

Aliens against AIDS
By Ana Tajder

After 16 years, the Vienna Life Ball has turned into the biggest AIDS charity event in Europe, collecting more than €12 Million for the fight against the disease. It has also developed into one of the region's biggest society events, becoming the only party where you can live out two of the top fantasies of our time: Meeting celebrities (this year Sharon Stone, Kim Cattrall, Debbie Harry and Linda Evangelista), and Walking down a red carpet wearing an opulent costume or much MUCH less. And all of it in the name of charity

“Landing on Planet Life Ball” was the theme of this year's ball, a party of 40,000 guests costumed as “alien” and/or “sexy”. You can forget the Carnival in Venice! Every time you thought it cannot get any crazier (or more naked), Life Ball guests invent more extravagant costumes. This year's extra long red carpet surrounded by thousands of ecstatic viewers offered an exciting mix of stars and creatures from “other starts”, marching in to the beats of spacey house music. Marcus Schenkenberg shared the carpet with blue and black creatures, their bodies only covered in stars. Sharon Stone was followed by another star - Mila Jovovich's character Leeloo from the movie *The Fifth Element*. Some aliens proudly posed to photographers, showing their big green faces but keeping their bodies covered in elegant tuxedos. There were creatures with running TV sets instead of heads, and gigantic pink space butterflies. Silver body-painted robots and white “real” robots. The theme emphasised “universal” togetherness, addressing the fear of the alien “other” that often results in misunderstanding and intolerance towards other cultures, religions, ways of living and other forms of sexuality.

This is especially true if there is an implication of danger, as in the case of AIDS, which is still associated with the “other” gay world, even while statistics show that the highest percentage of new cases in Europe are among heterosexuals, especially women. Even at this event, the long opening speeches focused only on the “alien”, the spread of the disease in Africa and Asia, forgetting Europe's own reality.

Although the organisers resist the association of the Life Ball with “gay-ness,” the most central presentation focused exactly on that, the “importance of being gay”. After losing a court case, the Life Ball's organiser Gery Keszler decided to fight the offence of having been called “Berufsschwuchterl” (“professional faggot”) in a magazine by creating the www.berufsschwuchterl.org website with pictures of 160 prominent Austrians wearing the “Berufsschwuchterl” T-shirt and expressing support.

Unfortunately this concept, great for its use of irony, was presented in such length and importance that it took away the focus from the next presented project “Österreich am Ball”. This project will use football clubs and tournaments (730 boy teams and 290 girl teams) to educate young people in Kenya about HIV-prevention.

The red carpet with stars and fantastic costumes is always the first highlight of the opening ceremony, a fashion show of a famous designer the last. This year, Agent Provocateur presented its exclusive lingerie and filled the runway with gorgeous models coming out of the landed UFO, wearing only tiny patches of black leather, white lacy corsets, miniature maid aprons or colourful see-through bras, panties and garter belts. They were followed by pole dancers swirling around their poles in black leather. The show provoked many questions: How much naked skin can be shown in a public event? Is it ok to play with the aesthetics of S&M and pole dancing on a charity event against a STD? And finally, again considering the fact that heterosexual women became the group most endangered by AIDS, is it right to present lingerie, most obviously putting women in the position of sex objects?

Trying to discuss those issues turned into a sad failure – the audience was uninformed and it actually didn't care; it was obvious that everyone came to the Life Ball for the pure

entertainment. Nobody seemed to be here to break their heads over serious topics -although a deadly serious topic is the point of the whole event.

And entertaining is what Life Ball is unbeatable at. It has to be mentioned that all these years, Gery Keszler stuck to his very social idea of placing the opening ceremony on the Rathausplatz, making the most important part of this fabulous event free for all. And as Life Ball grew in its opulence, so did this “gift” to the public. This year, it was truly gigantic. The opening started with a huge green UFO landing on the stage and included various performances and presentations, all accompanied by many colourful aliens: the entrée of the stars, government officials and costumed guests; a performance from the “Africa, Africa” show; a Chorus by Wiener Sängerknaben accompanied by the Wiener Staatsballett; a presentation of the “Österreich am Ball” project; viewing of the Life Ball Film; a new interpretation of Falco’s “Vienna Calling” song; presentation of the Crystal of Hope award and the www.berufsscewuchterl.org; a song from “The Producers” musical; performance of the official Life Ball song; the Agent Provocateur fashion show; a live act by The Feeling. Life Ball grew so much in prestige that everybody wants to be associated with it – so from next year on, the organisers should use the luxury of being able to carefully chose the quality and length of the performances.

The ceremony was so long that after four hours of standing, even the most enthusiastic guests gave up and left. The tribunes emptied, cooling off the ecstatic atmosphere long before the opening was over. But the actual party moved inside of the Town Hall and did not suffer from the length of its opening. Dozens of pompous neo-baroque rooms and courtyards adorned in a futuristic concept based on this year's motto were filled with music by famous DJs and live acts. And thousands of sexy aliens crowded on the floors, dancing the night away. Because - what can be better then partying while saving the universe?