

Review: Hot Doc 'Before The Last Curtain Falls' Is A Stunning Celebration of the Communion We Achieve In Art



Of the many documentaries I was able to catch at this year's Hot Docs (which wrapped up a few days ago), one viewing experience remains in my mind, and heart, an undeniable standout. It was Thomas Wallner's "Before the Last Curtain Falls", inspired by the production of "Gardenia", a colourful contemporary dance piece that tells the personal stories of its artistes: a group of transgender and drag queen ex-performers who, now in their 60s and 70s, have come together to climb upon the stage one last time.

"Gardenia" blossomed into a smash hit which far surpassed its original intention to play a limited run in select theatres, and thus its stars were able to travel the globe with their cathartic swan song expressing the struggles and triumphs of coming into their own, a tour which director Wallner observed "for many of them became the highlight of their lives."

Alternating between excerpts of the onstage marvel, the documentary juxtaposes each character's performance with a look inside their day-to-day as a transgender person in the autumn of their life. Wallner spent 18 months with the subjects to develop a bond of trust in which they would comfortably open up to him. These talking head interviews in the performers' natural habitats: their dressing rooms, day jobs some are returning to, and their own households — propel the film into the realm it's in that wowed me so.

Many of the characters underwent surgery — at one point a sketchy underground operation in Casablanca — while others opted for female hormones. As a child, one performer swore to her mother she'd never let a surgeon touch her body, and ages later has kept the promise. A few of the subjects are actively dating, but most long ago waved goodbye to any semblance of a romantic life. A fear of dying alone pervades.



At one point in the film we are shown inside the lonely living quarters of one of the performers — a gay man who spent almost all of his life in the agonizing closet. He sits in his bathtub, and as the faucet drips grow slower and quieter, muses on the number of days it will take the world to notice that he is absent, before the authorities burst through his door and find his body. It hit me: if one is forced to live their life believing they are unloveable, thoughts like these are very naturally bound to occur. Yet onstage this man's presence is a force to be reckoned with. This is the glory of "Gardenia".

The show culminates with a breathtaking finale to the sound of Ravel's "Bolero". Like a balloon or a ghost, the camera playfully floats in and around the performers' transformative tableaux — in the beginning the troupe had entered in traditional menswear and as the ballet runs its course, in the style of a picture chart displaying the larva's metamorphosis into butterfly, the stars have donned wigs, makeup, dresses, heels, and have reached their realest form.

"Before the Last Curtain Falls" is an endearing recollection of life as an outsider, a sincere exploration of queer identity, and a stunning celebration of the communion we achieve in art.