Levy: To Do or Dye

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By Renée Gearhart Levy

It's 9 o'clock on a recent Thursday morning and a power breakfast of sorts is taking place at the Louis Licari Color Group on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Among the heavy hitters present are two major beauty-and-fashion editors, a Los Angeles-based executive for Max Factor, and one of the most powerful public relations people in New York. They're not here to powwow on fashion trends or industry happenings. Rather, each woman is having her hair colored by the King of Color himself, Louis Licari.

Licari, who typically works on five or six clients simultaneously, is flanked by four assistants, all dressed as he is, in white teeshirts and black jeans. Using a paint brush, Licari dabs globs of what looks like chocolate pudding (color) and mayonnaise (conditioner) on the head of one attentive customer. Another woman's timer goes off and Licari rushes over to check her progress. "Under for five and then rinse," he instructs an assistant, sending the client off to a dryer.

Soon every chair in the front room is full. Seventeen women sit in front of floor-to-ceiling mirrors overlooking the tony boutiques of Madison Avenue. Each is in some stage of transformation, her hair filled with goop or sectioned into dozens of tin-foil projections, as if preparing for the Martian Cotillion.

These women are experiencing Louis Licari color, a technique Licari hopes to spread nationwide, as Vidal Sassoon did with hair cutting.

He is well on his way. With a client list including Christie Brinkley, Ivana Trump, Faye Dunaway, and Jessica Lange, a new salon in Beverly Hills, and a contract as worldwide spokesperson for Clairol, Licari is undoubtedly the most sought-after haircolorist in the world, earning a reputed $1 million annually for his talents.

Hair color is no trivial business. One out of three American women color their hair, according to Clairol. Between the ages of 28 and 65, it's one out of two. "Hair color is the ultimate fashion accessory," Licari says. "There is no easier way to make yourself look 10 years younger."

And, he says, "If you make your living from the way you look, you can't take chances with a colorist you don't trust."

A visit to the Louis Licari Color Group is not a spa experience. The place is

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busy—it takes five staff members just to man the front desk—but it's a friendly freneticism, a purposeful chaos.

An appointment can be more difficult to come by than a reservation at Spago. For a session with Licari himself, figure a four-month wait (a year for foil highlight- ing) and a bill approaching $350. And for that you'll be drying and styling your hair yourself, unless you choose to visit one of the salon's seven stylists for an additional $45. Seeing one of Licari's nine staff colorists is considerably easier (and up to $100 cheaper for the same service).

The salon’s 14 phone lines buzz continuously. Appointment requests for Licari are referred to his own personal booker, Enid Geller. “They love the King of Color,” she purrs. A look through Licari’s appointment book proves her point. Little notes are attached throughout—a television producer is going to the Academy Awards and wants to get in before then. Betty Ann, a client from earlier that day, has left a personal message for Licari—“MY HAIR IS PHENOMENAL. I love it!”

His secret? Hard work for starters. Licari starts his morning with an-hour-and-a-half workout at the gym, takes his first appointment at 8:15, and finishes the last about 12 hours later. That’s Monday through Wednesday. He takes a late flight to Los Angeles most Wednesday nights and works the Beverly Hills salon Thursday through Saturday, before flying back to New York Saturday nights. Sundays he keeps for himself.

“When you travel like I travel you have to stay very focused,” Licari says. “You realize what you’re doing and go to bed when you can go to bed, then you’re fine. The minute you lose the focus, the minute you do something extra, it really throws you off.”

Through all his concentration, he’s a charmer with the clients, knowing just the right thing to ask about, and the right response. He smiles and nods as Trudi Styler, Sting’s longtime companion, gives her analysis of the recent Grammy Awards. He looks admiringly at the test shots of an aspiring model. He asks another client about her upcoming vacation. “St. Barts,” he coos. “You’ll love it. You’ll never go anywhere else. It’s a whole experience that will overtake you.” (Later he admits privately he hasn’t been there in 10 years. “It was before things really got going,” he says.)

Then there’s the P.R. push. Any given month Licari can be seen turning brunettes into blondes on Donahue, doing couple makeovers on The Sally Jessy Raphael Show, or chatting up Joan Rivers about at-home hair color, not to mention the several fashion or beauty magazines he’s quoted in. It’s a combination of efforts by Clairol and Licari’s own personal publicist to make the Louis Licari name synonymous with hair color.

But the bottom line on Licari’s appeal is his eye for color. “Certainly that’s the edge I have,” he says, “that I can look at a head and see what other people can’t.”

Licari developed that eye at Syracuse University, where he studied painting, earning a bachelor’s degree in fine arts in 1975. He moved to New York City after graduation, envisioning himself the next Alex Katz. He never dreamed his canvas would someday be the heads of the rich and famous.

Painfully shy and a poor self-promoter, Licari the painter struggled, working as a waiter. “Everyone at this restaurant was either an actor or a painter,” he recalls. “It was too scary. I remember thinking, ‘Oh my God, I’m going to be 30 years old and a waiter.’”

A friend introduced Licari to a photographer who had once been a hairdresser to support his own art. He encouraged Licari to do the same. “I never thought I’d really be a hairdresser or certainly a hairdresser of significance,” Licari says. He zipped through beauty school, less than enthusiastic about his progress. “I was horrible with the hair,” he says. Then he landed a job as a shampoo boy at the ritzy Pierre Michel salon, subbing the tresses of society matrons, earning $80 a week. Learn-

LOUIS GOES TO THE MOVIES

If you sat through the credits of the movie Switch, you would have seen a film first: a credit for hair coloring, reading “Ms. Barkin’s hair color by Louis Licari.”

