

AROUND TOWN

Picture your audience naked

The Eurovision of speech-making crowns a local champ.

By Nanci Tangeman

Bill Monsour isn't afraid to pull pink bunny ears out of his trousers. Even when he's on stage, in front of 250 people. Even when he's talking about double mastectomies.

He's not afraid to lope across a podium – back and forth and back and forth – to keep his audience mesmerized. And he's not afraid of really, really long pauses in a speech: 'It felt good...' Very long, very dramatic pause.

That's why he's the champ.

Last weekend, Monsour delivered the winning speech, a talk about using laughter and humour to keep yourself healthy entitled 'Strong Medicine,' at the Toastmasters International Speech contest at the Amsterdam Hilton. He'll go on to represent Continental Europe in Toronto in August against speakers from around the world.

Toastmasters International is an 80-year-old organization 'devoted to making effective oral communication a worldwide reality.' Toastmasters began in 1924 in California, where these movements tend to begin. In the 1930s, the group went international with an affiliate in Canada, and in 2001 the first club in the Netherlands was chartered. Today there are over 10,000 clubs in 90 countries with 200,000 members; in the Netherlands there are five chartered clubs with a total of 100 members.

Think about those numbers the next time your managing director puts you to sleep with the quarterly results.

True Toastmasters do not allow their audiences to sleep while they're speaking. The Toastmasters training is vigorous and goes well beyond 'picture your audience naked', that old advice offered up to nervous speech-givers.

Monsour got serious about Toastmasters only two years ago: 'It's like going to the fitness club,' he says. 'If you want to be Arnold Schwarzenegger you have to go regularly to really pump up your muscles. In speaking you need a regimen, too – a regular workout.'

So, as with most professional organizations of this kind, while the rest of Amsterdam was out soaking up the sunshine last weekend, over 200 Toastmasters were locked in the Hilton's conference rooms 'pumping up'. You can only imagine the pick-up lines in the Hilton's bar between seminars. 'Your sentences have a very nice beginning and end.' 'Your vowels are nicely rounded.' 'Both your body and opening are exquisite.'



Yes, these are the people who you want making toasts at your weddings and bar mitzvahs. In fact, Monsour could probably pick up a few euros as a bestman-for-hire with his new title.

A 50-year-old management coach from Southern California, Monsour came to Amsterdam six years ago via Bangkok. He was one of the first members of Amsterdam's English-speaking Toastmasters chapter, as well as the Dutch-language De Sprekers chapter. 'De Sprekers allows me to practice my listening and speaking in Dutch and gives me insight into Dutch culture,' Monsour explains.

Despite what you might have heard from your friends who have had their own brushes with Toastmasters, most of the speeches are not about 'The Joys of Certified Public Accounting'. Sure, there are still plenty of podia around the world where Toastmasters are weaving tales about whatever it is they do inside their office cubicles, but at the core these people are nurturing a talent which otherwise might be lost forever. They are today's raconteurs. They can tell a story and captivate an audience. And it's not always about accounting.

The Amsterdam competition, where six of Europe's top speakers duked it out for the title, included not one mention of accounting. It did, however, include a tear-jerking tale from Laurent Horvath, an emotional Swiss giant of a man, imploring his audience with arms outstretched, face turned upwards to the brightest spotlight in the room, to 'Forget your car keys! Forget your money! Forget your cell phone! But when you leave the house – don't forget to say "I love you" to the one you love!'

Bill Monsour, champion toastmaster, is a well-known figure at the Hilton Hotel.

And it included 29-year-old Fiona Stoffer from Gothenburg admonishing humans for their own inhumanity. And UK-born translator and teacher Alastair Gunn from Paris throwing out one-liners about 'knocking up' American co-eds during his college years in California. And Indonesian-Australian Tony Achmat from Prague and Australian Ivan Aksenov from Frankfurt. The evening was a bit like the Eurovision of public speaking – but with more clothing (and talent). The competitors had already worked their way through regional competitions to get to Amsterdam.

Red, orange and green lights were positioned directly in front of the stage to warn them of the time; a presentation too short or too long would automatically disqualify them. Specially trained judges meticulously evaluated the presentations. The competition was serious, but the evening was entertaining. And diverse.

As Gunn pointed out in his speech, 'At Toastmasters we learn a fantastic lesson. We have to be with different people who think differently and we have to make it work.'

A true sentiment but, unfortunately, not a winning one, when it came to Saturday night's competition. His speech was missing the one thing which might have clinched it for him. Maybe, like Monsour, he just needed to pull a pair of rabbit ears out of his trousers.

Toastmasters has English-speaking clubs in most major cities in the Netherlands and a Dutch language group in Amsterdam. Look for details at www.toastmasters.nl.