

Gay rights pioneer who blazed a trail in Jozi leaves SA richer

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Michele Bruno, hairstylist to Jo'burg's glamour set, and the first Miss Gay SA, opened the way for the LGBTI community, writes Mark Gevisser.



Michele Bruno (1941 – 2016)

Michele Bruno, one of Johannesburg's trail-blazing gender-variant personalities and one of the city's most sought-after hairdressers, has died at the age of 75.

Born to Italian immigrant parents in 1941 and designated male at birth, Bruno lived his life between and across genders, long before the options of medical gender reassignment were available.

He was a self-taught intellectual, with a formidable library of films and books, and a collector of objects and people, too, in Johannesburg and in New York, where he lived for a few years in the 1970s. He was famous for parties, at which, says Judge Edwin Cameron, one of his friends, "there was always a mix of the mad, the eccentric, the serious, the silly and the well-heeled".

A celebrated drag artist in the 1960s, Bruno participated in Johannesburg's first-ever commercial drag show at the Jewish Guild Theatre in 1960. He won the first Miss Gay South Africa at the Hideaway on Claim Street in Hillbrow in 1969.

Three years before, he was one of nine people arrested for "masquerading as a woman" at the gay Forest Town party that precipitated an antigay clampdown and the beginning of the South African gay rights movement, of which he became part.

He loved telling the story: how the arresting officer called him "Lady" and helped him into his ostrich-feather coat, and how he flummoxed the cops when he was revealed to be wearing men's

underwear — he knew the charges would be less than if you wore women’s panties — and was forced to pay a R10 admission-of-guilt fine.

In truth, the humiliation and the public exposure was the worst moment of his life: the police released the names of the offenders, and their mugshots, to Beeld, and Bruno was in his salon the next day, working on a client, when he heard his name announced over the radio news.

I first met Bruno when researching *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* in 1994; I included him in *Joburg Tracks*, an exhibition I curated at Constitution Hill, and wrote about him in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*. I have spent hours with him, going through his scrapbooks of photos and news clippings, and the image that compels me most is one from 1963, snapped by a street photographer, striding down Eloff Street, code-switching with his tapered pants, woman’s handbag and gamine peroxide hairdo.

Bruno had always been himself — or herself, as the case might be. He was unconcerned about gender pronouns, and toggled between them according to circumstance; he asked me to use the male pronoun when writing about him, but only ever used women’s public toilets. And, because he was so comfortable with his identity, he lived with grace and elegance and humour, rather than the sense of rage or grievance he would have been entitled to feel.

As a stylist, he did the hair of some of Johannesburg’s most glamorous women, mainly out of Carlton Hair in Killarney, where he was an institution in the 1980s and 1990s. He worked until the end, at the Laurence John Salon in Balfour Park, but his life was not always as glamorous as it looked, and he had fallen on hard times, living in straitened circumstances with his younger daughter, Dineo, a photographer.

Dineo and her older sister, Olga Matiwane, were the children of Bruno’s domestic worker. From their infancy, he took an active role in their upbringing. Although his fortunes rose and fell, he always provided for them, and managed to send them to private schools. He adored them.

For *Joburg Tracks*, I asked Bruno what the Constitution meant for him. He told me that he felt “much more confident these days”, but spoke more about “my girls”: “they don’t see themselves as different to a white person. There’s no colour bar. And they don’t see the sexuality thing either. They just see people as people.”

Dineo confirmed this. “Being raised by Michele was an incredible education. I am just as open as he was. I have learned how to accept people as they are.”

For Cameron, “Michele was at the forefront of the movement for LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex] equality and dignity in South Africa, not because she understood or articulated herself politically — she didn’t — but because of who she was: a quietly assertive, dignified, unapologetic transgender person, claiming space for herself and others like her, in a hostile climate. The gender-diverse and LGBTI community in South Africa have lost a great champion and a person of intense beauty and fragility.”

Bruno leaves his sisters, Marianna Bocchini and Anna Levin, and daughters, Olga and Dineo Matiwane. — *Mark Gevisser*

Michele Bruno’s life will be commemorated at the Maryvale Catholic Church, Louis Botha Avenue, Orchards, at 2pm on Wednesday May 18.

<http://mg.co.za/article/2016-05-19-gay-rights-pioneer-who-blazed-a-trail-in-jozi-leaves-sa-richer/>