



Palais Intrigue

In a corner of Marrakech's medina, French iconoclast Bernard-Henri Lévy has restored and expanded the Palais de la Zahia—a place to retreat to with his wife, Arielle Dombasle, while communing with the riad's storied past.

BY SARAH MEDFORD PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON

THE FRENCH FILM *Day and Night* seemed to have a lot going for it on the eve of its release in February 1997. The romantic drama, which co-starred Alain Delon and Arielle Dombasle (with Lauren Bacall in a minor role), had been bankrolled by French luxury-goods magnate François Pinault and his friend André Lévy, an industrialist who was also the father of its director, the celebrated writer Bernard-Henri

Lévy. But the critical response was immediate—and brutal. The chastened director and his leading lady, who was also his wife, escaped to Delon's holiday home in Morocco, tucked away in the medina of Marrakech. They swam in its palm-shaded pool and took sun on the crenelated roof terrace, which overlooks the Koutoubia Mosque and most of the ancient pink-walled city.

"We came supposedly for one week, and after the week I told him, 'I don't want to move! I'll buy it,'"

Lévy says of the house. Delon demurred, according to Lévy, but not for long. "A new lady in his life—a Pol Pot of the feelings—was making things difficult for him. And finally, he said, 'Why not? I'll sell.'"

Lévy and Dombasle acquired the Palais de la Zahia, as it is known, in 1998. Over the past two decades, they've expanded the centuries-old riad with additional guest rooms, public and private areas for sheltering from the day's heat and gardens that alternately delineate and obscure its meandering



SPELLBOUND

The terrace of Palais de la Zahia, a centuries-old Moroccan Riad that Lévy and Dombasle (opposite) purchased in 1998. Designer Bill Willis restored the tilework in the mid-'60s for previous owners Paul and Talitha Getty.

courtyards. From the start, they've worked on the project with their friend Louis Benech, France's pre-eminent landscape designer.

The historic palace has remained a hushed, bewitching getaway from the couple's home in Paris. Lévy, in particular, has taken a keen interest in the characters who have passed through its doors, including the feudal warlord Thami el Glaoui, diplomat Hubert Lyautey—the first French resident-general in Morocco—and the Swiss writer-adventurer Isabelle Eberhardt.

In 1966, Palais de la Zahia took a dip into the counterculture when John Paul Getty Jr. purchased it as a wedding present for his second wife, the Dutch model Talitha Pol. Getty's father, J. Paul Getty Sr., was listed that year in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's richest private citizen for his holdings in the oil company he'd co-founded, and soon a rivulet of Senior's cash was making its way into a full restoration of the palace. Leading the work was Bill Willis, a Memphis-born antiques dealer and self-taught decorator who'd already cut a swath with the younger Gettys through Morocco. The couple's hedonistic days and nights at La Zahia were summed up in a now-famous image taken by Patrick Lichfield for *Vogue* in 1969, in which Talitha, dressed in an embroidered djellaba, harem pants and white go-go boots, lounges before Paul on the darkening roof terrace. (Two years later she died of a heroin overdose in their Rome apartment, after which Getty sold the Marrakech house.)

Lévy finds the flamboyant and somewhat debauched history of La Zahia intriguing. Trailing the Gettys to its door was a creative coven that included Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé, Marianne Faithfull, Gore Vidal and Michelangelo Antonioni, among others. "My passion is really the memoirs," he says. "The house was documented as the only place on earth where the Beatles met the Rolling Stones. They spent a Christmas here together. A few nights, with their ladies." The episode was recorded by Fabrice Gignault in his 2006 book, *Sixties Muses*; Lévy mentions that he also corroborated it with his houseman, Mohsine, who was born at La Zahia and whose late father looked after it before him.

Mohsine has just delivered a tray bearing espresso in porcelain cups to the terrace, where Lévy is relaxing after his morning swim, dressed in an aloe-green bath towel and wraparound sunglasses. He regrets not meeting Paul Getty in person, he says. "One of his sons came back here one day, with great emotion, and wanted to make a sort of pilgrimage. I think he was happy with how we've kept it, I don't know."

