Lights, audience, profit: The evolution of the Las Vegas spectacle

Jaime Lee Rana Koran
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds/1372

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.
LIGHTS, AUDIENCE, PROFIT: THE EVOLUTION
OF THE LAS VEGAS SPECTACLE

by

Jaime Lee Rana Koran

Bachelor of Arts
Graceland College
1999

Master of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree
Department of Theatre
College of Fine Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2002

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
The Thesis prepared by

Jaime Lee Koran

Entitled

Lights, Audience, Profit: The evolution of the
Las Vegas Spectacle

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Theatre

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Lights, Audience, Profit: The Evolution of the Las Vegas Spectacle

by

Jaime Lee Rana Koran

Ellis Pryce-Jones, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Theatre
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Las Vegas is known as a post-modern city: its development in the later half of the twenty-first century is an explosion of tourism, spectacle and gambling. Especially with the transitions of the past two years and the great variety in the new shows, no one has asked the question how did Las Vegas get from the showgirl to Blue Man Group? If we are to visualize a Las Vegas in the future, it is essential that we understand the whys of and the forces that impel change in the Las Vegas entertainment industry.

As there are no chronologies of the Las Vegas spectacle this paper is an effort to delineate the evolution of the spectacle as a beginning step to understanding the forces that change Las Vegas. What follows is a piecing together of myths, opinions, visual accounts, personal memories, and some documented chronologies of the development of the current shows in Las Vegas.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................. iii  
LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS ..................................................................................................... v  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..................................................................................................... vi  
INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 1  
CHAPTER 1  THE DEFINITION OF SPECTACLE ............................................................... 7  
CHAPTER 2  THE HOLLYWOOD PITSTOP ........................................................................ 14  
CHAPTER 3  THE BIG SPENDER'S EXPECTATIONS ....................................................... 31  
CHAPTER 4  THE FAMILY'S DINSEY VEGAS ............................................................... 42  
CHAPTER 5  THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUND .................................................. 51  
  Blue Man and Beyond .................................................................................................. 55  
APPENDIX  LETTER OF RELEASE ............................................................................ 57  
BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................................................................... 59  
VITA ......................................................................................................................................... 61
| PHOTO 1:   | The Arizona Club | 15 |
| PHOTO 2:   | Chorus Line, The Flamingo | 18 |
| PHOTO 3:   | Chorus Line, The Frontier | 18 |
| PHOTO 4:   | Chorus Line, The Thunderbird | 18 |
| PHOTO 5:   | Atomic Test, 1951 | 25 |
| PHOTO 6:   | Frank Sinatra | 26 |
| PHOTO 7:   | The Rat Pack | 29 |
| PHOTO 8:   | The Stardust, 1958 | 31 |
| PHOTO 9:   | The Lido Girls, 1958 | 32 |
| PHOTO 10:  | Louis Prima, 1956 | 35 |
| PHOTO 11:  | Ariel Photo of The Strip, 1952 | 37 |
| PHOTO 12:  | Freemont Street | 38 |
| PHOTO 13:  | Mackie's Jubilee Designs | 40 |
| PHOTO 14:  | The Bellagio, 2000 | 51 |
| PHOTO 15:  | Showgirl | 53 |
| PHOTO 16:  | The Paris, 2000 | 54 |
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge Ellis Pryce-Jones, Davey Marlin-Jones, Robert Brewer and Evelyn Gajowski for being a wonderful committee. I'd also like to thank Shannon Sumpter for her insight and invaluable help - along with sitting through my orals. and Georgia Richardson and Shahnaz Khan, without whom this paper would have never even begun.
INTRODUCTION

Las Vegas. Translated to mean "the Meadows" in Spanish, the name of the fastest growing urban metropolis in the United States has a different connotation than any other American city. Las Vegas is an internationally famous name and like all cities that become internationally famous, Las Vegas is unique in its distinction. Cities, which become famous, become famous for one aspect or another. Think New York and think of Times Square, Broadway, the avant-garde, the stock market. Think Chicago and think hot dogs, art, popcorn and the windy city. Think London and think Big Ben, Westminster, the royals and the underground. Think Los Angeles and think Hollywood, Rodeo Drive, the stars and surfers. Think Paris and think lovers, etc. Think Las Vegas and think "the Strip", gambling, the lounge singer and the showgirl.

