



Gay memorial: Amsterdam's last stand as gay capital?

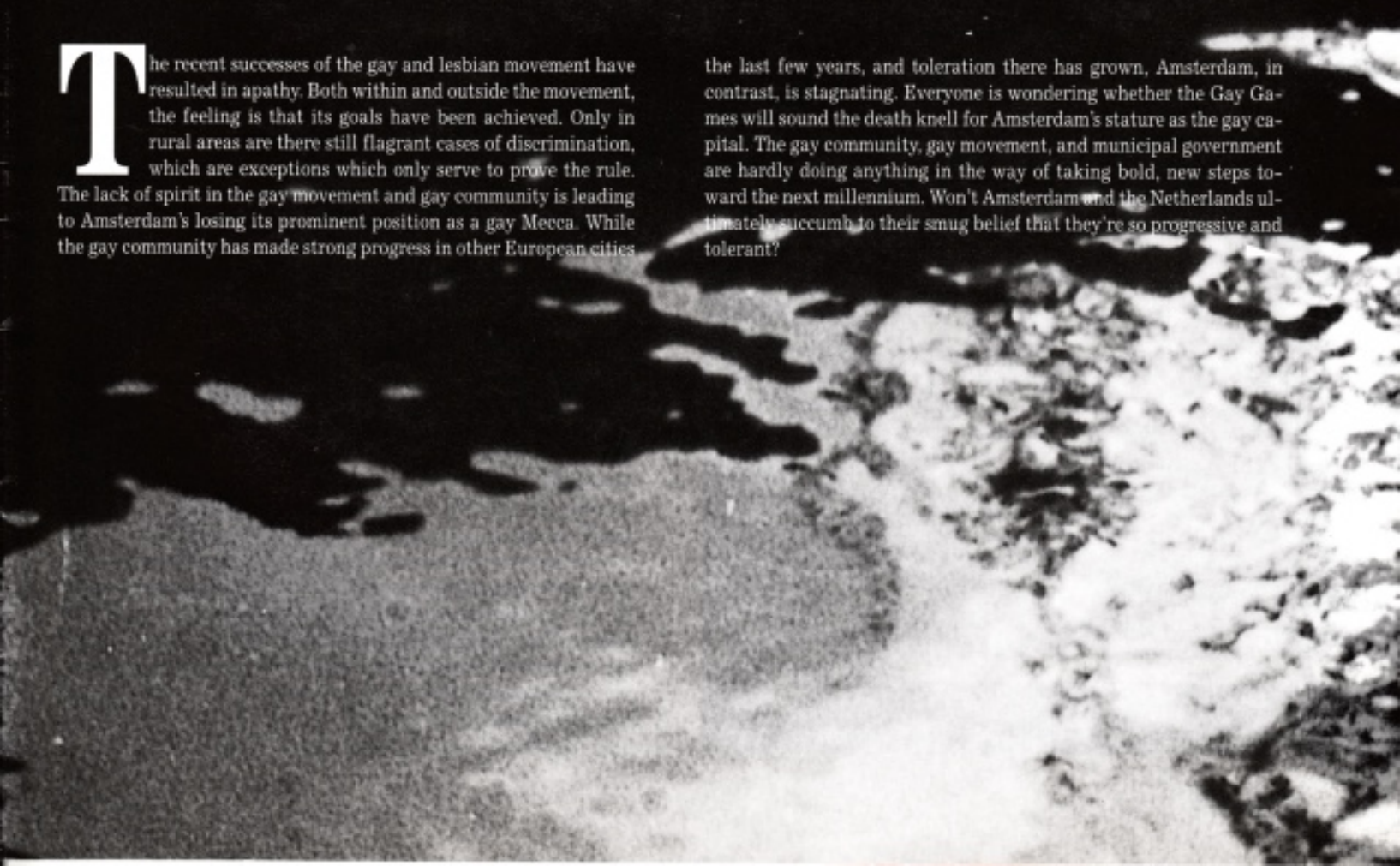
Gay capital's swan song

GERT HEKMA

Won't Amsterdam and the Netherlands ultimately succumb to their smug belief that they're so progressive and tolerant? Tolerance in this case essentially means indifference, writes Gert Hekma, in this essay, in which he predicts the end of Amsterdam's reign as gay capital of the world.

The recent successes of the gay and lesbian movement have resulted in apathy. Both within and outside the movement, the feeling is that its goals have been achieved. Only in rural areas are there still flagrant cases of discrimination, which are exceptions which only serve to prove the rule. The lack of spirit in the gay movement and gay community is leading to Amsterdam's losing its prominent position as a gay Mecca. While the gay community has made strong progress in other European cities

the last few years, and toleration there has grown, Amsterdam, in contrast, is stagnating. Everyone is wondering whether the Gay Games will sound the death knell for Amsterdam's stature as the gay capital. The gay community, gay movement, and municipal government are hardly doing anything in the way of taking bold, new steps toward the next millennium. Won't Amsterdam and the Netherlands ultimately succumb to their smug belief that they're so progressive and tolerant?



