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ZIAD RAPHAEL NASSAR DESIGNS FANTASTICAL
WEDDINGS THAT ARE THE STUFF OF FAIRY TALES

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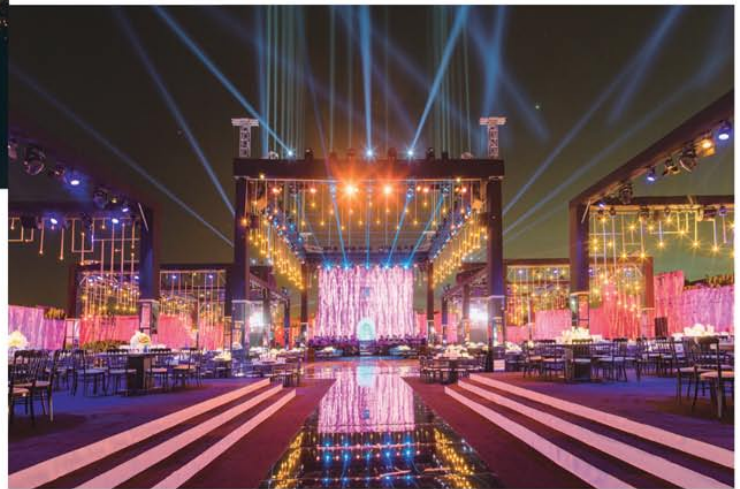
Ziad Nassar, founder of Once, has become the go-to event planner for Arab royals and A-listers, who enlist the designer to create standout, fantastical weddings

“I am a good listener, a kind of psychiatrist even,” says the Beirut-based wedding designer Ziad Raphael Nassar who likes to understand a couple’s dynamic before envisioning the setting for an event. “Most people will speak a certain way about themselves, but in the end they are not like that. I often go out to dinner with them to see what kind of restaurant they choose, how they interact.”

Nassar has become the go-to event planner for Arab royals and A-listers since founding his studio Once in 2009, and has designed more than 100 spectacular weddings in region. His background as a painter and advertising creative ensures that each is given individual flair.

“A wedding has to give a ‘wow’ effect, almost like a fairy tale,” he says, “It’s not about showing how much money the couple has, but reflecting their personalities in a creative way.”

Although the end result is invariably opulent, it can take a stretch of the imagination – and trust in Nassar’s skill – to picture the transformation at the outset, especially if the blank canvas is insa-



lubrious. He recounts the time he took a client to visit a dusty stretch of desert on the outskirts of Marrakech to consider as a potential wedding venue. “It smells like cows,” sniffed the mother-of-the-bride in disbelief, but Nassar managed to charm her and her daughter into choosing the site. A few months later, 1,300 guests were welcomed to an oasis lit by 50,000 candles, where traditional drummers and a red carpet led the way to a bazaar-themed celebration so vivacious it could have been a mirage.

Beyond the logistics of such huge events, Nassar faces more human challenges when staging receptions in the Gulf, which are often arranged exclusively for female guests. “Many of the women are cousins so the guest list is 90 per cent the same each time,” he explains, “Keeping things fresh can be difficult.” Somehow he always manages to surprise and delight. A recent standout wedding was designed for a Saudi princess who loved the art deco sets of classic films. Velvet club chairs, vintage Parisian lighting and thousands of tulips made for a chic atmosphere in Riyadh.

Nassar – whose line of home accessories is in the works – is also the author of *Once Weddings*, a coffee-table tome published by Assouline, which revisits his most lavish creations. But his own Beirut penthouse is more like a sleek luxury hotel than the glittering events he creates. “Interior design is the opposite of wedding planning,” he adds. “An event is not about day-to-day comfort the way a home is. All five senses have to be stirred at once.”

once.com.lb