That is what middle class America thinks of when Las Vegas is mentioned: the bright lights, the fantasy-land of casinos, and the infamous reputation of being the adult playground of the world. It is ironic that the stereo-typical perception of Las Vegas is actually extinct in contemporary Las Vegas. The general middle-American perception of Las Vegas corresponds with a Las Vegas that was in existence 20 years ago, not the Las Vegas that exists today. Out of the four characteristics listed. The Strip, gambling, the lounge singer and the showgirl, only two truly exist today. The Strip and Gambling are features that remain constant, but in the entertainment, the lounge singer and the showgirl are all but extinct. The Las Vegas Review Journal calls showgirls "A Dying Breed" and
the lounge has become nothing more than the occasional band. But even so tourists still visit Las Vegas; they don't visit because of the entertainment, instead “Today people visit Las Vegas to visit Las Vegas” (Rothman) “It's the Las Vegas experience.” But before Las Vegas was “Las Vegas” it was a road stop on the way to Hollywood, nothing more than a blink at the side of the road.

The origins of Las Vegas are well documented and uninspiring. The area itself was only “discovered” and settled by American pioneers in the late nineteenth century. First placed on the map by John Fremont in 1845, he is quoted saying Las Vegas “a term which the Spaniard use to signify fertile or marshy plains...the taste of the water is good, but rather too warm to be agreeable, the temperature being 71 in one [stream], and 73 in the other. They, however, afforded a delightful bathing place” (Land 13). Las Vegas became a common stopping point on the way west, and when the railroad was built, Las Vegas was a logical depot, in 1905. But in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Las Vegas was slowly dying; it was not until 1931 that hope for the town's survival arrived, in two different guises: Hoover (Boulder) Dam and the re-legalization of gambling.

During the five years of construction on the Dam, the workers lived in what is now Boulder City and Las Vegas became the source of entertainment and relaxation for the thousands of dam workers. Boulder City, then the Boulder Canyon Project Federal Reservation (the first planned community in the United States) was rigidly controlled and restricted. “There would be no liquor, no gambling, or ‘other practices deemed injurious to the worker” (Land 58). Las Vegas, only a short drive away, became a logical and popular place for blowing off steam, and several Las Vegans credit Sims Ely, the
"dictator of Boulder City," for establishing the town’s reputation as a "wide-open Wild West town" (Land 58). However, whether or not Ely established the town as the wild-west, the real entertainment in Las Vegas did not begin until the late 1940’s with the beginnings of the Hollywood set. The re-legalization of gambling pushed through by state assemblyman Phil Tobin, in 1931, allowed quite simply for the state to get a cut of what was already occurring. “I was just plumb sick and tired of seeing gambling going on all over the state and payoffs being made everywhere. Some of those tinhorn cops were collecting 50 bucks a month for allowing it. Also, the damn state was broke and we needed the money” (Land 84). So in reality Las Vegas, as we’ve come to know it, was founded in the 1930’s.

Despite its late beginning, in this century, entertainment in Las Vegas has been through several evolutions and has three distinct incarnations. To understand entertainment in Las Vegas is to define precisely what that is and to contain it to a sheet of paper, while the community of entertainment is, in reality, in constant movement. To contain entertainment in Las Vegas is to classify it. The three incarnations of spectacle and entertainment in Las Vegas are the showroom, the lounge and the Incidental/Visual Spectacular. The showroom, the big show, the main attraction – all of these simple phrases – describe the same thing and belong in the first classification: the major entertainment feature of a hotel-resort. Presently, Mandalay Bay has Storm, the Bellagio has O, Treasure Island has Mystere, The Mirage has Siegfried and Roy, and the Tropicana has Folies Bergere, etc. Most major resorts have one headline production that they market and advertise. This form of entertainment was developed by each of the resorts, the individual resorts using what resources they had available to them. Those resources
led to the showgirl revues, others took those resources and produced the large production/special effects show, and still others took a small opening act and expand it into a full-fledged show. It is the main entertainment thrust of a hotel's vacation package. This is where the resorts' multi-billion dollar budgets become a huge asset. There is nowhere else in the world that a theatre can produce entertainment, which seems to have no limit on their budget, at least on the pre-production costs, especially regarding technology. The showroom in Vegas is where technological developments are highlighted and revered.

