

Now, it's their turn

WITH REALITY-TV CAMERAS ROLLING, A WEDDING PLANNER GETS HITCHED

BY ANNE BRATSKER
Special to Newsday

When a famous event planner does any wedding, there's always the pressure to deliver. When he does his own wedding and it just happens to be the finale of his new television series, it's fair to say the pressure is on, on, on.

This was the exact situation for Michael Russo, 35, the principal of Michael Russo Events, who married his partner of 13 years, Richard Piana, 37, on July 26 at the Harbor Club at Prime in Huntington.

His new nine-episode wedding reality show, "Mikie Saves the Date," is set to premiere early next year on the FYI network, where a special preview aired Aug. 26. In addition to worrying about the cameras recording the action, Russo also had to please Piana, who, as the longtime director of public relations for Manhasset's nuBest Salon and Spa, is no stranger to special events. He had given Russo carte blanche in terms of the wedding design so, as groomsman Joey Fatone of 'N Sync put it, the groom was "sweating bullets."

Russo was admittedly his own toughest client at the event, which he said was "detailed to the nines" and "opulent, yet clean and over-the-top." Though he has planned and executed extravaganzas for hundreds of clients throughout his 15 years in the business — including the weddings of celebrities such as Fatone and his wife, Kelly (both in the wedding party), and Kevin and Danielle Jonas (they were there, too, along with former "View" co-host Sherri Shepherd) — the nerves were still there.

"Usually I can make decisions in a split-second, but I'm feeling indecisive," Russo said, pre-emptive. "I'm not thinking of myself as the client, but thinking as a groom, and I'm very emotional."

The ceremony

Russo wasn't the only emotional one at the ceremony,

which took place in front of 210 guests gathered at 7 p.m. on a large, rooftop deck facing Huntington Harbor. The grooms, both with tears in their eyes, were walked down the graphic black-and-white-striped aisle by their moms, Frances Piana and Rosemary Russo.

Diane Turdik, an ordained minister and family friend, performed the ceremony, in which the men exchanged handwritten vows. Russo, in a dark blue J. Crew suit accessorized with a brooch made from his grandmother's engagement ring, said that long ago, when he asked his Grandma Margie how she knew she should marry his grandpa, she said, "You just know." Russo, who at this point had tears streaming down his face, told Piana, "I now know what 'You just know' means."

In turn, Piana, in a black Theory suit and the cuff links his father, Quinto, wore to his own wedding, told his groom, "Today I choose you. I will always publicly take your side, even when I privately disagree with you."

The guests wept, roared and cheered, as they lifted their sparkly celebration sticks that read "Yay!" in the air.

"Only Richie and Mikie can make you laugh, then cry, then laugh again at their wedding vows," said Shepherd, both a client and a friend. "I'm glad Mikie got to see that it's much harder from the other side."

Details, details, details

The men, who live in Babylon, had only one major disagreement about the wedding: The cocktail hour, which, for the

See WEDDING on H16



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Above, Richard Piana and Michael Russo before their wedding at Prime in Huntington on July 26. At right, the couple's wedding rings and the cuff links worn by Piana's father to his own wedding.

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Tables festooned with roses held Mikie and Richie entwined in elation



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...d table number cards with
...borate script.



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"This season, black and white stripes are the new trend at weddings," said Russo. He incorporated some into his own.



ANTHONY VAZQUEZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Above, Piana and Russo share a dance. Russo changed his footwear to Louboutin sneakers. Left, the couple at the reception dinner. The wedding was filmed for the finale of Russo's wedding reality show, "Mikie Saves the Date," which will air next year on FYI network.

Cameras rolling, it's their turn

WEDDING from H14

record, was lavish.

"I didn't want it," said Russo, who felt that dinner was enough. "But Richie was a groomzilla about it," he said, laughing.

"I'm such a foodie, and my family has always been in the food industry," Piana said in response. "I wanted to keep with tradition. I thought it was important for people to mingle and relax."

Guests feasted. There were lobster crostini, Cuban sandwiches, a risotto and gnocchi bar, Peking duck steamed buns, a sushi bar, a seafood shucking setup and a table that groaned under the weight of the antipasti, which included artisanal cheeses, salamis, roasted vegetables and much more.

Dinner, too, was elaborate. Tables in a room downstairs were dressed in cloths embellished with silvery paillettes and glass vases bursting with white roses and orchids. The meal included two appetizers (salad and truffled potato gnocchi), a choice of four main courses — grilled branzino, roasted chicken, osso buco and filet mignon. And dessert — wedding cake and poached pear. The cake, a tailored, architectural, five-tiered tower from Taste in Woodbury (owner Corina Elgart was a finalist in the TLC series "The Great Baker"), was chocolate and vanilla with a raspberry filling, and the pear was a recipe Russo found in one of Piana's father's cookbooks.

"Being that his dad passed away, I wanted to incorporate his spirit without making people sad," said Russo of the sweet touch.

A soft touch, too, was the guest take-away: A black and white pillow with "Mikie & Richie" written in fanciful script set upon each chair.

The pillow wasn't the only black-and-white accessory at the event. "This season, black and white stripes are the new trend at weddings," Russo said. And he incorporated this theme consistently throughout, as Danielle Jonas noted.

"Right from the invitation, to the runner, to the napkins that say 'I do,'" she said. "Mikie's amazing."



At the Piana-Russo wedding dinner, lush floral arrangements cascaded from tall vases and suspended glass balls sparkled in the light.



Russo is flanked by Kevin and Danielle Jonas, Sherri Shepherd and comedian Bone Hampton.

Russo is, indeed, a stickler, and even changed from formal dress shoes into black-and-white striped Louboutin sneakers for the reception.

"They were a wedding

present to myself," he said.

The flowers, by Phil Sammut, a floral designer who owns Pedestal Floral Decorators in Garden City, were over-the-top and different, yet

still modern. Masses of yellow roses and orchids greeted guests at the door and during cocktail hour, boxed wheat grass and groupings of Phalaenopsis orchids lined the aisle during the ceremony, and lush arrangements at the dinner tables featured hanging glass globes that sparkled in the light.

"It's whites and greens and very organic," Sammut said. "It's definitely not something you're going to see at your average wedding."

A night to remember

The couple, who met long ago at Spectrum, a Brooklyn club that was once the site of John Travolta's famous dance moves in "Saturday Night Fever," danced on this night to John Legend's "All of Me."

All was festive and fabulous, but an emotional undercurrent was palpable.

Guest Matthew Titone, a New York State assemblyman

from Staten Island and the borough's first openly gay lawmaker, gave the couple a big thumbs up. "Marriage equality. We still need it," he said.

Fatone, too, touched on this topic during his speech at the reception. "I cannot tell you how happy I am for this day to come, and that in this day, people can finally marry whoever they want, regardless of color or gender," he said.

Piana, for his part, was happily surprised by the outcome. "I never dreamt I would even be able to get married," he said.

But it was Russo's dad, Frank, who summed up the moment best. Having wept openly before the ceremony, he explained, "I was crying because I was thinking back on how they've been together all these years, and now it's finally become a reality," he said.

"There's no difference in who you are," he continued. "Love is love."