

Why a feature film?

G.B.: I felt that the film should be long enough to adequately deal with this very complex subject. The journey from the familiar – from Bridge, the performance artist – to the unfamiliar – to Del, who takes testosterone – is very important, and this journey requires an epic form of narration. Not only that. VENUS BOYZ touches a topic that is taboo. The caution and scepticism that accompanies it must be treated with care, we need to leave it plenty of room. The journey in the film portrays, in a certain sense, my own journey. I learned a lot of new things while I was making VENUS BOYZ. I laughed a lot, I was touched, I was confused – and I wanted to share this journey of discovery with my viewers.

In VENUS BOYZ you limit yourself to the current situation and only briefly deal with the historical dimensions. Why?

G.B.: For me, it was important to concentrate on what is happening now. The current Drag King movement goes way beyond what has been known thus far. Modern Drag Kings reflect their transition from women into men also through parody. They do not simply put on men's clothing so they can appear on stage and slip into a man's role, as Marlene Dietrich did. Nor do they do it in order to make femininity more erotic. Their behaviour is often targeted at deconstructing and innovating masculinity. That evidences a certain distance and, at the same time, a new self-awareness.

Then in your eyes, the appearance of Drag Kings in these modern times reflects other social phenomena that we are experiencing now?

G.B.: Very much so. The possibility for women in western cultures to break out of traditional roles was never as great as it is today. The relationship between the sexes is on the way to very basic change. We are experiencing a paradigm change. One of the main reasons for this is that reproduction is no longer a fundamental aspect of the sexuality that binds man and woman. This creates new space, allows a completely new evaluation of the roles of men and women and the various forms of sexuality. Another release mechanism can be found in the new economic possibilities that women have today and in their self-understanding in view of feminism...

In VENUS BOYZ, the protagonists' distinct self-confidence and strong reflectiveness comes across very strongly.

G.B.: The fact that Drag Kings, especially the pioneers, appear to be such reflective characters is certainly relevant, on the one hand, to the fact that they are – or were – women. In our society, women are generally forced to think about their behaviour and their appearance. On the other hand, when they play masculine roles, they are called into question by society. In order to conquer new space they must have an awareness of what they are doing. For Del and the London group, this problematic takes on another aspect. They are perceived as men.

You mentioned before that you met several Drag Kings in New York. Wasn't it rather difficult to get into this scene – which must be somewhat small and exclusive?

G.B.: Not really. But it would be an exaggeration to say that I was welcomed with open arms. There were certain reservations when it came to strangers who were interested in making a film about them. The New Yorker scene is, however, quite large and thus quite open. Because I had lived in New York for several years previously, I felt at home there and I had friends who were able to introduce me into that scene. What is important is the long time we spent in realizing the project. If I had shot the film in 1996, when I began my research, the intimacy and confidence that characterizes VENUS BOYZ would not have been present in the film. Our long cooperation gave the participants the assurance that I was not presenting them as some kind of shimmering exotic birds – as they were accustomed to in talk shows, but rather that I was seeking serious clarification. This was more important for the protagonists in London than it was for those in New York. The London scene is more critical – and has been much more strongly attacked. Del, for example, who was still Della when I met him, was very wary in the beginning. He wanted to know exactly what I had done in New York. It was only once he had seen the film material I had made in New York that he agreed to work with me. He was favourably impressed with the fact that I had framed the images in a special way, that I had sought a certain beauty. He finds that his world is often portrayed as ugly and distorted – and that bothers him.

How did you finance your film?

G.B.: Financing the film was very difficult. In Switzerland we were confronted with extreme rejection and scepticism, especially in the established commissions. Partially, this was because in 1996/97, when I began my work on VENUS BOYZ, there was not as much awareness about the subject matter as there is today. In the meantime, many books have been written about this topic and a film was made about the story of Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena (BOYS DON'T CRY) – A lot has changed in the past few years. But without active support from abroad, this film would never have been realized.