Second, in classification, is the lounge act. While most of middle-class America may associate Las Vegas with the lounges and the lounge singers, the Las Vegas lounge show is an extinct act. Ironically, the lounge show was not successful in Las Vegas because it was a popular form of entertainment. People were staying in the lounges to see the lounge shows. The hotels and casinos made their money off of the gambling, at that time, and if the patrons were spending their valuable time sitting in the lounge and not gambling then the hotel was not making money. It was a simple economic decision. When the lounge shows' following became too great they "graduated" the show into the show room. Many of the main stage shows developed from the lounge; for instance, Danny Gans is a type of lounge act. However, because the lounge is a Las Vegas icon, in a city where icons are impermanent and fluid, changing each decade with the difference in advertising and marketing campaigns, some resorts try to keep the lounge tradition alive if not the acts themselves.

The third classification belongs to the broadest category and the most difficult to define. Incidental/Visual Spectacular. This is an exploding volcano at the Mirage, or
dancing water spouts at the Bellagio, or an animatronics figure in the fountains at Caesars, or traveling opera singers at the Venetian, or a trapeze artist over the bar at the Rio. It is all those things and more, because not only does incidental entertainment include the active participant but also the static ones. A resort’s façade is a form of entertainment: the façade at the Paris, with its one-quarter Eiffel Tower, allows a spectator to dream that they are actually in Paris. The spectator believes, if only for a moment that they are entering a Parisian alley, or a desert hideaway at the Aladdin, or maybe they just admire the sunset sky at the Sunset Station. The spectator derives entertainment from the architecture, in fact Hal Rothman refers to the architecture and the visual spectacular as Las Vegas’ “Public Art” the reason for seeing tourists walking down the road, staring up in wonder at the buildings. As incidental entertainment can be both active and passive this paper will not deal with it at great length. There is no question that the development of the resort façade is a huge part of the evolution of spectacle in Las Vegas; however, it is a spectacle more in the realm of a visual artist than a performing artist.

The first two categories, the showroom and the lounge, involve the entertainer and live performances so it is these that this study will focus on. For that purpose the main source material will be interviews with the residents of Las Vegas. Mike Weatherford, a reviewer for the Sun, has written a book, Cult Vegas, which investigates the entertainment personalities of the fifties through the early nineties, as well as some history texts of the economic and social growth of Las Vegas. But to begin we need boundaries and a starting point. Rather than beginning in the 40’s with the Hollywood show being imported to Las Vegas, let us begin instead on the opposite side of the
spectrum, with a definition of spectacle and then how spectacle's incarnations apply to Las Vegas.
CHAPTER ONE

THE DEFINITION OF SPECTACLE

Spectacle is defined as all visual aspects of a performance. Aristotle was specifically referring to theatre, so it is to theatre that the definition is applied. The visual aspects include lights, animatronics, dancing, certain blocking, wild gyration, and stillness. In the past spectacle has been misused and taken out of context to be seen as something bad or something not worthwhile. It has commonly been referred to as eye candy, fluff, or non-essential. This trend is prevalent in the modern idea of the "essential theatre" as was popularized by Peter Brook. The prejudice against spectacle begins much earlier.

This begins in the Renaissance with the re-interpretation of the *Poetics*. Aeschylus and Sophocles were the pinnacles of Greek drama, and so Aristotle relied on their plays for an observation of what theatre was, more specifically what the best tragic plays were. The six characteristics of drama are not a judgment but instead observations. They are descriptive not prescriptive. When the *Poetics* were re-discovered by the classicists, especially the Italian and French, they used the *Poetics* as a sort of rulebook for the theatre. Everything must occur in a certain order, a certain time and a certain place: the unities of time, place and action. However, they also began attributing a hierarchical importance to Aristotle's six characteristics of tragedy. Plot became the
“most important element” and so on down the list. Spectacle, near the end, was seen as not so important.

In the fifth position spectacle takes a backseat to character, dialogue/diction, plot, and thought, and comes in ahead of sound. Aristotle, when he thought of spectacle, was referring to all visual elements in a show. Spectacle by his theories, observations, is not enough to hold an audience; there must be plot, diction, character, thought and music. In tragedy he is correct, the spectacle alone is not enough to hold an audience. But what is sometimes misunderstood about Aristotle’s *Poetics* is two-fold, one that he was writing a prescriptive rulebook and two that he was referring to all types of theatre. Aristotle’s works are descriptive and in the *Poetics* he is specifically referring to 5th Century Greek tragedy. In Roman times and in Las Vegas today, the audience is not expecting a tragedy and hence the pyramid of characteristics can be set on end.

