Bear Essentials

Ruby Rims goes from drag queen to stuffed animal

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Ruby Rims looks like an adorable cherub: Round face and mischievous smile. “I am New York City’s longest-running drag queen,” he says. Whereas most drag queens focus on looking as glam as possible, Rims challenges the norms. Take his rendition of “When Will I See You Again”--performed as a pencil-selling, tin cup-shaking blind woman. Earlier in his 25-year cabaret career, Rims was not above setting himself on fire to make sure he had the audience’s attention.

These days he’s returning to his drag roots, which owe more to Smokey the Bear than to Liza, Cher or any other drag favorites. “I was a teddy-bear mascot at Barringer High School in Newark when I was a kid,” Rims says. “Teddy bears have been a very important part of my life.” Indeed, his first role as a professional actor was Papa Bear in a children’s theater company production of *Goldilocks*.

Five years ago, when he was diagnosed as HIV positive, Ruby (aka Robert Firth) came up with a novel concept-“Teddycares.” He organized cabaret concerts with the cream of New York City’s performers including Billy Stritch, Charles Busch, Julie Wilson and Philip Officer. The twist was the cover charge: Instead of paying the customary $10, audience members had to bring a stuffed animal to gain admission. The concept caught on, and since starting Teddycares, Rims has distributed more than 5,000 bears to children of all ages in New York City’s AIDS wards. Best of all, he hand-delivers them dressed in bear drag.

Lately Rims may have no trouble filling out that bear suit, but in the fall of 1995 his weight dropped from 215 to 160 pounds in two and half months after a bout of PCP. “I was dying,” he says. “They said I was on the way out. I said, ’To hell with you. I have too many dresses to wear.’” Rims, a protease inhibitor “miracle”--who admits only to being his “late 40s”--claims he is bigger and better than ever." In fact, his doctor recently warned him that with his weight increasing by leaps and bounds, Rims was more likely to die of a heart attack than AIDS-but with a heart as big as his, that seems unlikely.

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