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Dodo Berretty: the spectacular life of an Indo-European star photographer

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Dodo Berretty

THE SPECTACULAR
Life
**OF AN INDO-EUROPEAN
STAR PHOTOGRAPHER**

Dominique Roderick 'Dodo' Berretty (1925-1980) was one of the best photographers the Dutch East Indies produced. He led an eventful existence. He risked his own life to take photographs in war zones. At other important historical events, he was at the forefront with his camera. He got the greats of the world in front of his lens. Until recently, only a small group of insiders knew his work. Fortunately, his star is now rising again.

A biography of him was recently published.

By Coen van 't Veer // Illustration Peter van Dongen // Photos archive Berretty and Rahmat Kurnia

A LIFE AS A MOVIE STAR

On September 7, 1925, news of Dodo Berretty's birth in Batavia spread like wildfire through the East Indies and the Netherlands and from there to all the world's major cities. After all, how could it be any other way? Dodo Berretty was the child of two stars. His flamboyant father, Dominique Willem Berretty had worked his way up from a simple Indo-European background to a press tycoon of world fame. He was considered one of the richest people in the Indies. He entered his fourth of a total of six marriages on April 21, 1925, with the then already pregnant actress Mien Duymaer van Twist, a distant second cousin of the governor general who had once refused to entertain Eduard Douwes Dekker. Two years later, the glamorous couple had another daughter, Aimée. At the end of 1928, however, the celebrity marriage broke up. Both spouses could no longer tolerate each other's violent emotions. Mien left for the Netherlands to continue her career as an artist. The children stayed behind with their father on Java.

Father Berretty sought ever higher ground, also literally. As a statement of his accumulated status

and wealth, he had the immense modernist estate Villa Isola built in the mountains near Bandung, on the Lembangweg. On March 12, 1933, Dodo laid the foundation stone under the watchful eye of, among others, his Javanese grandmother. Nine months later, one of the most beautiful buildings in the world was completed. In the ponds of Villa Isola, black swans swam and Venetian gondolas floated. When Father Berretty sat in his study, he could choose which of his cars should be driven up by his driver at the push of a button. Berretty preferred sitting in his red Rolls-Royce. Father Berretty was always keen on publicity. For the outside world, he therefore also recorded his surroundings visually. From a plane, he made a professional film of Villa Isola and its surroundings, which he showed at the official housewarming party. His children and his beautiful sixth Portuguese wife, Coquita, often posed as fashion models to illustrate they lived like movie stars.

That life of luxury came to an end with a bang in December 1934, when the plane the 'Uiver', en route from Amsterdam to Batavia with father Berretty on board, crashed in the Syrian-Iraqi desert. There were



no survivors. Dominique Berretty was buried in Baghdad two days before Christmas 1934. His life had been consumed by a blazing flame, a newspaper reported after his death. His fortune had also gone up in smoke. For the construction of Villa Isola, Berretty appeared to have withdrawn large amounts of money from his media empire. Coquita and the two children had to leave Villa Isola. The estate became an annex of Grand Hotel Homann, and Dodo and Aimée were turned over to their biological mother by Coquita in Rotterdam on May 6, 1935. Mien could not manage money and did not know how to take good care of them. For the two children who had lived in luxury in the East Indies, a long journey from one address to another began. Dodo and Aimée were happiest with a landlady in Leiden.

THE DISCOVERY OF A PHOTOGRAPHIC TALENT

During World War II, Dodo joined the resistance. He was arrested by the Nazis and imprisoned in the Oranjehotel in Scheveningen. Via camp Vught, Dodo ended up in the German penitentiary Lüttringhausen. His name was already on a death list when he — very malnourished — was liberated by American troops on April 11, 1945. Dodo, however, soon felt well enough to sign up as an Indonesian war volunteer. As a storm trooper, he left for his native country to take on the Indonesian nationalists. There he managed to track down his older sisters Gerda and Aneta. He used his leave to visit Villa Isola. The building appeared to be riddled with holes. All that was left of the swing and the seesaw, where he and his sister so often played, were a couple of crooked bars. From early 1946 to mid 1948, Dodo would spend time in New Guinea, Celebes, Bali

