

The Public TROTH

It can take about a minute and should last decades, seldom attracts celebrities but has its own star performers — and talk about family values! For a mere \$25 per ceremony, about 100 times a day the City of New York joins in civil matrimony any couple with a valid New York State marriage license.

And, while June may be synonymous with brides, December turns out to be the biggest month for getting hitched in the city's municipal chapels. The surprisingly civil ceremony, with its simple exchange of vows averaging just under 60 seconds, is favored by the city's poor and the just plain frugal, the nonreligious and the true believers, recent immigrants and Daughters of the American Revolution.

On a Monday morning on the second floor of Manhattan's Municipal Building, as the door to the marriage chapel swings closed behind them, newlyweds Vicki Levites and Matthew Hardy, both 36, burst out: "We finally did it!" She's wearing a low-cut white dress; he looks like he plays in a rock 'n' roll band, which he does at times. Sweethearts since eighth grade, Vicki and Matthew's lives diverged while he was married to someone else for 11 years. For two years after Matthew's divorce, he couldn't get up the courage to give Vicki a call.

"Then I called her with the excuse that I couldn't get a good haircut out where I live on Long Island," he remembers. "I came into Manhattan ... and we've been together ever since. A week later we decided to get married."

For their rather impromptu wedding, the municipal chapel was the only choice. "I took the morning off from work," says Vicki, "but I have to go back this afternoon."

Never destined to rival the Elvis and glitz-themed private

December is the big month for getting hitched at the city's chapels of love

wedding chapels of Las Vegas, the Big Apple's five modest municipal chapels, administered by the staff of the City Clerk, nonetheless draw couples from abroad as well as from the city's "gorgeous mosaic." Witnessing the contrasts in the chapels' waiting rooms, you realize that Mayor David Dinkins' optimistic mosaic vision of New York had to be inspired by his 10 years as City Clerk.

Hizzoner still tells of the couple with AIDS that no one else would marry (so he did), and of the eager bride who mistakenly came to City Hall (Manhattan's wedding chapel is across the street), tripped on the steps, and broke her arm as Dinkins happened by. He invited her back the next day to be wed in City Hall's Blue Room.

One afternoon just before closing time in the marriage chapel in Queens Borough Hall, three immigrant couples are wed in quick succession, rekindling the melting pot in this most polyglot of boroughs. First there's Avi, an Israeli student, and Minoko, his bride of Japanese parentage. They don't exchange rings because they will be married in a religious ceremony in Israel.

For Mohammed Blekyat and Maria Asevedo — he from Morocco and she from Colombia — this will be their only ceremony, the one they've been postponing for six years since

meeting in an English class. "We finally have time to get married," says Mohammed.

The next groom, Hachem Zahoui, also Moroccan-born and a resident of Astoria, and his Brooklyn bride got their license in Manhattan, where they work as busboy and waitress at the Sheraton Hotel, but opted for an outer-borough ceremony. "We didn't want to get all dressed up to get married," says Hachem. "This is nice and casual." (Not so casual that couples can wear shorts or be wed in the nude, situations that have recently come up. Proper attire is required.)

"We try to provide as much dignity, courtesy and respect as we can," says Carlos Cuevas, the courtly City Clerk of New York. "We can't make every ceremony special, but we can make each couple feel special."

Now in his seventh year as the city's chief marrying official by appointment of the New York City Council, Cuevas and 14 of his staff are the only ones who can perform civil ceremonies in the city's municipal marriage chapels. In addition, clergy and city, state and federal judges can solemnize weddings elsewhere, but City Clerk personnel alone are responsible for wedding half of all couples taking out marriage licenses here.

Prospective bride and groom must apply together for their license (blood tests are no longer necessary), in one of the offices adjoining the municipal wedding chapels. Waiting on line for a license can drag on during peak periods like Fridays, holiday eves (Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day are among the busiest of the year) or the last weeks of December (when vacations, holiday spirits and last-minute income-tax breaks for married

By Steve Ditlea

Weddings

couples make this the biggest month for municipal weddings) and just before closing time (4 p.m. on any day)—as can delays for the marriage ceremony itself, which must take place at least 24 hours after the issuance of the license.

Couples must bring at least one witness to their marriage, although as many as 50 people have been known to squeeze into one of the chapels for a ceremony.

Just outside the chapel in Brooklyn's Municipal Building — where signs warn: "Please do not throw rice, it's very dangerous on the wax floors" — newlywed Clayton Ward, 34, expresses his satisfaction with the city's marriage service. "I like its practicality," he says.

"He means it's cheap," says his new bride, the former Miranda Summers, 29. Earlier, Miranda asked for time out at the beginning of the ceremony, ran back to her handbag and pulled out a greeting card that played a high, tinkling version of "The Wedding March."

