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Sharp Shooter: For Calgarian Aryn Nasser, life as an internationally-renowned photographer is as good as `caviar'

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Aryn Nasser was a fresh-faced 24-year-old when he packed up and left Calgary in search of fame and fortune in the international fashion industry.

But the world-renowned photographer admits he's gotten to the top of the industry as much for his moxie as for his talent.

"I left here without anything, not even a portfolio," he says.

"But I'm very aggressive. No matter how many times doors close in my face, I believe that eventually there will be one door that will open. And that's what happened, I guess."

One door -- or maybe several.

These days, he travels the world photographing actors and supermodels such as Claudia Schiffer, Carmen Electra, Helena Christensen, Iman, Jeff Goldblum and Rob Lowe.

His clients include the likes of Tommy Hilfiger, J. Crew and Bloomingdale's, and his work appears in the magazines Elle, Esquire, Glamour, Vogue, Seventeen and Cosmopolitan.

Not bad for a local kid with a penchant for photography and an eye for a great look, says his friend CoCo Bezzak.

"I always knew he'd make it. He's not afraid to do or say anything and he has a strong belief in himself," says Bezzak, a former model and current owner of Look Management.

"I knew he'd do what he wanted to do because he has the drive and he certainly has the creativity."

That ambition and creativity have surrounded Nasser, 42, all his life.

Born in Zanzibar, he lived in London and Kenya before moving to Calgary when he was 16.

Growing up, he was surrounded by creative people -- his mother is an artist, his father is a fabric designer and his grandfather was a photographer who gave Nasser, then nine years old, his first camera.

Nasser lost that toy camera years ago, but he never lost his love for photography. After graduating from Western Canada High School, he studied photography at NAIT in Edmonton before returning to Calgary to open a studio downtown, in the basement of the building that now houses Mescalero.

For a few years, Nasser -- whose parents still live here -- was content to work for the city's advertising agencies and companies such as Sun Ice and Forzani.

But his passion for fashion wouldn't go away, and eventually he decided to try life in one of the world's style capitals.

Next stop: Milan, Italy.

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Sure, he didn't know a word of Italian, and he had zero job prospects.

But he certainly knew how to make a lasting impression.

"I went to Italian Vogue's offices and sat there, and refused to leave. I said, 'I'm here to take pictures.' Finally they had to give me a story."

He parlayed that first little picture into bigger and better assignments, rapidly establishing himself in the industry as a hard-working and creative photographer.

And when hard work and creativity weren't enough to get his foot in the door of some high-glam fashion mag, he admits he'd occasionally resort to a clever stunt or two.

"I'd phone Vogue from the payphone across the street from their offices, and ask for myself, pretending like I was a client. When I got there, they already knew me. They'd be like, 'Oh, Mr. Nasser, there's been a call for you. You must be very busy,'" he says.

"This business, it's not just based on the pictures. It's based on your personality, too."

Personality, yes. But a quick wit and a skill for languages hasn't hurt either, he admits. Nasser soon taught himself Italian and French, in addition to the two Indian dialects, English and Swahili from his childhood.

That knowledge of Swahili proved to be useful a few years ago, when he was on a photo shoot for French Vogue in Kenya.

The organizers of the shoot wanted photos of the models with Masai warriors, he says. Yet everyone in the crew was afraid to talk to the regal natives, who are renowned for their formidable appearance.

"We drove to their village but no one would get out of the Jeep, so I jumped out and started talking to them in Swahili," says Nasser.

"They ended up feeding me and I took Polaroids of all their kids. It all worked out fine."

There are plenty of "fine" aspects to his job, says Nasser -- like hanging out with statuesque blonde uber-model Claudia Schiffer.

"She's got to be one of the most gorgeous girls I've photographed," he gushes.

"What I find terrific is that I'm shorter than a lot of the girls. It's a very big advantage. I love tall women. When Claudia comes up and embraces me, it's heaven. Trust me."

Nasser's supermodel stories don't end with hugs from Schiffer. Somali-born beauty Iman is another of his favourite clients.

"She's eccentric. Try to break her away from her phone," he says with a laugh. "But she's got a very kind heart, I must say. And she doesn't forget anyone on the set."

Nor will Nasser ever forget meeting Iman's rock star husband, David Bowie.

"I couldn't find my tongue. I was frozen speechless. He's someone I've idolized for so long," he says. "You look into that face and you don't know what to say."

He knew exactly what to say (and do), however, when he had to photograph Olympic medalist Carl Lewis.

"I had to pull him out of his hotel room, take his phone away from him and say, 'I need your feet.'" says Nasser.

"I thought, well, how do you take a portrait of a runner? That's what it's all about -- plus he's got a beautiful foot."

When it comes to photographing beautiful body parts, Nasser doesn't stop at feet. In fact, in his spare time, he's currently working on a book of nude portraits that he hopes to finish in the next couple of years.

But when he wants his clients to bare their all, he's careful to ask them long before he picks up his camera.

"I always ask up front if they'd be willing to take their clothes off for me -- on a professional basis, of course," he says.

"In turn, I promise I will take the most magnificent nudes of them. But then I do take beautiful nudes, so there is no reason to worry about it."

Modesty, it seems, isn't an issue.

And neither is money. Not only does Nasser hang out with celebs and supermodels, but he takes home supermodel-sized paycheques, too. Nasser's rates average \$3,000-\$30,000 US per day, and occasionally climb as high as \$35,000.

It may sound exorbitant, yet he doesn't have any trouble finding clients willing to shell out money for his talent. Home is Los Angeles, but he also keeps an office in New York and recently started working a couple days each month through Calgary's Look Management.

And he's already booking assignments six months down the road.

Not surprisingly, he admits he can't imagine doing anything else for a living.

"Everywhere I go, every country I've been to, I take pictures everywhere, all the time. That's just who I am," he says.

"It's caviar. Absolute caviar."

Illustration:

- Color Photo: Aryn Nasser
- Photo: Rob Lowe, left, Jeff Goldblum, top, and Carl Lewis have all been the focus of Nasser's camera.
- Color Photo: Rob Lowe, left, Jeff Goldblum, top, and Carl Lewis have all been the focus of Nasser's camera.
- Photo: Nasser's photos are featured in Hechter's catalogue campaign.
- Photo: "I do take beautiful nudes," Nasser says. His portrait of actress/model Amber Smith is ample proof.
- Photo: Recently Nasser shot the cover of Spanish Elle, featuring model Greg Hanson.
- Photo: Rob Lowe, left, Jeff Goldblum, top, and Carl Lewis have all been the focus of Nasser's camera.

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