He caught
Josephine Baker
and Mick Jagger
on camera

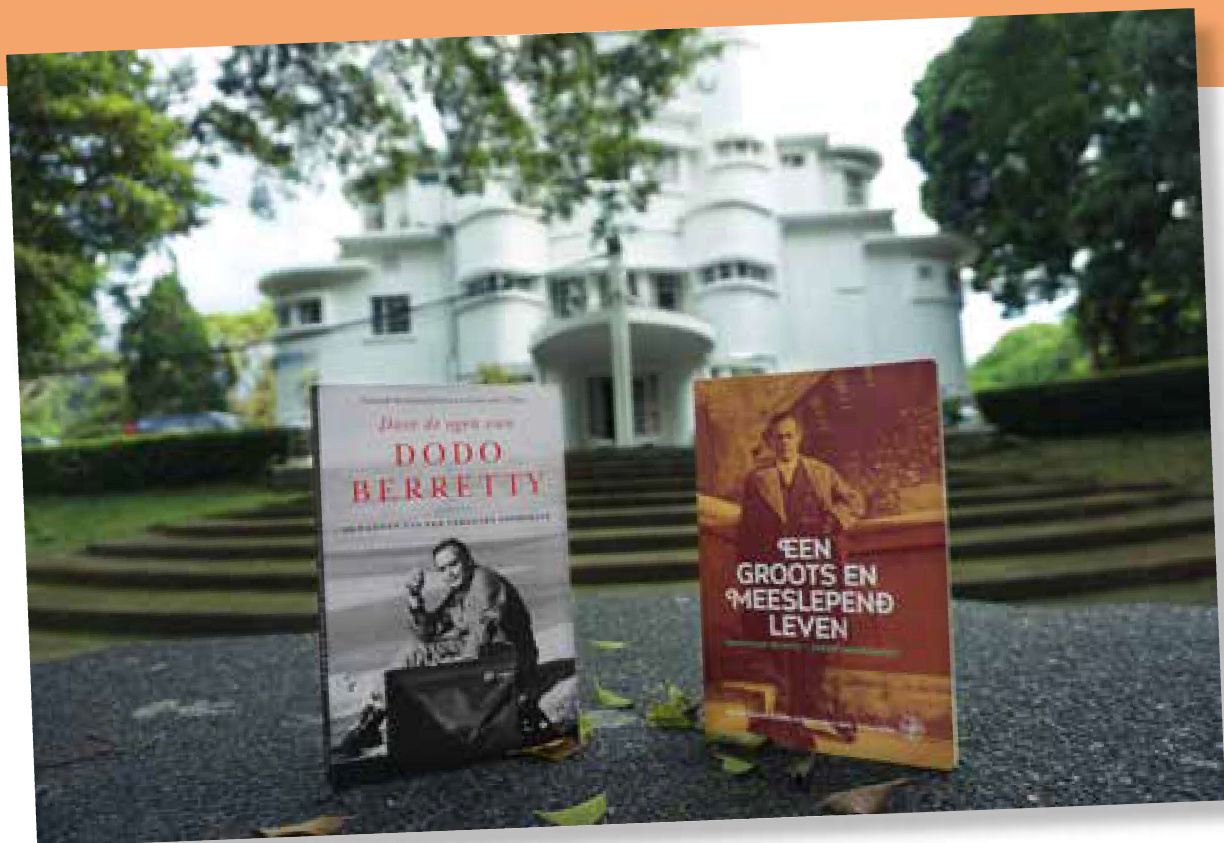
Aimée, Dodo and two dogs at Villa Isola



and Sumatra, among other places. He began taking photographs of combat activities in which he was involved. He tried selling these to Dutch weeklies, but unfortunately they were never recovered.

Nevertheless, Dodo had discovered his photographic talent in Indonesia. Back in Europe, he married Joke Meijeringh, who would later become famous by her actress name as Yoka Berretty and with whom he had a daughter, Jolanthe. With Yoka he left for Paris to embark on a career as a photojournalist. He may have been helped in his career by the legendary Indonesian dancer Ratna Mohini, the ex-wife of his uncle Willem Berretty, who was currently married to the world-famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Initially, Dodo mainly took portraits of everyday life in Paris and Holland when he was there. His photographs of the 1953 flood disaster traveled the world. His images of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 marked



his breakthrough. From that year on, his career took off like a comet. Dodo quickly became known as a courageous news photographer, as a man without fear who, for magazines such as Life and Paris Match, took pictures of war situations in Algeria, Tunisia and later Vietnam with true death-defying zeal. His primary employers became the French photo agencies Magnum Photos and Gamma-Rapho, and the American news agency Black Star.

A LIFE AMONGST THE STARS

The global celebrities, however, also knew how to find Dodo Berretty. Over the years he photographed prominent politicians like Patrice Lumumba, Zhou Enlai, Yasser Arafat, Franco, Charles de Gaulle, Alexander Dubcek, Robert Kennedy and Jimmy Carter. Celebrities like Louis Armstrong, Brigitte Bardot, Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alberto Giacometti, Dewi Sukarno, Josephine Baker and Mick Jagger were captured by him on film. If you want to find out how close the stars allowed Dodo to be, you could take a look at his photographs of the Rolling Stones in 1970 on the Getty Images website.

Before he was a famous photographer, however, Dodo had to seek out such stars himself. Often they did not want to be photographed. A colleague friend

would then distract celebrities like Marlon Brando or Peter Townsend so that Dodo Berretty could capture a few snapshots with a small camera.

THE END OF A STAR PHOTOGRAPHER

Dodo Berretty did not grow old. At the age of 55, he died of leukemia in his hometown of Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis in the presence of his second wife and his three sons from his second marriage. His funeral was attended by a multitude of people, including numerous fellow photographers.

After that, silence surrounded the man who received only one exhibition during his lifetime, in 1963. Dodo Berretty's star seemed to be extinguished. However, recently it has thankfully started to twinkle again to some extent. In November last year his biography *Door de ogen van Dodo Berretty* (Through the eyes of Dodo Berretty) was published by Gerard Termorshuizen and myself. The professional magazine Focus subsequently published an article about his photographs. It is time for Dodo's star to shine again and for the Netherlands to honor its greatest Indonesian photographer with a retrospective of his work in one of its photo museums.

Photos taken by Dodo Berretty can be seen at:
<https://www.gettyimages.nl/fotos/berretty>