The French couple bring their own version of celebrity to La Zahia. Dombasle, after several decades as an actress, has segued into a career as a singer and occasional film director. (Her latest, the 2013 *Opium*, was inspired by Jean Cocteau's classic memoir.) Wasp-waisted and vivacious, Dombasle is the shimmering sun to Lévy's taciturn moon. He's a writer-adventurer in the spirit of Eberhardt, hitting the road in dusty, perilous landscapes in search of a story, and is best known as an outspoken public intellectual, a self-described humanist who has taken

controversial stands on matters of international policy—most recently in Bosnia, Libya and across the Middle East.

Now 68, Lévy came onto the French scene in the 1970s, first as a war correspondent for the left-wing newspaper *Combat* and then as the author of *Barbarism With a Human Face*, an impassioned repudiation of Marxism. A fortune accrued by his father in the timber business has allowed him to lead a comfortable life, and he pursues projects only as they interest him. The list is long: Lévy has produced so much—and had so many professional ups and downs—that they are beyond count. His 2006 book *American Vertigo*, subtitled *Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*, was a bestseller in the U.S. as well as France despite an incendiary review by Garrison Keillor in the *New York Times* that began, "Any American with a big urge to write a book explaining France to the French should read this book first, to get a sense of the hazards involved." Alternately celebrated and lampooned in the French press for his high-minded exploits (he's regularly *entarté*, or given a pie in the face), Lévy has been rebranded in France simply as "BHL." He is also a dandy and a well-documented ladies' man: If BHL had his own emoji, it would sport a black suit and a white Charvet shirt with a stand-up collar, open at the neck.

In Marrakech, Lévy works to the exclusion of almost everything else. "I never move from here," he says, glancing around the densely shaded courtyard. "I work all day. And all evening. Sometimes I'm alone, and sometimes it's a good way to get work done." He admits that he leaves a lot of the details surrounding La Zahia to Dombasle.

"My wife likes making a house," Lévy says. "What I like in a house is people. The history. My history—and the people who came before. This is a little bit of a haunted house."

PALAIS DE LA ZAHIA is unquestionably a big house, a grand riad that dates to the 16th or the 18th century, depending on whom you ask. Thought to have been built by the Glaoui, or ruling pashas, of Marrakech, it bears all the markings of a rich man's trophy: rooms faced in *zellige* (glittering, richly patterned mosaic tile); cedar-wood ceilings, almost Nordic in their intricate floral motifs, carved and painted with botanical dyes; deep, arched fireplaces and walls of *tadelakt* (glazed and pigmented plaster). At some point, a smaller riad was annexed to the larger one and used as a harem. As Mohsine explains, this is where Marlon Brando spent a few months shackled up with the Gettys in the late '60s.

The first time Lévy and Dombasle returned to La Zahia as its owners, they brought along Benech and his then-partner, Christian Louboutin, to consult on various home improvements. "As a person, I like Louis's tenderness," Lévy says. "And as a professional, I love that he believes plants are living creatures. He really communicates with plants. They are the partners of his life."

Lévy has soaked up a bit of this thinking himself. "Louis taught me that plants had a life," he says. "And strangely enough, he convinced me of my relation to



MAKE A SPLASH

Above: Both avid swimmers, Lévy and Dombasle asked landscape designer Louis Benech to enlarge the pool and surround it with roses, shrubs and fig trees.

Right: One of the riad's original salons. Below: The roof terrace, overlooking Koutoubia Mosque.



SPEAK, MEMORY

Clockwise from left: The basement, lined with photographs from Lévy's past; a caged dining pavilion designed by Christian Louboutin; in a new wing, European furnishings mingle with Moroccan poufs and Taureg mats underfoot. The tapestry came from Dombasle's former chateau in Burgundy.



