

# The GREATEST SHOWMAN on earth

You know when you're onto a winner when your event planner breeds butterflies just for a wedding ceremony. Bruce Russell does nothing by halves

WORDS: HANNAH LEMON

“**E**very bride needs a Bruce,” reads one testimonial about the event and wedding planning company By Bruce Russell. While I agree, I’d like to amend that to “*everybody* needs a Bruce”. When we meet at The Ritz London’s decadent private dining room in the William Kent House, just five minutes of his soothing Canadian tones has me at ease.

The grand table running the length of the room is laden with bluebells in an eclectic selection of glass vases and jars set out by florist Kitten Grayson, highlighting the flecks of cerulean in the intricate Italian Renaissance paintings on the ceiling. Wispy curls of ink calligraphy from Lamplighter London act as place names, while the ornate Whitehouse Crockery adds the final touch – and to think this is just for a photo shoot.

Russell enters the room and moves one table an inch to the left. “I told you he’d notice,” remarks Maddie Barton, with a knowing smile. His second-in-command knows exactly what an exemplary perfectionist he is.

Russell’s attention to detail has been honed through 15 years in hospitality. Working within sales, marketing, PR and events for various hotel groups in Canada, New York and London, it embedded a comprehensive understanding not only of what people expect in the luxury industry but also of complicated logistics.



Seven years on from starting his own company, Russell has organised every type of wedding, intimate dinner and private party. “My first wedding was festival-themed with a marquee in the back garden,” he says. “It was for a friend of a friend, at her parents’ house. I was thrown into it and learnt a lot.”

Nuptial highlights since then are many, he tells me. “It’s about creating something personal for every couple. I never want anyone to look at an image of a wedding and say, ‘that’s a Bruce Russell wedding’. It’s not about that, it’s about the couple.”

Most couples who get engaged spend about one to two years planning. For Russell it can be as little as three months, even if it’s a celebration in his favoured destination, Marrakech. But that doesn’t put a limit on what he can conjure out of his magician’s hat: a sushi ice bar; Roman guards with bespoke outfits; fire throwers; or local Moroccan dancers. His brides wear dresses by Bruce Oldfield,

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Elie Saab and Peter Langner. Cakes are baked by GC Couture and flowers arranged by Nikki Tibbles. Russell's little black events book is bulging with every high-profile, high-end contact you could imagine.

Has he gone so far as having doves fly in? "Live animals are never a good idea," laughs Russell. "Although we did orchestrate the release of white butterflies. They had to be bred for the event and then there was the date, timing and heat to think about. It's difficult when these little things aren't necessarily under your control.

Like working with children – they might not walk down the aisle as slow as you want them to, they might just run."

Russell's inspiration rarely comes from wedding magazines. "I look at everything from an interiors perspective," he explains. "I went to *Maison&Objet* in Paris this year and everything was velvet and fringe. I then thought, 'how can I incorporate that?' It's about what the guests can touch, feel, look at and smell." Most of all, it's theatrical. "It's like directing. I'm a theatre producer in that sense, bringing actors and pieces together."

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Russell walked down the aisle for his own ceremony almost seven years ago. A simple get-together for

around 90 of his nearest and dearest in a stately home called Botleys Mansion in Chertsey, Surrey.

"It was like we were entertaining at home. It was a very sunny June afternoon. Everyone was outside enjoying the countryside, Pimm's and canapés. Then we went inside for dinner, dancing and a photo booth. We had family stay over at the venue where we drank port and ate cheese until three o'clock. It was a proper English house party." An expensive house party? I venture. "Yes, but worth every penny."

Home for Russell and his husband is Rowledge, a little village also in Surrey, where he spends time cooking and catching up on various Netflix crime series. "We live very close to the Four Seasons Hotel Hampshire, so that's where I go to swim and clear my head."

Although there hardly seems to be a moment in the day for him to relax. Another project in the pipeline is a reality TV show due to air in the spring on RTÉ2, an Irish entertainment channel. The show is about two event planners (hint: one of them is Russell), who present a couple with two weddings each: one at home and the other abroad. The couple have to choose which wedding to go with. My guess is that Russell comes out on top.

One question I'm dying to ask, inevitably, is how would he plan Prince Harry's upcoming nuptials? "As soon as they got engaged my first reaction was a destination wedding," says Russell. "I'm sure they have to follow protocol, but you can still make it very personal. The royal family has come a long way since Charles and Diana's wedding."

It should really be a Bruce Russell wedding in Morocco, I offer. "Yes it should," Russell replies. "I have a Marrakech wedding in May so we could just tag it on at the end of that." ■

*bybrucerussell.com*

