

Ribald S.F. Drag Queen Still Strutting

Gay community patriarch has always been 'out' — he'll lead N.Y. Stonewall parade

By Tara Shlova
Chronicle Staff Writer

Gay is good. That's the gospel Jose Sarria has been preaching since the late 1940s, when he began performing camp versions of well-known operas every Sunday at the legendary Black Cat bar in North Beach.

At age 70, Jose (The Widow Norton) Sarria is probably San Francisco's oldest female impersonator. Straight audiences know him from his performances at the Cat, and later at Finocchio's and other venues. Yet to many in the gay community he is much more. A pioneer and political, he is a father figure in a community where traditional notions of mom and dad don't always apply. He sings. He tells stories. But above all, he is definitely out. And at tomorrow's Stonewall celebrations in New York, he will be at the front of the parade.

The only closet in Sarria's life is the one he hangs his dresses in. From his Nob Hill apartment, he talks about his past, the Widow Norton and the message of openness he has tried to pass along. "Be proud of what you are," says Sarria, wrapped in a royal-blue housecoat that trails to the floor. "Look in the mirror and accept

what you see, and not what you'd like to see." Sarria's role in gay history includes several significant firsts. Well before Harvey Milk, Sarria was the first openly gay person to campaign for public office in

'The cross-dressers, to put it bluntly, we're the ones who had the balls to say, Look — I'm gay!'

— JOSE SARRIA

San Francisco, running for supervisor in 1961. He was unsuccessful. But he did win nearly 7,000 votes.

Three years later, he established the nation's first "court system," a hierarchy of honorary royalty with Empress and Emperor at its top, which became a major factor in San Francisco's gay community and one of the first gay charitable organizations in the country. Other cities have since set up their own court systems, and Sarria has been in wide demand as an honorary guest at coronations in cities

from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Buffalo, New York over the past two years.

Soon after the Black Cat closed in 1963, the Widow Norton was born. Inspired by Joshua Norton, the self-proclaimed "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico," who died in 1880, Sarria took the name of Norton's widow. Usually dressed in black taffeta, with matching gloves and a bustle, the Widow Norton became a fairly familiar sight at AIDS benefits and other gay community events.

Most recently, the Widow was spotted wearing flowered bloomers and full makeup at last weekend's "The Difference is Divine: A Queer Cabaret," at Yerba Buena Gardens, where he and fellow entertainer Minnie Pearl's Necklace performed Right Sed Fred's disco tune "I'm Too Sexy." Their way, of course.

Though at times his style has been unconventional, Sarria's motives have been consistent. To get his point across, he has often resorted to outrageous measures.

One of the first San Francisco bars to welcome gay customers, the Black Cat drew many gay patrons. But upon seeing

STRUTTING: Page A23 Col. 1



BY JERRY TELFER/THE CHRONICLE

Jose Sarria, 70, as 'The Widow Norton'

STRUTTING: S.F. Drag Queen to Lead Parade

From Page A1B

Sarria outside the bar some refused to even acknowledge Sarria's presence, for fear of being associated with a gay place.

"I would scream until they turned around, and then I'd curtsey," Sarria recalls, his eyes twinkling like the diamond stud earrings he wears. "Just to let them know, honey, that they weren't fooling anybody. And they weren't fooling me."

Sarria is one of 25 people chosen by the Stonewall celebration committee who will lead tomorrow's parade in New York. He and the others will be honored for their contributions to gay life in America at a ceremony following the festivities. Sarria says he is glad that rumors that the 25 people chosen would not include cross-dressers proved untrue.

"The cross-dressers, to put it bluntly, we're the ones who had the balls to say, 'look — I'm gay!' " he says. "We're the 'leaders of the parade.' "

Former Black Cat patrons still remember Sarria's "grand operatic homicides," as one writer put it, through the 1950s and '60s. Some 200 to 300 people would pack the small Montgomery Street saloon to watch Sarria perform opera classics such as "Carmen" and "Madame Butterfly" — his way.

Wearing Kabuki-style white-face and a gown, a kimono or whatever costume the role called for, Sarria would single-handedly sing both male and female parts. Words to famous arias were rewritten with a distinctly gay tone, including slightly ribald references to gay life. At the end of each performance, Sarria would lead the audience in singing "God Save Us Nellie Queens," (to the tune of "My Country 'Tis of Thee"), a kind of rallying battle cry for the then-nascent gay movement.

Stanford Stevenson remembers Sarria's Black Cat days. "He was a sort of catalyst that was extremely important in bringing the gay community together in San Francisco," says Stevenson, 63. "People would yell and scream and laugh. The people who hung out at the Cat knew he was doing something very special. He was very out and very proud at a time when it wasn't safe to be."

Sarria remembers the days when anybody wearing white jeans was suspected of being a homosexual, harassed, even arrested by police. Now, cross-dressing is a common sight on San Francisco streets, and many San Francisco police officers are openly gay and lesbian. Sarria acknowledges the significance of Stonewall, but he points out that the struggle for gay rights in San Francisco predates

the events of June 28, 1969.

"Stonewall was not the beginning of the gay movement in the United States," says Sarria, tapping a well-manicured finger on the table for emphasis. "Stonewall was the beginning of national recognition that gays in the United States existed — that they could well be your next-door neighbor. Nobody ever thought about that before!"

While the status of gays and lesbians in America has improved greatly since then, Sarria says there is still much to be done. He says he is frustrated by divisions within the gay community over names and titles, preferring to use the catch-all term "gay."

He finds the word "queer" offensive, and its connotations profoundly negative. He calls the debate over the naming of last week's Lesbian/Gay Freedom parade an unnecessary diversion from the real struggle for rights.

Sarria says he hopes that the gay community will come together over a unity of purpose, and that debates over what gay people call themselves and their parade will cease.

"One day maybe I'll see it, it'll be a human rights day celebration," Sarria says, smiling a little. "Because the rights that we fight for are basically human rights."