MOODY BLUES

Right: A new courtyard garden. Far right: A daybed with a view.



"IN THIS HOUSE, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO EXPERIMENT WITH SHADOW AND LIGHT."

—BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

LUSH LIFE
Benech planted a tangle of ivy and foliage around a low velvet banquette.



this world. The Americans love their dogs and their cats. For me, perhaps it's pet plants. Introduced by Louis Benech. 'Mr. Lévy, meet your pet plant.'

Benech got his start among the rain-misted gardens of Normandy, but several early projects had introduced him to North Africa's parched, unremitting climate, and the challenges of garden making there fueled his imagination. "The landscape tradition in Morocco is a bit Alhambresque," he says from the terrace of his Paris home and office, a modest townhouse in the ninth arrondissement. "There is sometimes a big reservoir surrounded by fruit trees—citrus or olive, as in the Agdal Gardens of Marrakech. And then there is the riad garden, an interior courtyard with raised walkways and sunken beds. It's a gravitational watering system—though not as clever as the ones in Iran."

In the early '80s, Benech designed a slim water canal in the Moorish style at Dar Zuylen, the estate of Guy and Marie-Hélène de Rothschild in the Palmerie, a new residential community outside the medina. "It was lined with artichokes, which have such a beautiful leaf," he says. Having stayed at the house one summer, Lévy and Dombasle craved a canal of their own. Beyond that, their requests for La Zahia were personal: Dombasle wanted a certain apricot rose, a hybrid tea named Just Joey; her husband wanted the world in microcosm.

"My little idea," Lévy explains, "was that in this house, you should be able to experiment with

Barefoot and still draped in a towel, Lévy rises from a velvet-cushioned campaign chair and pads through an arched doorway in the courtyard to an area he annexed some years after buying the house. The transition is from night to day: A sun-struck garden in fiery oranges and yellows encircles a newly built wing. Here Benech planted citrus trees and fragrant, trailing moonflower, wisteria and jasmine vines to make an opulent stage for the hybrid tea roses Dombasle favors, which are laced among hibiscus and an almost-vermillion lantana to ensure that the garden is constantly in color. Flowing down the middle is a turquoise-tiled canal that culminates in a small pool where calla lilies, bird of paradise and other showy bloomers perform.

"Although it looks wild, it's very geometric," Dombasle says of the rectangular plot. "Louis makes very sophisticated gardens that never look like gardens à la française. It's not his style at all. But he's so passionate."

Renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of plants, Benech prefers using native species whenever possible. In Marrakech, frustrated by the poor selection of natives in the nurseries, he resorted at one point to smuggling in seeds and seedlings from abroad, a practice that soon took on a narcotic allure. He supplemented his stowaways with local specimen plants scavenged one by one. "Louis was like a collector who knows that a piece of art exists somewhere, and he has to find it," Lévy says. "He

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all sorts of relationships between shadow and light. There should be a place for sunlight, for deep shadow, for coolness and for burning heat. A place for being surrounded by plants and then seeing plants at a distance. Not a variety of plants, but a variety of behaviors of me and my friends. I wanted the framework to be set in order to create a variety of relationships with plants."

Benech says he doesn't recall this dialectical tale, but the result was achieved anyway—in its beguiling complexity, La Zahia offered a range of horticultural opportunities. The existing trees in the riad's courtyard garden were magnificent: jacarandas, figs, palms, flame trees and Persian silk trees approaching the height of the upper-story bedrooms. At eye level, though, the sunken beds looked empty and rather sad. Lévy and Dombasle suggested raising the soil to the level of the green-tiled walkways, but Benech argued that this would "strangle" the trees. Instead, he persuaded them to plant a proper understory mixed with potted ferns and flowering climbers—rosy pink bougainvillea, persimmon-hued crossvine—that would soon infiltrate the courtyard with a primitive jungle on the order of Henri Rousseau. "At the time of the Gettys, there were just the big trees," Lévy says. "Now there is a sort of clever and wild composition, and it is like this all year round."

would take a car to the desert and come back with a little pot. Now the plants are not so little. It was a big commitment, and he did it with heart."

