

THE MODERN DAY WEDDING CULTURE

by Nicole Watson

WHY A WEDDING?

It's 2009; men are staying home with the kids, women are earning enough to not need an allowance and the word common-law is more popular than ever, yet the wedding industry keeps bombarding us with traditions that were born in the 1950's. It used to be shameful for a couple to live together, or heaven forbid, have children together out of wedlock, but today for a couple to get married BEFORE living together is almost a sin. For many it therefore begs the question: "To marry or not to marry." By Quebec's standards a common-law couple has the same rights as a legally married couple, so what's the difference? The party! So in reality, are weddings what they used to be? No. Are they a necessary event in every person's life? No. But coming from this soon-to-be-wed writer, I can't wait for my lavish, traditional day, because when it comes down to it, what better excuse for a crazy party? Even if it means we'll be eating soup from a tin for the next 3 years to pay for it.

THE GROOM

He bought you the sparkling diamond, or ruby or sapphire, you've always wanted; he hopefully planned some wonderful surprise dinner, boat ride, vacation, where he proposed, and now as far as he's concerned, he's done. That's it. Don't try to negotiate and don't give him a hard time about it. The sooner you realize that he loves you and is excited for the wedding but really wants nothing to do with it, the sooner you will find peace and happiness. To women, this is momentous, and every decision needs to be shouted from the rooftops and mulled over for weeks. To men, decision making barely requires a glance away from the television. Ask his opinion so that he feels included, accept his non-committal shrug and mull it over with your bridesmaids; that's what they're for. But remember, come the big day, he will love it all, so don't give him grief about it now.

THE WEDDING PLANNER

Now that you've decided that you're willing to sacrifice \$5 coffees and cut down to a cigarette a day to afford your wedding, make sure not to fall fast and hard for all the wonderfully luxurious ideas everyone around you will have. You will notice that around an engaged person, everyone becomes an instant wedding planner and will live vicariously through you by trying to get you to add things that they couldn't afford, namely white horses and doves and everything else Cinderella has to offer. What they don't tell you is that any live animals will simply cost you more than your first child's education, and despite the fairy tale romance of it, they simply poop all over your dance floor. You don't need a wedding planner, and you can politely nod at all your family and friends, but don't get bogged down by the overwhelming input you will receive. This is your day. Have some fun with it, save some money, and plan it yourself. Wedding planners are an extra nuisance that an organized person can do without.

THE WEDDING PARTY

Your first major task will be choosing the bridal party: the traditional maid of honor and bridesmaids and best man and groomsmen. If of course tradition is not your thing, don't be shy to have your brother be your maid of honor, or your dog be your best man.

Anything goes, as long as these are people who mean something to you and will be in your lives longer than the reception. However, you will notice that of all the times in your life, this is when you will find yourself truly evaluating the quality of your friendships: "Who really deserves this?" Go with your gut, but if, like I did, you make a mistake with one of your choices, diplomatically speak to the person about it. It can get really ugly if you uninvite someone to be in your wedding, but if you word it well, with a shot of whiskey here and there, all mistakes can be easily corrected and forgotten in the morning.

WEDDING SHOWS

The first thing I wanted to do as a newly engaged woman was buy every wedding magazine and dash off to a wedding show. I wanted to bury myself in all things wedding, but let me strongly advise you against this. I have been engaged for about 8 months and am getting married in 5, and I am completely bored with all things wedding. You can be

completely over-stimulated by how much there is out there, and the confusion and competition of it all makes it more tiring than fun. Buy a few magazines and cut out some cute ideas, but don't spend hundreds of dollars buying them all, because they will become a blur and really, they are all the same. I also don't recommend going to a wedding show UNLESS you still have no clue what you are doing. I already had a lot organized by the time I went and all I got out of the show was a bagful of business cards that I threw away at home. Remember, this should be fun and exciting, not tedious, so don't overdo it.

