Queen of Hearts

Lady Catiria says goodbye—for now

June 1, 1999 By Donald Suggs

It's a cold February night in Manhattan, but it's scorching inside La Nueva Escuelita, a Times Square–area club that caters to a young, mostly Latin crowd. A male dancer wearing nothing but a red G-string with an ingot-sized gold pendant and a Dominican flag wrapped around his shoulders grooves to the music. Across the dance floor, a woman with a waist-length *I Dream of Jeannie* ponytail twirls her hands above her head and bats her false eyelashes fast enough to generate a breeze.

But it's when the music stops and the dance floor clears that you know who really wears the crown—Puerto Rican drag performer Lady Catiria, reigning diva of Escuelita and the beneficiary of tonight's farewell tribute. Though too ill to witness tonight's festivities—she is at home recuperating from chemotherapy needed to fight KS lesions in her lungs—her presence fills the space. In clubland, where allegiances change as often as favorite songs, the 39-year-old has parlayed her understated vocal style and dazzling collection of gowns into a 20-year career that has encompassed running a nightclub and appearing in Hollywood's drag epic *To Wong Foo*…. But unlike those performers with HIV who quietly disappear when they fall ill, Catiria proclaimed her status from the runway. "I wanted to let them know that there was nothing to be afraid of," she says.

Catiria began her career at 19 in the Latin neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, impersonating Spanish TV bombshell Iris Chacon. "I was still a boy then," she says with a laugh, "but I looked good and they loved me." In a few years, she graduated to Escuelita. "You wouldn't walk out of there with less than a hundred dollars in tips," she recalls. "I was finally working with the best." By then she'd already set her sights on winning the Miss Continental crown. "It's like Miss Universe for drag queens and transsexuals," not an easy task for a full-figured newcomer.

"I started dieting," she says, "and working out with a trainer. I went to Mexico to get liposuction—which is where I found out I was positive. I was devastated." Several years and nearly $20,000 in expenses later, she won the 1996 Miss Continental crown, but she immediately faced new challenges. With the title came a grueling schedule of nationwide performances and appearances—along with her private battle with HIV. "I was so sick that I couldn't carry my own bags," she says. "I'd lost 30 pounds. People were talking about how thin I was, but nobody knew."

It was after she had completed her reign that Catiria decided that she would come out as a person with HIV. “I didn’t want everyone saying, ‘What’s wrong with Mary?’” she says. “So I told them myself.” And she also wanted to fight some of the misconceptions. “I have lots of friends who are sick,” Catiria says. “They’re drinking and drugging and partying all night. They think that as long as you keep the virus drunk or high, it will not attack you.”

In typical Catiria fashion, the moment she chose was at the Continental pageant where she was set to perform before relinquishing her crown. “I had a beautiful $1,800 gown made,” she says, “plain black with an AIDS ribbon in rhinestones as the collar. I had my crown done over in red to match. I played a prerecorded tape, explaining that I was sick and needed everyone’s support. Then I did my number.”

The response she received is echoed by the crowd at tonight’s farewell performance, as one fellow impersonator after another performs the numbers that Catiria made famous.

At home, Catiria is determined not to miss her tribute completely. She joins in by phone, bursting into tears at the applause. “I cried and cried about not being able to be there,” she says later. And then with just the slightest measure of cattiness, she adds: “But I also felt glad. I’m not ready to quit. I’ve still got some good years left in me—and some new looks!”

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