

Stars turn out for AIDS awareness special

Advertising profits go to charity

By Suzanne Gill

This spring, tennis star Arthur Ashe felt media pressure to go public with information about his own health that he had kept private for four years: He is infected with the HIV virus, which leads to AIDS. By keeping his own counsel, Ashe had hoped his life would not be overshadowed by AIDS. Yet only weeks after his forced announcement, he is a participant in a television special conceived to focus attention on the disease. "In a New Light," airing Saturday, July 11, on ABC, is a star-studded,

emotional appeal to individuals to take part in the fight against AIDS.

"In a New Light," as executive producer Joe Lovett points out, is a new approach to AIDS education and fundraising. The special features a variety of performers calculated to appeal to all audiences — from Anita Baker, Paul Rodriguez and Clint Black to Carol Burnett, Joel Grey and Dustin Hoffman. Some sing or give dramatic readings, all offer personal reflections on the impact of AIDS in their lives. They are not always eloquent, but they wage a war of attrition on our emotional defenses. Their backdrop is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which now includes some 20,000 panels representing one tenth of those who have died in this country from the disease.

Lovett did not set out to make this special. The former "20/20" producer, who worked on a series of AIDS reports in his years with that program, was — and is — producing a documentary about "Heart Strings," a touring musical show that gives audiences a sense of the spiritual toll of being or loving a person with AIDS. But "Heart Strings," with its cast of unknowns, was turned down by ABC's prime-time chief, Robert Iger, when his late-night counterpart Don Beuth approached him with the idea. It needs stars, Iger reportedly said. Fourteen months later, "In a New Light" is packed with stars, beginning with Elizabeth Taylor, who briefly introduces the show, and Linda Lavin, Robert Guillaume and Bruce Davison, who are its hosts. A celebrity edition of "Heart Strings" was staged in February and taped for the special.

According to Lovett, everyone involved has been more than generous. Barry Manilow paid all costs associated with his appearance, including musicians' salaries. Gloria Estefan is allowing two of her songs, "Coming Out of the Dark" and "Get on Your Feet," to be "repositioned" in viewers' minds as themes for AIDS awareness. There's even film footage of Disney's "The Little Mermaid" and "Beauty and the Beast" in a tribute to the late

lyricist Howard Ashman.

With star power to spare, "In a New Light" was offered to advertisers at full rates, and ABC has earmarked the show's net profits for an AIDS charity.

In its two hours, the special offers a number of messages. First, there's no reason for anyone not already infected ever to contract the disease; its spread can be halted through changed behavior alone. Second, it's a subject people need to talk about, not hide from. (In an ice-breaking comedy routine, Andrea Martin puts a condom over her foot.) Third, women contract the virus more readily from men than men do from women. Worldwide, half of all AIDS patients are female. Fourth, children are at risk, not only for prenatal transmission but through prostitution, which preys on ever younger recruits because they are more likely to be healthy.

Two toll-free telephone numbers will be provided during the show. Both are hotlines of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. The first directs callers with general questions, while the second is a source of information about government drug studies available to those already infected with HIV. With only 40 operators to respond, however, viewers are asked to write down the numbers and phone in later. Though Lovett applauds the government agency's involvement in his show, the phone bank is a meager commitment to a quarter-billion citizens.

For all the party atmosphere, brave smiles and star turns of "In a New Light," one stark fact remains: We live in an age of complete disclosure, when no detail of life is too personal or private to be hidden from the camera's eye. As Arthur Ashe discovered, our appetite for such information is insatiable, we do not even wish to go in the movies without knowing the background and personal habits of the stars. It seems an age of idolatry, but it is an age of distrust. We dare trust no one, our very lives are at stake if we do. In this way, at least, AIDS has affected all of us.

Editor's note: Joe Lovett's documentary "Heart Strings: on the Road" is in development for PBS.

STAR NOTES

Stewart's down payment on success

By Suzanne Gill

One of these days, Catherine Mary Stewart is bound to become an overnight success. Stewart, a cheerful brunette from Edmonton, Alberta, saw India, Australia and Fiji with her family during her childhood, then set out for Los Angeles after starting her career in London.

"I've spent most of my career kind of avoiding series (television)," she admits, apparently unwilling to forsake her vagabond past and settle down. Instead, she worked in movies, mini-series and daytime drama, and her credits include *The Last Starfighter*, *Night of the Comet*, *Weekend Update*, *Bernie's*, Aaron Spelling's *Ho, Ho, Ho*, *Wives and The Disney Channel's* *Perfect Harmony* with Peter Sarsgaard. In May, she starred in the USA thriller *The Psychic*.

Last fall, Stewart heard about a part in another Spelling production. Within a week, she had landed the female lead in *Hearts Are Wild*, a midwinter replacement that aired on CBS. The show was taped in a Las Vegas casino, and except for the bright lights, Stewart says, "the set (didn't) really stand out that much" amid the hubbub.