THE BUDGET

Early on, after all magazine pictures have been clipped and a full out scrapbook has been created and mounted in some sacred corner of the house; the budget needs to be put in place. If you don't do this now, you will get attached to ridiculous ideas that the president couldn't even afford. You need to know your limits so your eyes and heart will simply skip over the caviar appetizers and champagne gift bags. If, like most couples, you get engaged about a year before the actual wedding, get your head out of the clouds and from day 1, start getting practical. Perhaps open a joint account and every Friday, both of you deposit the same amount of money based on what you can afford. My boyfriend and I each put in \$150 a week, which comes to about \$15,000 at the end of the year, and which can almost pay everything in cash. Don't put yourself in debt or the honeymoon year will become the 'want to kill each other' year.

THE DRESS

In the end, the most important part for the bride is always the dress. She could be walking down the aisle at the metro station as long as she is the most beautiful person in the building. However, dresses today are absurdly expensive. I knew someone who was beaming that she got her dress on sale for the cheap price of only \$900. \$900 on sale? For 1 day and a lifetime in a closet? Because really your daughter will not wear it because the bows and ribbons that might be in today will be hideous by then. I will proudly announce that I bought my dress at Sears...online. I spent \$220 tax included and never had to leave my computer. Yes, I admit this takes some of the fun out of trying them all on in front of 28 mirrors in a white plush carpeted storeroom, so go try them on anyway. You don't

need to buy them. Feel like a princess with a fan base cheering you on, then slip away to your pc and go the Sears route. My dress is stunning and identical to all the \$1000+ dresses out there. No one would ever know...until now I guess.

THE CAKE

Second to dresses, wedding cakes are the business to be in if you want to retire early. Yes, they are absolutely stunning, for about 5 minutes and 100 camera flashes, until one of you digs in and smashes it into the other's face. Or if you are too civilized for such messiness, until it is taken away to the kitchen and chopped up into tiny little pieces which look the same as you get at any buffet. Save yourself hundreds of dollars and be unique. Cupcakes are lately all the rage, and although they sound cheap and childish, they can be beautiful and festive, and very original. Or, once again I will divulge my dirty little secret, if your hall provides a fake cake, use it. This is basically a beautiful, mouth-watering looking traditional wedding cake, made entirely of cardboard. The camera flashes are happy, and when it returns cut up from the kitchen, it's actually delicious Costco carrot cake. You also save yourself any chance of being hit in the face with a nice piece of vanilla frosting.

THE GUEST LIST

Everyone you know wants a say in who gets invited, and you may even get suggestions of people you've never met but are really old "friends of the family". You may feel torn so as to satisfy everyone, so listen to their suggestions with a pretty smile painted on your face, then nod and say "I'll consider it." Everyone leaves happy, and by the time of the wedding they'll have forgotten they even asked. Furthermore if your family consists of 12 aunts and uncles, each with 2 or 3 children who are then married with children of their own, be firm in the lines you draw. If Aunt Sarah came to all your piano recitals and paid for your first car and named her first child after you, but Uncle Bob is a drunk who lives in Brazil, don't worry about inviting one and not the other. Too many people are worried about offending half the family, but you know who matters to you, and if you offend the ones that don't, who cares?

WEDDING WEBSITE

A great new innovation in this technological world is the wedding website: one stop shopping for save the date announcements, food planning and RSVPs. There are some great ones that have free packages but depending on how many features you want and how many photos you want to share, packages for 1 year range from \$100 and up. It is a fun little project where you can have the guests fill out surveys and quizzes, give information about the site and have a little guestbook for them to write their best wishes, but this little project took my boyfriend and I about 3 weeks to complete. You are now confronted with gathering email addresses, compiling pictures and supplying all the information you can, when really at this stage you have none. I'm happy now that we did it because it will be a nice keepsake but hope for some rainy weather or sitting in front of your computer putting this together will seem like forever.

THE INVITATIONS

If you do opt to go to a wedding show, you will be immersed in colourful, stylish and unique invitations, that will convey to the world your creativity and originality, but they will also probably be thrown away after the RSVPs are sent or lost in a corner of old papers. You are in fact the only one who will probably keep your unique and beautiful invitation for memory's sake, so order 1 gorgeous one if you need to, and make the rest yourself. Buying fantastic stationery and printing up the exact words you want, while even adding in a favorite photo if you choose to, will cost about 75% less than ordering a batch of designer cards. If, however your personal creativity is equivalent to that of a grade 1 finger painter, instead of going with designer invitation places, try going to your local office supply store. They often have a printing counter with great wedding options which will save you countless glue-filled nights.