As influential as Aristotle’s *Poetics* are in the world of theatre and drama, they carry conditions that cannot apply to the present in Las Vegas. Consequently the characteristics, and their resulting hierarchy, are not applicable to the extravaganzas on the Las Vegas stage. Las Vegas excels in the same type of entertainment that the Romans excelled in: mass entertainment, based on large economic and social backgrounds, the entertainment for the masses. This does not mean that the entertainment does not focus on a certain element or type of audience. The Roman culture had many different types of mass entertainment. They had the violent entertainment in the Coliseums, with feeding Christians or slaves to the lions. They had the violent, but honorable, entertainment of gladiators fighting one another. They also had the pure spectacular when they would flood the coliseum for the naumachia and show huge sea
battles. In Greek times the theatre spectacle was stripped to a minimum on stage, and there was a sense of ceremony, of ritual, that the Roman audiences and productions lacked. While the Greeks had plays consisting of large dancing and singing choruses, the Romans had huge visual spectacle plays. Where as in *Oedipus* in the Greek world goes off stage to see that his mother/wife Jocasta is dead by hanging, in the Roman theatre of Seneca Jocasta shoves a sword up her vagina on stage. The gladiator fights, the large spectacle comedic plays by Plautus, the closet dramas by Terence, the themed costume parties, and gambling were all a part of Roman indulgences. Las Vegas has many of these same elements.

Las Vegas is now a cultural pleasure Mecca. Pleasure is emphasized because it sells. Anything that can enhance the pleasure of a patron is considered a good thing. Las Vegas creates a fantasy around the patron, so that they can exist within a "pleasure dome." But Las Vegas is also a cultural phenomenon, which implies a large amount of people to be pleased. As pleasure is an individual experience Las Vegas had to borrow a leaf from Rome's book and create mass entertainment spectacle. The hotelier and resort owners had to create a fantasy land that would appeal to an individual but also to the greatest number of masses. So here, you have the large scale fantasy that can be individualized in the imagination of the patron. Hence the shows in Las Vegas are not tragic or designed to show an individual character's journey; instead, they are designed to appeal to a large audience with enough elusiveness to allow the spectator to form a personal fantasy. Spectacle is a large stunning show that wows the audience, an audience from several different economic and social backgrounds. In theory and in practice the same held true in Roman times.
The large coliseums of Rome were not built for "great literary art:" they were built to allow mass access to a spectacle. The most literary of the Roman playwrights surviving is Terence and we believe that none of his works were actually performed, that they were simply read as "closet dramas". The point here is that Las Vegas is not the first city or culture to build the idea of spectacle into a cohesive audience gripper. An audience that enters the theatre expecting to be entertained without investing themselves are right at home in Las Vegas.

Las Vegas has taken Rome's idea of mass entertainment and technologically advanced it. We now have a living spectacle that provides entertainment simply by being as well as the constructed shows housed within the spectacle. The definition of spectacle becomes complex here. We are no longer in the parameters that Aristotle once set down. We are not in a theatrical production. We are not in a tragedy. We are in a metropolis, a metropolis that is fundamentally an experiment in spectacle.

It would be very easy to say that the definition of spectacle changes here to simply be Las Vegas. The visual art that permeates the valley is the "all things visual" that Aristotle was referring to, and the prevalence of incidental entertainment means that walking down the Strip is one of the most exciting shows around. However, even in Las Vegas, spectacle alone is not enough to survive. The shows that are successful today combine spectacle and theme. The theme of a piece, Fantasy for EFX Alive. Love for O, Life for Mystere, Elementals for Storm, Discovery for Blue Man Group, allows the spectacle to focus on one cohesive journey. The audience can latch on to the journeys of the pieces and follow in a spectacular ride.
This doesn't mean that all one must do is find a theme, slap a bunch of special effects on it and "ta-da:" one now has a successful Las Vegas show. There are other factors to be considered. The most prevalent of these other factors is participation. In all of these shows there is some sort of audience involvement, or the illusion or audience involvement, to create a kinship with the performers. This establishes the journey not only as one on the behalf of the artist but also on the behalf of the audience. "Part of the unspoken success of [Blue Man Group] is some of the interesting gimmicks of audience participation" (Tratos). When you cannot show a journey among the performers it makes sense to have the entire show become a journey for the audience. And to do so you need to include the audience in the show, by real or illusionary means. However, this involvement must be carefully regulated. "The truth is even in Blue Man when they get the guy to get up on stage it's not really him ... it's all previously video taped ... but it creates the illusion of audience participation, it creates the illusion of the audience being involved ... and in the end the audience does participate ... so now they've got this illusion that they, the audience, has done something entire time and it's unusual and it sells" (Tratos). Shows that actively involve the audience in more than an incidental way, unless under controlled circumstance such as Mystere and Blue Man Group, will only threaten the audiences' sense of distance and control. To Las Vegas an appropriate show is amazing spectacle that allows the viewer to maintain their safety zones, and live in a fantasy world, but one that they don't actually participate in. The spectator knows they are watching a performance rather than being the performer in the act themselves.

