



MAIN EVENTS

Mr. January

Ralph Rizzo has been the maestro behind Baltimore City's New Year's Eve for 21 years.

BY SHAWN C. BEAN

There were 150,000 people crammed into the Inner Harbor on New Year's Eve, and not one of them knew the man behind the curtain—because he was hiding in plain view. Walking among them was Ralph Rizzo, the guy about to pull the trigger on the impending celebration. He was set up between the two Harbor Place pavilions, the preoccupied masses ignoring him completely. On his signal, the floating barges fired off their fireworks (500-gram brocades and big willows), local radio DJs wished listeners well, and TV stations beamed it all into our living rooms.

"I push the button that signals the fireworks, the music, all of it," says the affable Rizzo, a self-described "master of merriment." "I'm like the conductor at the symphony."

For two decades and counting, Rizzo, the 48-year-old president and founder of R&R Events, has pressed the button for Baltimore's annual New Year's Eve Spectacular. In addition, the high-end event planning and production company has handled the 1995 Papal visit, Fourth of July festivities, White House functions, Ravens-related events, and the 108th Army-Navy

gala at the Convention Center in December. Thanks to its reputation, R&R Events, a company with annual revenues in the "seven figures," can charge upwards of \$750,000 for major events, with most clients spending between \$25,000 to \$50,000.

The company has a massive inventory of props, set pieces, and related material. Walk around the 12,000-square-foot Rosedale warehouse and you'll see King Kong's hand, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, and a huge pair of pink flamingo sunglasses.

Rizzo caught the entertainment bug from his father, a bodyguard for Frank Sinatra, and his mother, an exotic burlesque dancer and costumer. "We had sequins and boas all over the place," Rizzo jokes. He began his career as a sound guy, hustling AV equipment between high school dances and sock hops. Rizzo's first major gig, the Inner Harbor's 10th Anniversary in 1990, cemented his reputation as the city's Great Oz, cueing the smoke and special effects.

So how *does* Rizzo bring everything together on New Year's Eve? Will he lift the curtain for us? "It all starts with the click track," says Rizzo. The click track is a five-minute countdown wirelessly fed to all pertinent entities: the barges so the fireworks ignite on time, the music coordinator so Kool & the Gang's "Celebration" can be cued up, the radio and TV stations for real time coverage. Only one time has the symphony been out of tune. "One year the city wanted to incorporate a laser show," Rizzo recalls. "All the tests went great, and then 40 seconds before midnight, a 25-cent piece fails. But my people were so alert they fixed it in a minute. The crowd never knew."



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