

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a large, ornate gold crown with diamonds and pearls. She is also wearing multiple necklaces of pearls and diamonds, large earrings, and a ring. She is holding a small, ornate object in her right hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

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# *God Save The Empress*

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# God Save The Empress

Now that Princess Diana has wrangled her way out of that inbred British monarchy, maybe she should turn to the Imperial Court for some royal enlightenment. Of course, she'll need surgery and an Adam's apple in that delicate throat of hers. The Court, now in its 10th year in New York City, prefers its queens to bring their own family jewels.

The Imperial Court's biggest event is the annual Night of a Thousand Gowns—arguably the most austere drag show on the planet—but the Dukes and Duchesses of Manhattan will come together April 20th for more than just glass slipper fittings. Though this year's event will feature the passing of Empress IX Philomena's crown to new Empress X Ran-Dee, the reason for the glamour and ceremony is to raise money,

with this year's beneficiaries being the gay PBS TV show *In the Life* and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

Unlike the debauched shenanigans of other downtown drag performers, the regency of the Imperial Court is based on elegance and demure; no pink wigs or filthy jokes or glittery gold platforms in this decidedly matriarchal organization. "The new Empress is elected using many different criteria, foremost their commitment to the mission of the organization, which is to raise funds for AIDS-related organizations," says Absolute Empress VII Coco LaChine, The Celestial Dragon Empress of New York and president of the New York chapter of the Imperial Court.

In addition to Empress X Ran-Dee, the

Imperial Court will also crown a male counterpart, the Emperor Stephen.

"We've had emperors before but not every year," Coco explains. "It's hard to find good men around."

Certainly the most visible member of the Court next to the current Empress, the elegant Coco La Chine has watched the efforts of the New York kingdom flourish.

"Over the years, we've raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for other organizations," she says, "And not just on the Night of a Thousand Gowns. Philomena has probably been to one or two events every week. We do this all year round."

And the Court members aren't afraid to roll up the sleeves of their Bob Mackies and get to work. "Sometimes it's not just all the

*by Gregory Young*









Incoming Empress X Ran-Dee, with an admirer, and incoming Emperor VI Stephen.



Empress VII Coco LaChine, with RuPaul, and Empress IX Philomena.

glamorous stuff," Coco says. "We go to hospitals and entertain people living with AIDS. We take our little sound system and take it on the road, arriving at hospitals in dress and with our crowns on." They're also aggressive solicitors, passing out fliers for the Children's AIDS Foundation at the Easter Parade and handing out condoms with GMHC at other functions.

"Another thing we like to do is show up at other people's events," says the statuesque Empress IX Philomena, "either to add

glamour and personality or just work." Court members were usherettes at the premieres of *Jeffrey* and *To Wong Foo* and water girls at the last White Party on Fire Island.

Their mere presence at an event is apparently sometimes cause for celebration, such as their announcement from the audience at a recent Gay Men's Chorus concert and their gracious reception at *Victor/Victoria*. "We went backstage and [cast members] Michael Nouri and Gregory Jbara took us on a tour," Philomena says. "The most



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exciting part for some of us was getting to see the costumes and wigs. We said to Greg, 'You're bringing 18 drag queens into a wig room which is full of wigs, and none of us have shopping bags!'"

The Imperial Court, represented by 65 chapters throughout North America, was founded 32 years ago in San Francisco by legendary gay activist and drag performer Jose Sarria a.k.a. the Widow Norton. (She purports to be the widow of a 19th century gold miner.) She was declared Queen of the Tavern Guild Ball in 1965 and then declared herself Empress of San Francisco shortly thereafter, creating the complex royal syndicate that Coco claims is one of the largest gay organizations in the world. And, just like the Brits, the bloodline of ascendancy to the highest seat is hotly contested, though San Diego's Nicole the Great is first in line.

Coco is third in the line of succession. "There are two people in front of me," she says, breathing heavily, dangerously.

The Widow Norton will be on hand for this year's Night of a Thousand Gowns as she has been for the past five years. And last year, the aging monarch joined Coco and Philomena for a truly unusual drag event: the filming of the Patrick Swayze vehicle *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*.

"Two and a half years ago, the people from Universal came to the Night of a Thousands Gowns during my reign as Empress, and they came to my dressing room to watch what a girl would do in preparation for the big event," Coco says. "The director thought Patrick's role should have my demeanor. I got to make suggestions in terms of the script, and they rented stuff from my house to use on the set."

"If *To Wong Foo* does nothing else,"



explains Philomena of the 60-second scene, "it got a lot of very talented performers their Screen Actor's Guild cards. We all got screen credit, and the money was pretty good. And we also get residuals since we were principals technically. When it does well on video, which it's going to, we'll get that half a cent per video tape or something. You know, that check for seven dollars in 10 years."

Philomena will miss the royal costume jewelry and the focus of so much austere attention, but she's ready to pass down the crown.

"It's time to step aside and let somebody else have some fun—and get up at nine in the morning and paint their face in the middle of July."

She advises aspiring Empresses everywhere to remain professional. "Generally drag performers have had bad reputations in terms of not showing up for shows, being vulgar, behaving in an inappropriate way. And with drinking and drugs, you can do whatever you want in your private life, but if you're working, you should maintain yourself in a dignified manner."

In addition to remaining general secretary of the Imperial Court, she has two theater performances in the works, including a production of *Nunsense* on Fire Island and a show called *Pros and Cons* about call girls and



International Court System Founder Empress Jose, the Widow Norton and Philomena.

convicts. Coco meanwhile has cabaret performances planned at such odd locations as the Empire State Building.

"We're conquering places that you would normally not see drag people perform," she says modestly.

And if the slow but poised ascent of the Imperial Court is any indication, Coco's comment might be prophetic. This year, the Night of a Thousand Gowns is at the Sheraton New York Hotel; can Buckingham Palace be far behind?

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