THE RINGS

There is absolutely no skimping on a perfect engagement ring, but once the bank is broken for it, a traditional gold band doesn't need to cost an arm and a leg. Oddly enough, this important piece of jewellery will probably be one of the cheapest purchases in your entire wedding. There are many jewellery warehouses or outlets where you can get good

quality, inexpensive bands (and diamonds), but again don't discredit the power of the internet. Get both your ring fingers sized at a jeweller (don't use the online measurements as they are ridiculous and inaccurate) and then check online. A gold band only needs to be 14 carats, and if you have your exact measurements, they can be ordered right after your bridal gown from Sears online. Busy yourself with all the homemade projects that will save you some big dollars, and let the efficient postal system take care of the rest.

THE FLOWERS

You can probably see a trend developing in all things overpriced, and flowers are no exception. A single flower could be \$2-3, a nice bouquet for your mom's birthday could be \$20-30, but that same bouquet with the smallest amount of ribbon around the stems will cost \$200-300. What kind of ribbon is that? Is it gold? Can I make my rings out of it? The mark-up on wedding bouquets is absolutely absurd, and it is simply because you've attached the word 'wedding' to it. Make your budget happy. Go to the florist, decide which individual flowers you want and order them to arrive the day before your wedding. Go to the dollar store and pick up some fancy ribbon, probably the same they use anyway, and some sewing pins. Pick up your flowers, call in your bridesmaids, because up until now they really haven't done much, and wrap some ribbon. It is not difficult; a monkey could do it, and he wouldn't charge you \$200! Have a glass of wine and it's a party. Wine included; you've saved a bundle!

THE VENUE

At this point you and your spouse-to-be have probably argued and gone in circles about the final guest list until you've arrived at your ideal number of 50 / 100 / 250. Don't be surprised when at the last minute you still tack on one or two more as you realize your neighbour's cousin whom you met once on a ski trip in college is actually now your new best friend. But essentially your number is now fixed. The quest now is to find a venue that will accommodate you all, but hopefully with as little hassle to you as possible. Hotels are great because they usually have extensive packages including meals, some decorations and table ware, but if you really want a DIY project, opt for a hall or an outside location. In both cases though, you have now taken on the task of finding a

caterer, rentals for tables and chairs, plates and cutlery and bartender, but hey, what's a few more phone calls. Also, if you're doing it outside, my advice is rent a tent. Even the most beautiful July can have disgusting surprises in between.

THE MEAL

Have you ever had a nice steak dinner at a fairly high-end restaurant? Well now add on another \$70 to your plate, and that's what your meal will cost you. Actually your range could be anywhere from \$50 a head to about \$130, but luckily the higher range of prices usually include alcohol, cocktail hour and a more extensive wedding package. But, what to eat? Many hotels or caterers will try to sell you on choosing 1 dish for all the guests. They feel it might be too difficult to juggle different choices since people always change their minds at the last minute. Tell them NO. You should allow guests to choose from 2 or 3 options in advance, but to make life easier, write their choices on their place cards so they are locked in. We have all fallen victim to the 'hmm, what he's having smells good, could I change my order?', at least this way guests can see the little fish symbol beside their names and hopefully suffer the consequences. Of course, if you are Italian, you will probably be eating 9 courses for about 5 hours, so don't bother asking the guests what they want. They'll get it all anyway.

OPEN BAR

Ahh the age-old question, open bar or not? If you are hiring your own bartender, open bars can run quite high, especially if you expect them to stock all the best liquors known to man. At a hotel, an open bar could be an additional \$10-15 per head, and it won't even last all night. You need to know your crowd, but in my wedding-going experience, carrying a purse full of money to a wedding to pay for your drinks is a little strange. I've also been to weddings where you receive tickets for free drinks, and once the tickets run out, it's a cash bar; however, this feels a bit like trading in your tokens at a carnival for an alcoholic prize. An open bar is a nice touch, and the one place where I don't recommend skimping on the budget. Guests will thoroughly appreciate it, and any drunken mishaps will be chuckled over later and could be useful to cover up the fact that your DJ has played YMCA for the 6th time.