The same could be said for Lévy's expansion of the illustrious riad. "This is a little more than a house, so there is a transmission that has to be true and consistent, a legacy," he explains. "I did not change it. I added. And I got in touch with Bill Willis, because I wanted the same spirit as the Gettys. But Bill worked in close contact with Louis."

Willis had stayed on in Marrakech after restoring Palais de la Zahia in the '60s, becoming the city's unlikely shaman of the decorative arts. "Bill created the Marrakech look, and it started with that house," says the decorator Jacques Grange, who visited La Zahia with Yves Saint Laurent in 1972. "Yves was very close friends with Talitha. She had died by then, but we spent time there with Paul."

In 2002, Willis reprised his role at La Zahia. Then in his 60s and somewhat of a recluse, the designer threw out one far-fetched idea after the next, and Benech—with input from Louboutin, who is no slouch when it comes to houses—did what he could to shape them into workable plans. Willis died in 2009, and Lévy and Dombasle emerged from the adventure with a few choice stories. They still use the furniture Willis designed for the Gettys, including a

four-poster bed painted like the Good Ship Lollipop in a fantasia of ice cream colors and Berber-inspired motifs. In Talitha Getty's former boudoir, Dombasle stirred Willis's haute-bohemian pot by placing a red-satin chaise once owned by the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli beside a soaking tub paved with psychedelic *zellige* tiles. "It's so amusing," Dombasle says of the result, taking a drag on her cigarette and smiling.

CERTAIN ROOMS at La Zahia still breathe the stately air of the 19th century. When the couple host late dinners for friends, a long table in one of the salons is set with colored votive candles, and the fireplace is lit on cool evenings. Lévy says he prefers to dine at home. "In 20 years, I never went to a dinner, a party, to a lunch here." This sounds unbelievable, but he insists. "People come from abroad," he says. "A coterie, no. But it's a place where my best friends come. And sometimes the house has been used to have people meet, and take time together discreetly." Meaning? "A few political discussions have taken place here," he says cryptically. "In 2000, there were some meetings, some talks here. Between Israelis and Palestinians. In 2011, there were some talks with Libya, factions of the Libyan revolution. But generally, it is not that. Generally, it is really a place for me to write and to get together with my friends."

The Middle East has been Lévy's focus for more than a decade, and in the past two years he's made a pair of documentaries on the rise of ISIS. "As you can guess, you don't come back from such an adventure absolutely intact," he says of filming in northern Iraq. "It takes time, and I am...in recovery." To ease back into the general public discourse, he's working on a new book about populism, he says. "Trump, Putin, Europe. How to understand it, how to get rid of it."

Reconciling the many contrasts of Lévy's life is no easy matter, a fact that becomes even clearer after a trip to La Zahia's basement, where a series of rooms is lined with images of him and a galaxy of acquaintances from childhood to the present.

Cameos by everyone from his two children, his two ex-wives, Omar Sharif, Nicolas Sarkozy and Charlie Rose to camo-clad soldiers and Russian dissidents tell an unfathomable number of stories. Benech refers to the place as "the Dombaslothèque"—where the still-glamorous chanteuse lets loose in the evenings to entertain friends. "This is a crazy place," Lévy says, before leading the way through to the underground gym.

In 2000, on a trip to Tangier, Lévy fell in love with the view from a clifftop bluff and asked the late French designer Andrée Putman to build him a contemporary villa there. The two Moroccan houses couldn't be more different, he says—"Like Mac and PC. Like Beatles and Rolling Stones. Like Racine and Corneille." In July, though, he put the pristine Tangier house on the market; he rarely found himself going there. Instead, he's been spending more time in the ancient arms of La Zahia. He can be alone here, to a point. "This is a very old house, with many ghosts. Good ghosts." ●