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Randy ♥s Brides

With Kleinfeld's fashion director Randy Fenoli '93 as matchmaker, each bride knows she'll meet her perfect dress

by Linda Angrilli

Photographs by Paul Whichloe

Randy Fenoli, left, says this ball gown-style dress by REEM ACRA '86 reflects her love of luxurious fabrics and textures. "This graceful dress, with its delicate embroidery, is for a more youthful bride. It's more of a princess look, with lots of sparkle and twinkle." Acra adds, "Each bride is special to me, so all my gowns are done by hand—the beading, the draping, the ruching and all the little details."



THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE at Kleinfeld bridal is that everything is white—vanilla, eggshell, champagne, cream. Big, billowy dresses surround you, frosted with lace, beads, and sparkly crystals. It's like being inside a very large, delectable cream puff. This romantic fantasyland is just what one of the world's foremost bridal salons should be. And in the midst of it is fashion director Randy Fenoli, reed-slim in top-to-toe Gucci, ready to match every bride with her ideal gown.

Fenoli has worked with thousands of brides, but you'll never hear him talk about Bridezillas. He thrives on the drama of helping a woman (and her mother, best friend, grandma and whoever else comes along) prepare for one of the most important moments of her life. Every bride works with a consultant. Fenoli is often called in to provide expertise and close the sale. His position requires extensive knowledge of the stock, a precise understanding of what looks good on a particular figure, and boundless patience and sympathy.

Kleinfeld carries about 1,700 dresses by 75 designers—the largest selection in the country—ranging from about \$1,800 to \$30,000. The average cost of a wedding dress in the U.S. is \$800; at Kleinfeld, it's \$4-5,000. Despite the economic downturn, Fenoli hasn't noticed brides looking for cheaper dresses, though he says they're more careful about sticking to their budget. For some, money isn't a problem. "The other day a bride from Russia asked for our most expensive dress. That was all she cared about, not even what it looked like."

Fenoli was born on a farm in southern Illinois, the last of seven children. "My parents wanted a girl, and I did my best," he says mischievously. One day, at home alone, he found a dress pattern and some fabric of his mother's. When she came home, she was astonished to find that her young son had made the outfit, perfectly.

This trumpet silhouette gown by AUSTIN SCARLETT '99, designer and creative director for Kenneth Pool, features 3D silk organza flowers and petals, and Swarovski crystals. Randy says, "Austin is definitely one for dramatics. His stuff really glows. His dresses are goddess-y show stoppers, very heavy on embroidery and beading. Not for the understated bride."



AMSALE ABERRA '82 says, "I originally started designing bridal gowns when I created my first one - for my own wedding!" This strapless A-line gown with organza and Alençon lace bodice has a natural waist accented by beaded flower detail. Randy says, "What's beautiful about Amsale dresses is the proportion and magnificent attention to detail. Her look is a little quiet, understated. This dress is fresh, light, and fashion forward. It would look good in a garden."



DOUGLAS HANNANT '94 created this strapless honeycomb-pleated gown for his first bridal collection. "It's cut on the bias, like Vionnet's. A bride wants to be sexy but it's not appropriate to be too sexy," he says.



Vision in White

Douglas Hannant introduces his first bridal collection

I've been in the high-end couture business for 11 years, but I launched my first bridal collection this spring. In doing bridal, I didn't want to do a Disney princess gown. My lady doesn't want to look like Cinderella. She wants something no one has seen before, something sophisticated and chic. My designs are young and slim, great for destination weddings.

I'm influenced by the '30s, especially '30s eveningwear, and I'm always attracted to soft fabrics and bias cut. A good design should be classic and modern at the same time. Traditional is boring.

In this economy, some of my ladies are cutting back on daywear. But they might attend two or three black-tie events a week, and a woman won't wear a dress twice, especially once she's been photographed in it.

I'm lucky to have a personal relationship with my clients, and there's a certain type of client who orders her wardrobe from me no matter what.



Bridal is the closest thing to couture we have. It's the only place to make money doing fantasy dresses.

—RANDY FENOLI

It was hard growing up gay and creative in a place where boys cared mostly about sports and hunting. At 16, Randy ran away to live with his brother and sister-in-law in New Orleans. There he discovered female impersonation, and became an accomplished performer, wearing elaborate gowns that he designed and made himself. The pinnacle of his drag career was winning the Miss Gay America title in 1990. That year, he applied to FIT, using his costumes for his portfolio, and the money he had earned paid his way through school.

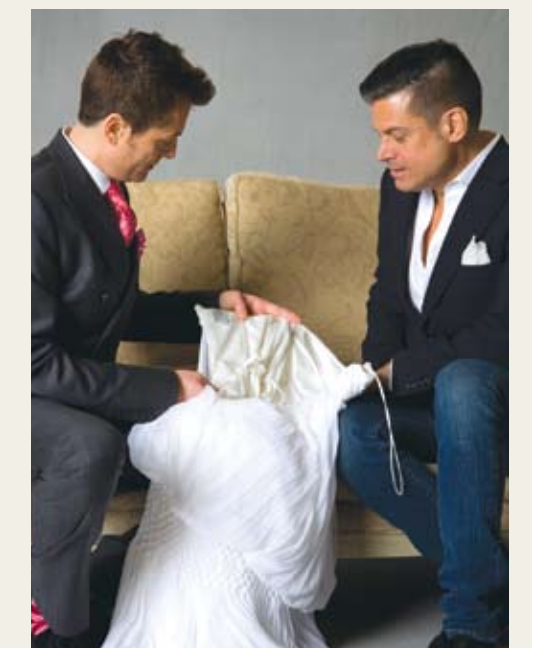
Says Professor Linda Tain, who first met him when he showed up in her office with a garment bag full of beaded, fringed dresses, "He had wonderful ideas; he just had to learn professional construction. And he can sell anything. He makes clothes sound like dessert."

After graduating in '93, he began designing wedding dresses, and was soon one of the country's premier bridal designers. After September 11, Fenoli left the industry and moved back to New Orleans, returning to New York in 2007 for the Kleinfeld job.

Though he no longer impersonates celebrities, he's becoming a star as himself, on TLC's reality show, *Say Yes to the Dress*. Each episode traces the gown quest of several Kleinfeld brides. Fenoli is in his element amid the big, puffy dresses, anxious brides, and TV cameras. He rushes around, plucking gowns from racks, soothing frazzled nerves, shedding the occasional tear at a heartwarming moment. He clearly adores all of it.

No wonder brides love him. He's designed fabulous gowns and he's worn them, so he understands style and fit. He knows what flatters each woman's figure—and he wants her to be happy. In fact, he gives clients his cell phone number in case of a bridal emergency. Sometimes a bride who has already bought her gown will call him late at night, unsure of her choice. If she really can't live with the dress, he'll do whatever he can to make it right. But sometimes it's just jitters. "I tell her, 'It's like finding the right man: Once you're engaged, you can't go back to the singles bar.'"

RIGHT: Fenoli says the inside construction of Hannant's bridal designs is notable. The silk charmeuse bustier of this strapless gown is lined with point d'esprit lace and secured with encased boning, so the top doesn't buckle. "Silk charmeuse is much more luxurious than the fabric in most gowns—it feels good on the skin," Fenoli says.





**ENVIRONMENTAL SAVINGS
FOR HUE SPRING 2009**

- 59 trees preserved/planted
- 170 lbs waterborne waste not created
- 24,937 gallons wastewater flow saved
- 2,759 lbs solid waste not generated
- 5,433 lbs net greenhouse gases prevented
- 41,852,000 BTUs energy not consumed

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