THE MUSIC

Of all the other choices you make, this is the one that will make or break your wedding. A good DJ will play all your favorite songs, have a little something for all ages to enjoy and take requests; a bad DJ will have a generic playlist consisting of everything from 'Dancing Queen' to 'YMCA' and then maybe repeat at the end of the night when guests are too drunk to notice. There are tons of DJs out there and the competition means that prices are dropping with little sacrifice to quality. Try to see samples of your DJ's work and try to meet the specific DJ who will do your wedding, not just the company he works for. If your personalities click, then he'll probably be more likely to please you musically on the big day. Also see if you can make a list of songs to play in advance so he can get them if he doesn't already have them, as well as a black list of songs that should be caught nowhere near your dance floor. Most guests can forgive the dry chicken or the cash bar if the music is good.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Unfortunately these hard-working talented people are facing a career crisis, all thanks to a little thing called the digital camera. Photographers are unbelievably expensive, a somewhat bizarre response to the dwindling demand for them, plus you have to feed them and endure their company all night. The most important professional shots happen in the first 3 hours of the wedding: the preparation, the ceremony and posed group shots, other than that, send him packing. Make it known to all your guests that you would appreciate it for them to send you their digital photos. Provide them each with a blank cd and postage if you choose not to have them email you. Their pictures of the reception will be far superior since between them, they will be able to cover all angles at once. Another growing trend is the disposable camera, which at about \$5 each, is easy to place on each table for guests to use as they wish. The problem here is that the quality is not always so wonderful, you have a big job later to develop them all only to discover that most of the pictures are identical anyway, and guests are still going to use their own digital cameras. Why complicate things?

SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

The last 2 months before the wedding are the true test of a relationship, because just when you think you've covered all your bases, a family feud develops between Uncle John and Aunt Martha, and your job to keep the peace is to find separate corners to place them in. The seating arrangements are often tough since you want your guests to have fun and not crawl under the table at the premise of being stuck there. The point to remember is that they are not stuck there all night. If you are deciding between table 1 and table 6 for your friend Bill whom everyone likes, don't panic, Bill has legs and can easily visit his neighbours. However, don't try to play matchmaker and fix up tables of complete strangers thinking their personalities might click. If eyes meet across the room and two people are destined to meet, they will. At the table they want to feel comfortable and enjoy their dinner conversation, not worry about saying the wrong thing or having spinach in their teeth.

GUEST FAVORS

The day of the candy-coated almond is almost behind us. Tradition states that each guest be given a personal thank you from the bride and groom; something that says 'I'm glad you could share this day with us.' I'm not sure when a candy-coated almond ever spoke those words, but maybe that's because all the ones I've ever received have ended up straight in some poor child's Halloween bag. This small token should be something appropriate to the couple; perhaps homemade treats like fudge or honey, or go green with the latest trend in saplings or plant seeds. If all else fails, find something cute and get it printed up with your names. At least the almonds will be laid to rest.

THE BACHELOR PARTY

Amidst all the planning and organizing and stressing, there is nothing that worries the bride-to-be more than the bachelor party. This is probably not because she doesn't trust her future husband, but more likely because she doesn't trust his best man. Luckily strip clubs have become a little outdated, so many bachelor parties end up with paintball or go-karts and then harmlessly doused with a night of shots. There are really only 2 rules most

women care about: Make sure he returns home alone, and there shall be no pictures; however, many women have let the picture rule slide if the night included the bachelor dressed up as something ridiculous and humiliating that he will never live down. Then pictures are more than welcome.

THE BACHELORETTE PARTY

Women, unlike men, are not out to humiliate or terrorize their friends in the bachelorette party. Strippers are rarely included, and most women don't walk around in animal costumes or wearing a diaper, unless they expressly request it. I've seen many women sell kisses for a dollar, but really, is that the most fun you can have on your last wild single night? Accepting dollars from any strange, hairy or creepy man that wants a kiss? Fantasia parties, or 'pleasure' parties have also become popular, but this is definitely not for the faint of heart since some of the 'products' whipped out might stimulate nothing more than an uncomfortable silence. Spas are great fun and highly relaxing, but girls, get on your dance shoes and end the night partying hard. After years of running around being a good wife, your swollen feet may never fit in those heels again.