The basic question is what significance Dutch tolerance still has. Although the legal context for gay emancipation has been created, no social structure has arisen providing a world where sexual variations have space to breathe in the heterosexual ghetto that the Netherlands has remained. In secondary and vocational schools, teachers barely devote any attention to information on sexuality. Homosexuality often gets little or no attention. It is no wonder, then, that a recent study showed that most schools have remained straight domains where half of the boys still carry around prejudices against homosexuality. Gay integration is still of secondary importance for the government, corporate world and sports associations. This is the negative result of the fact that the most well-known gays on the tube are jokers that nobody takes seriously.

For centuries, Amsterdam has had the reputation of being a tolerant city. After all, didn't religious dissidents such as Jews, Armenians, Catholics, Huguenots, and others find a safe haven there? This image does not hold true for men and women with homosexual preferences. As recently as the eighteenth century, in the Age of Enlightenment, gay sex - especially among men - was severely prosecuted, and two hundred men in the Netherlands, a dozen of whom in Amster-

dam, received the death penalty for what was then called 'sodomy'. It was not until around 1900 that the first small breakthrough in gay tolerance was achieved and the first undisguised gay novel appeared. Politicians nevertheless continued to advocate stricter punishment of homosexual 'perversion'. In 1911, the Christian government introduced stricter public decency laws. Article 248 made homosexual relations between adults and minors (younger than 21) punishable. For heterosexual contacts, the age of consent was 16.

The criminalisation of homosexuality resulted in the establishment in 1912 in The Hague of the first Dutch gay movement. In 1932, Amster-

Sex remains a dirty business, even in the city that lives off of it

damers took the initiative in the bar De Empire to start the first gay magazine, *Wij* [We]. They wanted to establish a more comfortable, Amsterdam club. Only one issue of the magazine came out, and before the association could get off the ground, the police raided De Empire, arresting everybody in the bar. Not until 1940 did others make a second attempt and publish the magazine *Levensrecht* [Right to Live]. Only four issues were published of this monthly, as the German invasion put an end to this initiative.

Before the war, the Amsterdam police kept a very close watch on the handful of bars with homosexual clientele. The managers were warned to escort gay customers out the door. This control remained in effect during and after the war. Two things did change after the war, however. The police permitted the Shakespeare Club or COC, to hold meetings, provided these would be decent. Secondly, the police discovered that it was better to let queens seek each other out in bars behind closed doors rather than have them comb the streets in search of partners.

In the 1950's, Amsterdam became the gay capital. The policy of tolerating gay life by allowing bars, dancing spots, and COC resulted in enormous growth for the subculture. If the number of gay could be counted on one hand before the war, suddenly in the 50s, there were two dance halls and a dozen cafés. The first exclusively lesbian bar however did not arrive on the scene until 1970. Not only gays and dykes themselves, as well as the police, were thinking about homosexuality more respectfully, so were prominent ministers, priests and psychiatrists. While gays directly after the war could count on eternal damnation, and some proposed castration as the solution to homosexual desires, gays and lesbians were elevated to fellow human beings.

The more tolerant attitude and growing subculture very much furthered gay migration and tourism to Amsterdam from both other parts of the Netherlands and neighbouring countries. In the mid-1960s, city hall became alarmed about the plane loads of English gay tourists coming to Amsterdam for a weekend. Such concerns, however, were swept away by the sexual revolution, and the gay community further grew undisturbed.

In 1969, they first took to the streets to organise a demonstration at the Dutch Parliament against Article 248. In 1971, the Amsterdam chapter was not allowed to lay flowers for homosexual victims of World War II at the May 4th memorial service on Dam Square. Activists broke through the police and navy cordon and laid their wreath down. In 1977, Lesbian Nation organised the first American-style gay and lesbian parade on the last Saturday in June. This demonstration has since become an annual tradition known as *Roze Zaterdag* (Pink Saturday), and since 1980, has been held in a different Dutch city each year. In the meantime, the gay movement was counting its first successes,



Gay Pride: homophobia confined to the countryside?

such as abolition of Article 248 in 1971. In 1973, COC was given recognition by the royal family, and gays and lesbians were allowed to serve in the army. In that year as well, the first independent lesbian movement, 'Paarse September' ('Purple September'), which fought against sexism in the gay movement and homophobia in the feminist movement was created. In 1980, the city of Amsterdam stopped demolishing urinals where gay men met each other. The police, who until then had harassed gays at their cruising spots, were now ordered to protect them against gay-bashers, which the police did while gritting their teeth. On the initiative of the first openly gay city councillor, Bob van Schijndel, Amsterdam adopted an emancipation policy starting in 1982.

