

# The Empress of All Emperesses Grants an Audience

BY DENNIS McMILLAN

**O**n the same night that glamorous actress Kim Novak graced the Castro with a personal appearance at the local theater, famous dragstress Jose Sarria (the Widow Norton) appeared in person in a local church.

As a fund-raiser for Castro Area Planning + Action (CAPA), organizers featured an interview of veteran gay activist and founder of the Imperial Court System, Jose Sarria, conducted by Supervisor Tom Ammiano at Metropolitan Community Church on Oct. 18.

"We are committed to shaping the future of our neighborhood through planning and action, and building relationships with other neighborhoods and our city government," says CAPA's mission statement. "Working together as residents and merchants, we will honor the integrity of the Castro and promote respect, diversity, history, pride, rights, and responsibilities within our community." It was only fitting and proper that longtime San Franciscan and first gay to rent in the Castro, Jose Sarria, speak of the history and pride of pre-gay lib homo society.

"This is the third in our Fall series of presentations concerning gay history," explained Linton Stables of CAPA. "We are proud to have a former candidate for supervisor and a current supervisor on our stage." Stables then introduced Supervisor Ammiano, who introduced Sarria, who once

ran for the Board of Supervisors. Addressing the upcoming elections, Ammiano quipped, "If I am ever elected President of the United States, it would be very cost-effective, since I could be my own first lady!"

This night Sarria did not appear in his typical widow's weeds, having just returned from a court coronation in Toronto, but he was decked out in a lovely Japanese kimono. Ammiano explained that Sarria is very famous in Japan, so he was wearing "this beautiful schmata." And speaking of beauty, Sarria said that way back in the '40s he and his cohorts thought they would remain young and beautiful forever, but now he realizes "that is the biggest fallacy ever." Gay youth might want to take a lesson from the gay young-at-heart.

## BLACK CAT CATECHISM

When Ammiano questioned Sarria about the history of the infamous Black Cat bar, the renowned drag Carmen of the opera who nightly wowed the saloon, spoke of times when well-known society folk and public officials would sneak into the Black Cat, be spotted by Jose and try to sneak out again. "They were petrified I was going to identify them and they might lose their positions," said Sarria. "They knew I was a fruitcake, but I never exposed them, although I always told everyone to stand up proud of what you are and never apologize."

The Widow is currently in the process of writing an autobiography and accordingly commented, "There are a lot of queens from

the Black Cat days who are very upset about this, but that's the spice of life, isn't it?" She then giggled and made a delightfully evil face.

Sarria said the bar was very bohemian and cutting-edge for its time, with liberated women in pants smoking cigarettes and socializing with each other, while bold men in all sorts of outfits danced with each other. This was Sarria's stage, where he would perform various operas in his tenor-trained voice all dolled up in various high drag. "I could reach high-C without even crossing my legs," he joked.

But during those dark days before gay liberation, it was illegal to do drag except for Halloween. "And at the stroke of midnight those Cinderellas had better be off the streets or they went right to jail," Sarria said.

### POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

The Black Cat closed its doors in 1961 because, according to the Widow, they simply got tired of fighting to stay open. Shortly after that Sarria ran for SF Supervisor, "because the Queen Bee no longer had a throne [at the Black Cat]." He said he campaigned in order to make a public statement during a time when gay people thought they were secondary citizens, but he always maintained pride in who he was and had a deep desire to help others feel proud of their proclivities. "I didn't win, but I gave them a good run for their money," he said, speaking of the 7,000 voting gay people and his other straight supporters. "The gay vote has been heavily courted ever since," he boasted.

The Widow Norton has always been in the forefront of gay movements. He summed up the formation of the Tavern Guild in 1964 as "32 ambitious, money-seeking queens all wanting to be the leaders of San Francisco; but I thought to myself—over my dead body!"

### ONE DEAD EMPEROR AND A VERY MUCH ALIVE EMPRESS

Shortly after that in 1965, Sarria declared himself the widow of an historical, hysterical, legendary character of early Barbary Coast times, a lovable lunatic who decided he was Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico in 1854. Emperor Joshua Norton ceased ruling his monarchy in January 1880, when he suddenly collapsed dead while strolling down Kearny Street. The entire city went into mourning, flying its flags half-mast in genuine sorrow over the end of their king's twenty-six-year reign. But then, about as

many years ago, Sarria ceremoniously stood at the Colma gravesite of Norton in black mourning veils, proclaiming himself the widow of Norton, rightful holder of the title Empress I of San Francisco. And from that declaration sprang the impressive international court system as we know it today.

### IT TAKES BALLS TO GO TO BALLS

Sarria disclosed a poor drag queen's sartorial secret: years ago he would go to ritzy shops such as I. Magnin's and purchase an expensive designer gown with a charge account, saying he was buying it for his sister; he would temporarily line the collar and wrists so as not to soil the frock with makeup, and the next day return the dress without having to pay for it. He wore one of these fancy-schmancy numbers to a ball in his honor, but the attending drag queens had to share a banquet room with mourners attending a Chinese wake. He said he and his fellow nellie fellas looked so elegant in their gorgeous gowns that the Chinese ladies flocked around them and practically ignored their husbands. Apparently this is the power of an extravagant outfit.

Naturally, not every night was an occasion to dress to the nines and feel like the belle of the ball. But he said that even on the worst of days he would always force himself to "stand in front of my mirror and say, 'Good morning, Mary, how are you?' and then take a man's razor and shave."

"I do not believe I've ever done anything to hurt the gay community," he professed. "And the gay community has been very good to me." He illustrated his point by defending the drag queens who are chastised by some critics for improperly representing the gay community. "The dress-up queens have been called a disgrace to the human race, but let me tell you that it was those nellie queens that had the balls to get out there and fight for our rights," he said, recollecting the days of the Stonewall Riots and even before that historical homo rebellion.

"Song has always united a people as they march for their cause," said Sarria. "I choose to sing and skip for my cause." And then to close the evening's visit with the Widow Norton, Sarria took the audience back to the days of the Black Cat when the bar was about to close, or when someone got busted for being a homosexual—and the patrons stood up tall to proudly sing their homo hymn to the tune of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Sarria led the captivated CAPA crowd in the very same rousing anthem, "God Save Us Nellie Queens." ▼