# Dressed to Empress

Philip Stoehr is a royal performance

May 1, 1996 By Dick Scanlan

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The man-sized mannequin is wearing the Empress' new clothes -- a mirrored mini-skirt in which she glitters like a disco ball. But is her Highness, Philomena, also the seamstress, Philip Stoehr? Apparently the mild-mannered Philip Stoehr, Wall Street exec, was seen with the same red nail polish as the Empress herself. I followed these crimson tips and caught up with the mild mannered dressmaker at his Fifth Avenue high rise. He was more than happy to clarify the rumors and tell all.

Yes, Philip Stoehr is the famous Empress who recently ended her year-long reign of New York's Imperial Court -- one of 85 courts nationwide -- passing the tiara this past April to Rand-Dee at the AIDS fundraiser and coronation ball, "Night of a Thousand Gowns." But Stoehr, who by day looks more local tailor than Liz Taylor, says Philomena was more than just a "drag queen figurehead."

Unlike most monarchies, the Empress is an elected position in a court that uses royal wear to raise funds for the HIV community. What hadn't been used in years past was the openly HIV positive status of some of the court's former Empresses. During Philomena's campaign, however, the nominee decided to bring Philip out of the HIV closet. "There was the possibility that I'd become ill and unable to fulfill my commitment," Stoehr says, "so I announced it at a general membership meeting." A bold move for Stoehr, who previously had limited his HIV disclosure to two close friends and "anyone" he dated. In the court "no one used it," says Stoehr. "By sacrificing my anonymity, I could help somebody else feel less isolated." At this year's ball he did just that in his welcoming address, using his platform right until the last reigning moments to speak about HIV and AIDS. "I wanted to remind people with HIV, who are in the same place I was in five years ago, that you can still have hope and fun, and I wanted to put a face on the disease for people who might not know anyone with AIDS."

And what a face. "Maureen O'Hara in *Miracle on 34th Street*," Stoehr says. "That's what I wanted to look like." His apartment is adorned with high fashion, high-haired stills of Philomena -- blonde, brunette, redhead and pink (from her appearance in *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*). Like the working woman O'Hara plays in the holiday classic, Stoehr exhibits a sensible-shoes persona in and out of pumps. He long ago traded an intermittent acting career for the security of a steady job. "It was the mid-1980s. Wall Street was booming and I was offered a fabulous job overseeing the word processing department of a major bank."

Speaking of fabulous, Stoehr's lover of two years is Lady Fabu LaRue, when he shows up in a dress. In pants, however, John Yohannan is the Empress' Prince Consort. He's also HIV positive, one of the criteria listed in the personal ad through which they met. "There are things you don't have to explain to someone with HIV," Stoehr says.

Although Stoehr's counts are well below 200 and his treatment is important to him, he couldn't "make being sick my career." An Empress of the Imperial Court has so many responsibilites, including public appearances at other courts thoughout the country. "So I found a health care professional who is the best in the field, and I do whatever he says."

From the window of his lovely high-rise apartment, Stoehr can see his birthplace, Jersey City, where last year, his mother passed away. Stoehr's father moved on to retire in Florida but is kept abreast of Philomena's appearances via compilation video tapes. "He's very proud of me," says Stoehr, who chooses not to tell his father his HIV status. "He's very depressed about my mom and his health isn't very good. I know I'm going to outlive him, so I don't see any need to hurt him." Stoehr stops. "My mom, on the other hand, she would have understood AIDS."

A smile comes over the tailor's face as he recalls one particular childhood Halloween. "'I don't know why you'd want to look like that,'" he says his mother told him. It was the first time she saw him in drag. "'But if you're going to wear that outfit, your hose are a shade too dark.'"

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