Licari first met Ellen Barkin while she was an unknown actress working on Diner. The ascent of her career has paralleled the progress of her hair color, going from mousey brown with subtle highlights to full blown bombshell blond. Barkin now has Licari’s services written into her film contracts and Licari’s reputation throughout the industry is well known.

He turned Kim Basinger’s golden locks brunette for Blind Date and later was Concorded to London for touch ups on her blond again hair during Batman filming.

He made Susan Sarandon brighter and redder for Thelma and Louise, and turned Anthony Hopkins steel gray for The Silence of the Lambs.

“Actors realize what hair color can do to create a look,” says Licari. “It’s the quickest way to create a character.”

Sometimes he reads the script in question. Always there’s an in-depth discussion about the character. “You have to know everything,” says Licari. “What is he or she doing? Why is she doing it? Where does she come from? Is she educated? Is she poor? I can help define that through hair color.”

Licari is perhaps most proud of the haircoloring he did for Robert DeNiro during the filming of Goodfellas, helping DeNiro to age some 30 years. “You have to figure out when the aging happens,” he says. “I had a little timeline to figure out when he goes from fortyish, to fifties, to sixties, and what changes would happen.”

Licari colored DeNiro’s hair four times—with about 15 touch-ups in between—using cotton swabs to paint individual strands various shades of gray.

It wasn’t the first time Licari worked special effects on DeNiro. He had previously turned him gray for Once Upon a Time in America, and for Awakenings. “We made him look sick, like he was in a coma,” says Licari. “He is only concerned with the character.”

Likewise, Licari is only concerned with the quality of his performance. “You have the craftsman and you have the artist,” film producer Ted Kuryla told Premiere magazine. Kuryla worked with Licari on Final Analysis, Johnny Handsome, and Once Upon a Time in America. “Louis Licari is an artist. He’s on the A list as far as his field is concerned.”

There will be another film first this summer, when the credits roll on Lorenzo’s Oil, starring Nick Nolte and Susan Sarandon. This time Licari will get two credits, one for each star.

—R.G.L.
ing his way around the salon, he realized that although he was no good with a brush or scissors, he knew color. He just had to figure out the medium of hair.

He worked his way up to assistant, studying under chief colorist Robert Renn, whom he credits with starting him on Clairol products and teaching him more than just the basics.

Licari’s career then got a kick start. One day model Rosie Vela needed a touch-up at home. Renn was too busy to go, so he sent his young assistant. Vela loved the results, and began sending her model friends Licari’s way. Soon actresses, social luminaries, and beauty editors were all beating a path to his door.

In 1979, Licari moved to La Coupe, the Madison Avenue salon of the moment, becoming color director and taking over a whole floor with his growing galaxy of star clientele. He got the Clairol contract in 1984, and in 1987 went out on his own, taking a handful of colorists and stylists and La Coupe’s maintenance man with him. Two years later, he doubled his space.

For all his success, Licari maintains a surprisingly gee-whiz attitude. “Just think of where we are right now,” he says of his Madison Avenue salon. “In the middle of one of the best streets in the world. And now I have another salon in the center of the Beverly Hills triangle. These are miracles. I never thought it was going to be like this.”

Licari says the opening of his West Coast salon in April was the obvious next step, as he’s been traveling to Los Angeles at least twice a month for four years, mostly doing work for films. “I believe my career has sort of led me in directions,” he says. “When I’m really sure I belong there, then I take it.”

Licari is sitting in the Gardenia, the coffee shop below his salon, drinking a decaf coffee and eating a chocolate frozen yogurt. It’s a rare respite in his day, being out of the salon during daylight hours. “Louis!” he hears from across the room, as an attractive woman saunters over. “I have an appointment next week.” Even now he can’t escape.

Licari is flying to Los Angeles in a few hours. It’s a month before the new salon opens and he’s going out to get his house organized.

“No one knows I’m coming,” he says. “I’m not doing hair this weekend. Well, almost. He’s keeping one, secret appointment. He’d made Jennifer Grey’s hair very blond for Francis Ford Coppola’s new film, then turned it dark again when filming ended. Problem is: She needs to do a retake and her hair has to match its previous blond exactly.

If anyone discovers Licari is in town, “the phone will ring,” he says. “Once the word is out, it’s over.”

On the other hand, of course, there are some opportunities Licari will not miss. He is very ambitious—some might say driven. In a field where demand is everything and careers dry up overnight because there’s a new hot stylist or colorist around the corner, accessibility and image are crucial.

“Every single person that comes in is very important in their own way,” says Licari. “You have to give 100 percent to every client.” There may be more excitement involved with some of his high-profile clientele, but you’d never know it by his attitude.

Licari claims he can walk down Madison Avenue and know at a glance where the women who pass him get their hair colored. And he’d certainly know if it was done in his salon.

“There’s an absolute look to our color,” he says. “It’s something that’s very natural. It’s very soft.”

But mostly, it’s one-of-a-kind. “When you come to see us, you’re unique,” he says. “You won’t see 10 other ladies with your hair color.”

And what’s also unique is the whole concept of Licari’s salon, with coloring being the primary activity instead of...