

Before the Last Curtain Falls: ages and stages of drag cabaret stars

German-Canadian director Thomas Wallner's *Before the Last Curtain Falls* has its world premiere at Hot Docs Monday night.



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Writer-director Thomas Wallner, left, has made a documentary about Belgian cabaret performers, including Gerrit Becker, centre, and Danilo Povolo who are in town for its premiere at Hot Docs.

By: [Linda Barnard](#) Staff Reporter Published on Sun Apr 27 2014

"I definitely did not want to make a film about transsexuality or homosexuality," German/Canadian writer-director Thomas Wallner said about *Before the Last Curtain Falls*, a stage performance within a documentary that explores the colourful and complex lives of a group of older Belgian cabaret performers.

The film has its world premiere at [Hot Docs](#) Monday, screening again Tuesday and Friday.

"It's really about bigger themes; love and aging," Toronto-based Wallner added of the documentary, which profiles six cast members about to do their final performance of a show called *Gardenia*.

The successful touring stage production, about to make its last stop at home in Ghent as the documentary opens, is a mixture of music, movement and tableaux. With moods that range from melancholy to humorous, *Gardenia's* performers reflect about their lives, fears, triumphs and disappointments.

Aged 60s and up, they were a mix of professional and amateur performers. Some are gay, others transvestite or transsexual. They dressed as both as male and female onstage to help the audience appreciate the duality of their lives, going from simple three-piece suits to sundresses to elaborate drag.

Wallner, who won the Special Jury Prize for Canadian Feature at Hot Docs 2011 for *The Guantanamo Trap*, saw *Gardenia* in Montreal and was curious to know more about the performers after the curtain came down.

"I could tell the cast was extremely reticent to give close personal details about their lives. I felt I really didn't know the protagonists," he said, adding he saw a role for a documentary to fill in those missing elements.

In *Before the Last Curtain Falls*, the six look back on their histories as they enter what one called "the autumn" of their lives.

The mood is reflective as they speak about their search for intimacy and acceptance, sharing stories of the time in their lives when they found love and were young and beautiful, proudly showing photos of who they were then.

They talk about aging, broken hearts, their families and secrets kept and revealed, as well as the physical and emotional risks they took to find a place in the world. Some went through gender reassignment surgery, or what was then experimental hormone therapy. Others kept their sexuality a secret, enduring shame and regret.

Gardenia was conceived by Belgian writer and actress Vanessa Van Durme, who came up with the idea after watching a Dutch documentary about a transvestite cabaret in Barcelona featuring "very old artists."

"This is a show," thought Van Durme, who speaks openly in *Before the Last Curtain Falls* about her highly risky gender-reassignment surgery in Casablanca in 1975 and the heartbreaking fallout that resulted.

She assembled a cast of transgender and transvestite performers, some professional, others not, who she knew from back in the day. "Old friends used to wearing high heels," she jokingly called them over the phone with the Star from her Paris home.

Alain Platel and Frank van Laecke co-directed *Gardenia*, which toured the world beginning in 2010 for more than two years, with 200 performances.

"I think for many of them it became the highlight of their lives," said Wallner of the cabaret.

Two of the performers, Gerrit Becker and Danilo Povolo, are in Toronto to attend the documentary's premiere.

"For us it was a (gift)," to perform in *Gardenia*," said Becker, who is retired. His neighbour, Povolo, a longtime drag performer in comic transvestite theatre groups, now works as a cleaner in an Antwerp brothel.

"At our age — I'm 70 this year — to be asked to perform onstage in a piece with Alain Platel and director Frank van Laecke, they are very famous in Belgium, so for us it was a gift, we did a tour all over the world," said Becker, an elegantly handsome man who met Van Durme 40 years ago when she was performing at a cabaret in Antwerp.

"Nothing is hidden, it's all said in the film," Povolo said with a smile.

But it wasn't an easy transition for some. One performer hadn't officially come out and didn't want people to know he was gay. Another had kept his past as a window prostitute in Antwerp secret.

Before beginning to shoot, Wallner spent 18 months getting to know his subjects, gaining their trust and as a result, they open themselves onscreen with often-touching candour and some deeply emotional revelations.

But it is not all bleak and in fact, there are some very amusing observations.

"They finally got to say a lot of things they never could say," Wallner explained, adding perhaps their age helped push them to opening up.

"At this stage of their lives, they're beyond (worrying). This is what I am, take it or leave it. They've all gone through a lot."

After *Gardenia* closed, "we took up our lives like we did before," explained Becker. Although acting was never his profession, he'd love to get back onstage if the opportunity presented itself.

Van Durme continues to work, including performing in a solo show.

"Well, OK, I'm a survivor and I'm a very happy person with a nice little career," said Van Durme, who, like the others in the documentary is wistful on the subject of love, aging and living alone.

"Love is the most important thing in life," she said. "We forget it. We think it's money and possessions and jobs, but it's love. I have a lot of love for my profession. I am 66, I can retire, but I am going on."