The 1980s witnessed a spectacular growth in gay institutions and in 1987, the Homomonument was unveiled. When AIDS struck Amsterdam, a well-developed gay infrastructure was already in place. Good co-operation between the city government and gay movement was helpful in responding properly to the epidemic. Amsterdam was able to avoid the same sort of repressive measures against the subculture as in the United States. Despite the insistence of officials in the health department, the city did not shut any dark rooms or bathhouses. Nevertheless, AIDS had serious consequences for the gay community in Amsterdam, with almost half of the cases of AIDS in the Netherlands occurring there.

AIDS did bring about better co-operation between gays and lesbians. Since the 1980s, lesbians have occupied prominent positions within the gay movement, as had long been the case for the lesbian movement. An independent lesbian community, however, hardly existed. The number of lesbian bars in Amsterdam now is the same as in 1970 - just one. Unlike gay life, lesbian life takes place above all in protected locations: behind closed doors and at semi-public places such as parties, living rooms and female sports. In contrast to the gay community, the lesbian community has barely created a public culture. Public life is still a man's business, something which is very evident in the gay community.

In the 1990s, there has been consolidation in the gay emancipation mo-

Amsterdam could profile itself as a refuge for gays, but chooses not to

vement in the Netherlands. In 1993, an anti-discrimination law was enacted. Since 1996, the Amsterdam Gay Business Association has organised a Canal Pride Parade on the first Saturday in August as a festive complement to the more politically-tinted Roze Zaterdag. This year, the new government-to-be solemnly swore that marriage would be opened to gay and lesbian couples and the right to adopt Dutch children would be granted to them as well.

All the same, gay culture remains a public policy blind spot in the Netherlands and Amsterdam. Tourists come not only for the tulips, wooden shoes and canals these days, but also to check out Amsterdam's international reputation as a city of sex, drugs and tolerance. While the municipal government, Chamber of Commerce and Dutch Tourist Office heartily promote the virtues of Schiphol Airport, the harbour, canals or museums, they believe that a little less 'tolerance-tourism' would be nice. The authorities in Amsterdam harbour a pot of gold in the Red Light District and gay world, yet they try to play dumb. Erotic postcards which tourists buy by the thousands cannot be displayed on the street. Instruments of torture are not 'offensive'

according to the authorities, unlike pictures of genitals. In contrast to other economic sectors, investing in sex and in the gay community is just not done. Sex remains a dirty business, even in the city which lives off of it.


The ambivalence with respect to this economic engine in Amsterdam points to a constant and fundamental ambivalence regarding sexuality generally. Nobody can deny that fake tolerance exists alongside genuine tolerance in Amsterdam. At the least, true tolerance of sexuality and homosexuality would mean that they were considered to be making

Gays on TV: jokers nobody takes seriously

an important contribution to public life. Tolerance mostly takes on the form of 'putting up with': turn a blind eye to it, or better yet, run in the other direction from it - certainly don't actively promote it. Above all, tolerance means indifference.

An interesting comparison can be made between sex, on the one hand, and music and sports, on the other. The government does a lot to promote sports and music in education; through subsidies, it allows sports halls, football stadiums, pop music arenas, and concert buildings to be constructed. The goal is to promote health, cultural development, life enjoyment and integration. These same goals are equally applicable for a sexual culture that is at least as conducive to health, well-being, development and social cohesion. Yet, unlike with sports and music, the government invests hardly anything in appropriate sexual education, mostly puts taxes on sex, and provides no funds at all in this area. The government only gives money to fight sexual problems such as violence, wretched conditions among prostitutes and venereal diseases.

Strangely enough, the Gay Games is emphasising its sexlessness. The organisers are singing the praises of friendship and assigning eroticism to the dunce's corner where it was always forced to sit. A century ago, the contrast between homosexuality and sports was stressed. Gay men were queers who didn't belong on the athletic field, while the athleticism was equated with heterosexuality. A century later, sports and homosexuality are again coming together at the Gay Games. Trying, unnecessarily, to project a more masculine image, the gay community has not hesitated to throw eroticism overboard. Lost in all this is the ancient Greek ideal of the Olympic Games as a nude competition representing achievement and pleasure between men. Amsterdam could profile itself as a refuge for gays, but chooses not to.

Gay discrimination is an issue of the recent past and next-door neighbours. Men who were castrated and arrested because of their homosexual desires are living just down the street. Refugees from all over the world who have sought shelter in Amsterdam are sitting on the sidewalk. Horrible forms of discrimination belong to the past, but tolerance has not become deeply ingrained. On the dance floor and in city hall, most people would like nothing better than to forget as quickly as possible the shadows of the past and the misery across the border. If Amsterdam is not careful, the Gay Games may end up tarnishing its reputation. Yet, with just a little good will and a few modest resources, Amsterdam can make that reputation a good deal stronger. 

GERT HEKMA

Professor Homostudies, University of Amsterdam