the Dutch band Teach-In won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1975.

When you think it's all over

They let me down

Dry your tears

And forget all your sorrow

From the first time as a child I was allowed to watch the song contest, I was forever addicted to this European songfest. This feel-good music became my musical Prozac. No wonder decades later, as Dolly, I'm recasting Holland's entries to the song contest. When I heard Duncan Laurence's song Arcade in 2019 and read how he, too, had been bullied as a child, I incorporated my own bullying past into a retelling titled On the echo of my heart.

A boy looks at me sadly

Fists clenched, I see a tear

I feel his pain from long ago

I carry it, carry it with me

Outsider, an outsider

I feel the cold clammy sweat

On my own, all alone

Had I known what I know now

In retrospect, that being bullied also provided something positive, namely the fuel to later jump on the bandwagon for misfits like Dolly Bellefleur. For example, I now visit schools. I remember a girl who, during one such visit, dared to tell the class for the first time that she was into girls. So brave. At her graduation party, I performed as a surprise. A few months later, during Canal Pride, I suddenly saw her in a boat with her parents. Father in rainbow suit, mother beaming beside it and she with a balloon: 'I love Dolly! My heart melted.'



Photo: Anne-Rose Bantzinger

You manage to proclaim the message of love like a guardian angel in between all the polarization. I think that is really very brave and clever as well. I myself have difficulty staying calm in these times and distancing myself from all the shouting. Yet in the candy cane pink packaging, you are also on the barricade; just think of your version of Boney M's Rasputin against Putin's regime."

"I sang that in 2013 at a demonstration at the Maritime Museum where Putin was dining at the time. A video of my performance appeared on YouTube after which the most terrible reactions appeared in Russian. I then used Google Translate to translate them. That was a bit of a scare, but since then I have also been in contact with a gay Russian boy who is afraid of being betrayed

by his neighbours. I then wonder if I would have dared to be so brave if I had lived in Russia. Surely such contact gives perspective and nuances such a protest song.”²

You have known many of the people portrayed in this book. I think of the time you taught safe sex education along with Hellun Zelluf (also in this book).

“When I debuted in 1989, AIDS swept through the city like an assassin. The scare was pretty much there. I was really terrified of love. So little was still known about this mysterious disease that was sarcastically called the 'boy flu' in the gay scene. I felt so powerless and felt I had to do something. Safe sex soon appeared to be a way to put some stop to the disease. So to the tune of 'I don't know how to love him' I wrote a song entitled 'I do know how to love him' in which I wanted to convince hit lovers to please use condoms in a light tone and with a quip. Young people today cannot imagine these times: just imagine friends of yours dying every week.”

How old is Dolly, anyway? Will she ever retire?

Chuckling, “Do you want me to vanish? Dolly is ageless but myself ... I want to go on until I'm eighty, just like my great example Jenny Arean. With that power, with that voice until you drop”.

'Let love rule' is your slogan. A message that is eternal.

“I continue to believe in the Power of Love, that despite all the differences among people you can always find each other again from love.”

What were you thinking when you were asked for this book project?

“I've had a soft spot for misfits all my life. For me, the string skater is one of the birds of paradise who impressed me the most. Every time I was on the streetcar and saw that guy in his thong skating by, it made me so incredibly happy. That's the freedom of the city, where else do you come across that? But I also have great admiration for the pink pioneers like (also in this book): Daisy Dynamite and Aaïcha Bergamin. We must never forget that we stand on the shoulders of earlier generations. *Those were the gays my friend.* They once fought fervently against taboos and trite clichés. With their drive they liberated us...”

www.dollybellefleur.nl

Photo Vondelpark: Eveline Renaud

