

# ode

the emerald's weekly  
entertainment guide

By RANDY SHILTS  
Of the Emerald

"Do you, Elsa Daniels, accept this cloak as the cloak of protection you are to give your people?"

The trembling brunette looked up to the enthroned figure before and whispered yes.

"Do you, Elsa, accept this sceptre as a sign of authority over your people and the importance of your position as Empress of the Inland Empire?"

Looking to the glittering

1,200 people, clad in everything from drag to tuxedos, gathered to watch the coronation of the Empress of Portland—the city's top female impersonator. Portland is a convention city, but rarely has the city seen the likes of early November's coronation which brought hundreds bearing titles of empress, emperor, duchess, czarina and baroness from courts throughout the west.

Behind the glitter and pageantry of this lavish spectacle in the Hilton, however, lies an intricate



Doing "Satan and Silk" at coronation show is Her Imperial Majesty (H.I.M.) Donnie Lamay XVI, empress of Portland and the Inland

Empire. Donnie, the sixteenth empress in a line of monarchs stretching back to 1958, gave up her throne that night to Elsa Daniels XVII.

## The trembling brunette belle whispered yes

sceptre, the quivering voice again answered yes.

"Then I, Donnie Lemay, sixteenth empress of the Inland Empire, crown you empress seventeen of Portland and the Inland Empire."

With those words, Empress Donnie XVI placed a red, jewelled crown on the head of the successor who knelt before her. Empress Elsa XVII turned to the cheering crowd to walk down the long runway, tearfully accepting the adulation of her new subjects.

The scene is not from a medieval court, nor from Atlantic City. It was in the Grand Ballroom of the Portland's Hilton Hotel where over

subculture of courts and royalty that spans the west coast.

While transvestitism is primarily a heterosexual phenomenon, a subculture of gay female impersonators, or "drag queens," has evolved in most major American cities. Their complex social system is patterned after the royalty of the middle ages with strict court protocol and coveted royal titles. While virtually every city on the west coast has a court system of its own—from Anchorage to San Diego, Denver to Salem, Ore.—Portland is the "mother city" of the western court system, with the longest succession of

empresses and most lavish coronations.

As satyrs danced around belles in hoop skirts, and

spotlights purveyed the ballroom spotted with crowned wigs of orange, blue and platinum blond, some of the

participants of this most unusual event commented on what the coronation, and entire court scene, meant.

"When we play this funny game called drag, we do nothing more than a charade," said the out-going Empress Donnie XVI, who manages a delicatessen in a major Portland department store. "A lot of straight people have their Elks Clubs and their little social groups. They do what they have fun at, we do what we have fun at."

"I don't do drag because I want to be a woman," added Van, who served as thirteenth empress and variously transforms himself into Cher, Helen Reddy and Carol Channing. "I do it because it's like playing a part in a play. The problem is that many people confuse a person's dress with their sexuality. They think that just because you're in drag, you have to be a certain thing."

If the drag scene compares to theater, then Portland's court is one of the biggest and longest-running shows in Oregon. The court is under the reign of an empress who coordinates the court's many in-town activities and serves as representative for Portland to courts around the country. The court involves over 100 other people with the empress and princess royale elected annually by open balloting in Portland's dozen gay bars. Next year the rose court will



Photos by Mark Sanders

Center is Mame, part of Empress Donnie XVI's royal court, performing in show at the early November coronation in Portland's Hilton.

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