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MEETING 'DR NO'

He's the most in-demand plastic surgeon in Paris and beyond, but Dr Olivier de Frahan doesn't hesitate to tell prospective clients to come back in five years' time

By JANINE DI GIOVANNI
Photograph by JUERGEN TELLER

I MET OLIVIER DE FRAHAN in 2010 when a friend brought him to dinner at my Paris apartment. He's a striking figure: tall, lanky, bronzed, with long hair. He sat at the end of the table, regaling everyone with stories of growing up in the now Democratic Republic of Congo, near Lake Kivu.

I hadn't realised he was a plastic surgeon. But after he left, a French friend, then in her early 40s, whispered to me that he had just 'done' her eyelids. She didn't look done though – just well rested. 'That's his secret,' she replied. 'Everyone in Paris goes to him because it's the anti-Los Angeles facelift. You look serene, not stretched.'

I soon discovered that Dr de Frahan was Paris's best-kept secret: 'Do you want to know why he's the top plastic surgeon in Paris and London?' another friend – who'd had her eyes and face done – asked. 'He is such a narcissist that he can't stand a bad result. It has to be perfect. It's a reflection on him if it doesn't look good.'

I asked Dr de Frahan if this was true when we met for lunch in a café in Paris's 16th *arrondissement*, on a hot summer day before the annual *vacances* started and just after lockdown eased. 'Ben, oui,' he says, surprised to be asked.

Olivier de Frahan was born in the late 1950s (I daren't ask when) at 'the most beautiful clinic in Paris. Where all the rich people went. All the best families.' His mother, Marie Laurence, was 20, a wild, glamorous creature, scion of a wealthy Protestant family who owned fabric mills that supplied to the house of Dior. His father, Henry, was a Belgian aristocrat, 'with a very beautiful little castle and not much money'.

Henry de Frahan went to work for a mining company in the then Belgian Congo, and asked his wife to fly out to join him. But Marie Laurence didn't like being told what to do. She refused to fly, and instead bought a sexy Cadillac convertible, packed her trunks and one-year-old son into the car, and drove from Paris to Africa.

'It was probably during this travel I caught hot in my head,' de Frahan explains, a charming way of saying the voyage shaped his future life. 'That is why I am not totally usual. That is why I am different. I don't look like a surgeon. I only like natural things and I chose the most unnatural work. I must be a little strange.'

In 1961, the family fled to Kenya to escape civil unrest following the assassination (orchestrated by the CIA) of the prime minister Patrice Lumumba, hero of Congolese independence. His parents' tempestuous union didn't last. 'The confrontation between my parents exploded two years after I was born,' says de Frahan. Aged nine, he returned to Paris with them to live in his grandparents' vast home at the edge of the Parc des Princes, near the Bois de Boulogne. It

wasn't an easy transition for him. One positive, he recounts, was being sent to the local school – it was all-girls. He was the first and only boy in the class. 'I was very pleased,' he says. His appreciation of women began there.

After medical school in Paris, he was awarded a fellowship in brain surgery, but it depressed him. The results were never conclusive, he says. You could save someone from a tumour or after a car crash, but they could also lose their memory or the use of their left arm.

'I was too frustrated,' he says. He wanted to see results, and he strove for perfection. From neurosurgery, he moved to specialising in plastic, reconstructive and burns surgery at the renowned Hôpital Foch in Paris. He found burns surgery difficult but rewarding. In the 1980s, his fascination with beauty led him to a residency in plastic and aesthetic surgery.

It was a different era. There were no fillers, lasers or Botox. There were no lunchtime lifts. Surgery was something deeply serious, and de Frahan dedicated himself to perfection. He refused clients if he felt he couldn't make them look better, he says, 'according to my personal taste in beauty'.

Then came the filler and Botox of the 1990s. 'Fillers were a new world,' he says. 'The only problem was, it was used at the beginning by people who had no idea about plastic surgery – mostly GPs.' It was a revolution, he says, but 'with excess'.

The women making appointments became younger and younger; he worked on one super-model's eyelids (he won't say which). French fashion designers

consider him their best friend. Rumour has it that he treated one famous American actress in her early 40s after a painful, public divorce. When I ask him about it, after seeing her photo on the wall of his office, he discreetly declines to comment. De Frahan still says no to three out of five patients; if he doesn't believe they need surgery, he'll tell them.

What do models request most? Breasts and liposuction, he says. 'Sometimes they are not busy working, and they let themselves go. But I never do a shape surgery to make people less obese. This is precise, to sculpt a small area.'

Eyelids and facelifts are his most popular surgeries. He says there is no average age for his clients, but most come to him in their 40s. His star rose after British singer Toyah





NIPPING ABROAD

Paris-based cosmetic surgery supremo Dr Olivier de Frahan sculpts the faces and figures of international supermodels and celebrities

Willcox wrote a book – basically a love song – about de Frahan after he did her facelift in 2005.

De Frahan, however, is not interested in celebrity; he looks at each patient individually. 'But often I do nothing – or only a non-invasive waiting treatment – and tell them to come back in five years.' (I know this to be true; after a visit to New York, where my friends were having laser treatments, I asked de Frahan if I needed one. 'Only if you want to throw your money down the lavatory,' he replied.)

Surgery, he stresses, is not for everyone. He and his mother 'never discussed her having a facelift', although he operated on all her friends. They never spoke about it between themselves.

'The thrill of my work,' he says provocatively, 'is a perfect natural

result. I have – before the surgery – to have the feeling that it's going to be a real improvement. I mean, surgery is not like going to the hairdresser.'

De Frahan's techniques have changed over the years. His facelifts result in less bruising and a shorter recovery time for patients than in the 1990s, but these days, he spends three hours operating as opposed to an hour and a half.

De Frahan, by his own admission, is expensive. But he's cheaper than many top New York or LA surgeons, which is why more Americans, pre-Covid, booked into nice hotels and stayed for two weeks to be treated by him. Of his clients, 60 per cent come from outside France – America, the UK, India, Russia, the Middle East – and de Frahan loves having a

global clientele. He sees a difference between American and European consultees. 'French women see about three surgeons, think about it, go back to the surgeons, think about it some more. They intellectualise it.' While American women 'want to look younger', the English and French want to 'look better, fresher. They are not going for youth and perfection.'

As for boob jobs – the best-seller of the 1980s – he says American women still want large breasts. French women don't. 'French women want a beautifully shaped boob. They don't want everybody noticing them.' Faces are more complicated. He is 'devastated' when he sees a celebrity 'losing their identity or the key to their original beauty' after a procedure.

'The day you have a definition of beauty, it would be terrible,' he continues. 'Beauty is like perfume – you don't really know why you like the one you do... It can be a mix of so many things in a face, but it's not like cooking. You don't have the ingredients to build this.' What he is trying to say, he explains, is: 'I know exactly what to do if I see a face, even in five minutes. That is, I know exactly what *not* to do. It's instinctual.'

'It's nature that inspires me. For me, it started as a child in Africa. That cycle of seeing beauty. The trees, the flowers, the fruits, the lakes, the women.' He pauses. 'You know, I hate fake beauty.'

He laughs loudly. 'Strange for a plastic surgeon to say that. But I told you from the beginning – I am an odd duck.' □