THE REHEARSAL DINNER

The night before the wedding there is little more you can do to save any crucial mistakes you've already made, so why not sit back, have a great dinner and drink your nerves away. For the rehearsal dinner it's always great to find a restaurant near your venue with a private party room where your guests can toast you, roast you and being the celebration a day early. Budget wise, I suggest calling the restaurant and choosing a set menu for a fixed price in advance. People have fewer choices to mull over and you have fewer surprises on the bill. A bring your own wine restaurant is also ideal, and then you can order a batch of 30 bottles at any wine depot. It will cost you a fraction of the price (about \$3/ bottle) and your guests have a semi-open bar. It's a win-win.

THE BIG DAY

If you've been traditional up to this point, then you probably spent last night at the hotel in separate rooms. Even though you may have been living together for the last 3 years, that 1 night apart has made you strangers again, re-virginized you, and you are now ready to embark on your 'new' journey together. The groom will probably be in his room with his buddies drinking some beer and watching the game until the last minute when he has to throw on his tuxedo and he looks like a million dollars. The bride will be in her room with an army of slaves simultaneously doing her fingernails, toenails, hair, makeup, massage and squeezing her into her dress which probably has a corset fit for an anorexic. She will then have a simple glass of white wine (heaven forbid she get a red stain on her dress) and emerge looking like a million dollars. Both will be shaking with nerves: in her case that she doesn't trip down the aisle, in his that he doesn't forget his vows. But then before they can think further, everyone is in place, the music starts, she begins her walk and their eyes meet. And every corny movie moment comes true.

THE SPEECHES

Selecting who will be making speeches may not be costly in dollars, but the decision can be very costly in humiliation if you make the wrong choices. DONT's: The guys or girls you partied hard with in college, any family member who will be appreciating the open bar far too much, or an ex. DOs: Best man or maid of honour (as long as they don't fall into the above categories), father of the bride or groom, and why don't you take one of the slots? There is nothing nicer than a few words from the happy couple directly to their guests. If you are both shy and have no idea what to say, simply end it in a kiss. That's really all they want to see anyway.

THE FIRST DANCE

Traditionally the first dance was a special moment between the new bride and groom, however today it has become more of a dinner spectacle for the guests to watch and critique. Many couples opt for dance lessons to decrease their chances of complete humiliation, however a full out choreography is hardly necessary to wow your fans. The first dance should be a song that allows for a little movement, but no one is expecting

flips and flair. Swish the dress around the dance floor a bit for their pleasure, but make sure to worry less about them and concentrate more on each other for your own pleasure.

DESTINATION WEDDINGS

The best way to save money is to have your wedding and honeymoon in one. If you take an all inclusive, the food is free and there is already an open bar, you can't buy a long, expensive gown even if you wanted to because it will just drag sand all over the place, and as guest gifts, you can pick lovely, one-of-a-kind shells. That is, IF you have any guests. The downside is that while you think most people will drop everything to jump on a plane and celebrate with you, realistically they already have their own vacation plans for the year and are not going to easily tack on another week for you. Unfortunately this often leads to many couples having receptions when they get home to accommodate all those missing guests, and then the whole cost-savings thing is out the window. It isn't the ceremony that is expensive to begin with, so if the little reception back home becomes a ball at the Ritz, it would have been cheaper to fly everyone out with you yourself.

THE HONEYMOON

Breathe. The stress is over. The wedding gifts have been cashed (or returned). It's time to realize what it was all about: free champagne in your honeymoon suite. Whether you do a one week all inclusive or a 3 week European adventure, flaunt your rings and see what kind of great honeymoon freebies you can get. Hotel resorts go ga-ga over newlyweds because every couple around them seems to get all dreamy eyed, and then before you know it, there are champagne bottles everywhere, so really you should get commission for all this good publicity. And when your performance is over and the hotels have catered to your every whim, look over at who you married, take their hand and lead them lovingly back to your room... where you will get the best sleep of your life, because after a year of stressful and meticulous planning, you will be so exhausted that your bed will be good for that alone. At least for the first night.