During nonpeak periods, a couple can request vows that they've written, though in keeping with separation of church and state, civil vows may not contain religious references. Still, the standard vows for the municipal chapels should satisfy most brides and grooms: "There are only two requirements in marriage vows: that we ask if there is any reason why the couple shouldn't be married and that they agree to take each other as wedded spouses," explains City Clerk Cuevas.

The exchange of rings is optional.

In the municipal chapels couples have used felt-tip markers to draw on wedding rings, have fashioned them out of paper clips, and exchanged dollar bills instead of rings. The kiss between bride and groom is also optional, with religious couples often refraining from contact in public.

"I can look at a couple and tell by the way they kiss how deeply in love they are," enthuses Johnnie Johnson, the unabashedly motherly administrator who presides over Brooklyn's chapel. She herself was married here in 1970 and she takes pride in uniting others. "I get the most beautiful couples," she says as she flips through an album of Polaroids.

On the other hand, Johnson continues, "Some people are up to no good when they get married. I remember one groom — he was a city correction officer. He took me aside and said: 'Miss Johnson, I can't go through with this wedding. I was married before and never got a divorce.' Of course, I couldn't perform the marriage. When the bride found out, she threw the rings at him and stalked out."

On another occasion, when Johnson asked if anyone present knew of a reason why a couple shouldn't be married, the bride's mother spoke up: "She said the groom wasn't good enough for her daughter!" Because the bride was of age and didn't need her mother's consent, the wedding continued.

In general, observes Johnson, "brides are facing up to the fact that a big fanfare doesn't pay off. The money they would spend on a big wedding goes to setting up their household instead. Now they're dressing up in nice little outfits, not fancy gowns, either."

In the waiting area of the Bronx municipal chapel above the Grand Concourse, one wedding party bucks this trend. Dressed to the nines is Victor Iglesias, 23, in an iridescent blue jacket and paisley tie, and Shirelon Wilkerson, in a white satin dress. Also in the party are Shirelon and Victor's two daughters, a 3-year-old and a 9-month-old.

"This wedding is three years overdue," admits Victor, to which Shirelon adds: "I was responsible for keeping him from marrying me. I wanted to be sure he would be a good daddy to my children." Why the fancy threads today? Says Shirelon, who will soon reach her 20th birthday: "Now I know this is the man I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Teresa Dorry, Bronx administrator for the City Clerk's Office, acknowledges that it's hard not to get sentimental in her line of work. "If I have a crying bride, I cry, too. At 29, Dorry is still awed by the power vested in her by the City of New York: "I think it's amazing that I can marry people. It's almost too big for me to grasp."

In the largely Spanish-speaking Bronx, most of the borough's municipal marriage ceremonies are actually conducted in Spanish by Paula Pagan.

Teresa Dorry performs in English, to both the delight and dread of her family: "My husband likes to tell everyone he meets that I marry people. My grandmother says only the church can marry you."

For all of the 34,000 civil

marriages performed by City Clerk staffers with a minimum of fuss every year, celebrity weddings in the municipal chapels are exceedingly rare. Carlos Cuevas recalls the day then-heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson wed Robin Givens in the Manhattan municipal marriage chapel: "First thing in the morning, I heard everybody buzzing: 'He's here. The champ.' In no time, all the reporters and photographers at City Hall were over here covering the story. Tyson bought his marriage license and then went over to Civil Court to get a waiver on the 24-hour waiting period for getting married. He was back here in 45 minutes and he was married then."

The next biggest event after Tyson's short-lived vows (he was divorced within a year), was Cher's near-Mrs. According to Dora Young, who has been performing municipal marriages in Queens for eight years, including 200 ceremonies on Valentine's Day of this year for an all-City one-day record, a few years ago she received a call that the following day "Cher was coming over to get married, but her boyfriend knocked out a photographer that night and she never showed up."

The real stars of the municipal chapels are the people who overcome all obstacles to get married — and the people who marry them. "One woman nearly had her baby here. Less than 30 minutes after the ceremony she was giving birth at the hospital," says Young. "Another time a woman's water broke as she was saying 'I do.'"

In the Manhattan municipal chapel, a May-December marriage is the focus of attention. Brigitte, 23, a blond fraulein from Germany, clutches the arm of beaming retired New York professor John, 80, himself a German emigre. When he talks about their just-completed exchange of vows, he sounds like a character out of Thomas Mann: "After I am no longer around, which may be soon, Brigitte will be looking after my estate." Brigitte has no time for gloom and doom: "We were impatient to be married, so we came here because it is much faster than the three weeks it takes in Germany." As for the attraction between them, she explains, "We've gotten to know each other and we care for each other." And their secret formula for romance? Says Brigitte: "We'll keep our secret, so other couples can find out for themselves when they get married here." ■

(Steve Ditlea is a freelance writer.)