There is one show that fits all of these parameters but still failed with in the first year of production. The reason De La Guardia closed was not because it invested only in
spectacle, in fact it had a strong theme, but the reason it closed was the show required too much involvement on the part of the audience. The dance club style show required the audience to stand all ninety minutes, to accept the possibility of getting wet and to fear the reality of performers or things falling on them. The regular audiences in Las Vegas were denied the usually comfy, cushy seats and their drink holder, and even access to a bar. They were drawn into a show that not only asked for the audience’s full attention but demanded it as active participation.

While this show was amazingly successful in New York City and on the east coast, the audience of Las Vegas was unprepared and not interested. “We’re more west coast for sure. A lot of the stuff that works on the east coast, a lot of the humor that works on the east coast won’t work here” (Walton). Now that could lead to the assumption that the Vegas audience has no interest in culture or the avant-garde, especially in the theatrical venues. This would essentially be correct, but not for the normal reasons. Instead it should be stated that the audience that travels to Las Vegas does so in an effort to escape into a fantasy, and while that fantasy is amusing and distracting it is enjoyable, but once the fantasy tries to erode the barriers of protection the audience has built up it is no longer enjoyable. In other words De La Guardia was simply too avant-garde and participatory for an audience that craves a momentary distraction.

Spectacle is a valid way to entertain in Las Vegas, valid in the sense that it not only generates money but also fame – the unique distinction of Las Vegas, with the fame an alternate facet of spectacle’s definition is brought into play. This aspect is harder to define, because strictly speaking it doesn’t fall within Aristotle’s definition. It was said
earlier that the simplest way to define spectacle in Las Vegas is to simply say that spectacle is Las Vegas. This is probably a more complete definition in its simplicity. All things visual, this is Las Vegas. But what adds to the appeal and the draw of Las Vegas is the uniqueness of the city. "Entertainment has become king in American society. and no place, not New York, not Hollywood, offers more of it in more forms than Las Vegas. It is entertainment and not gaming that has redefined Las Vegas" says Hal Rothman in his new book, *Neon Metropolis*, "[Tourists] walk the Strip by the thousands, with their fanny packs and cameras. Tourists walk with camcorders, filming the town, but they don't look through the camera eye. Instead they walk and watch, their camera recording a version of it at shoulder-height for eternal replay on home VCR" (64, 69-70). Las Vegas takes spectacle to a new level, by taking it out of the showroom and placing it in every facet of the city, from the architecture to the menus. Here spectacle is not only all things visual, but also a business, both for the generation of money, but also for the generation of audience.

It would be negligent to ignore the basic fact that Las Vegas is a tourist attraction. Not necessarily only for the casinos or the quick weddings and quicker divorces, even if it was those very traits that were the first draw to tourist to Las Vegas. The Las Vegas architecture and style is in itself a spectacle. The unique visions in the city and the uniqueness of the atmosphere takes spectacle a step further than a Broadway show and turns it into a living entity. The spectacle here is not piecemeal – it is the whole package. Today Las Vegas is the place to go to see something that you cannot see anywhere else, and the shows in the showrooms follow that same theme.
CHAPTER TWO

THE HOLLYWOOD PITSTOP

Now Las Vegas is established as the entertainment and spectacle capital of the world, if by no other virtue than the city designed itself to be that way, but it wasn’t always so. To understand the evolution of what is now the spectacle Mecca of the world, one must look at the beginning of entertainment in Las Vegas. In reality Las Vegas entertainment began with the founding of the city as a railroad town, or a pit-stop town on the way to Los Angeles. When the railroad came to town, the city was parceled out into blocks, although an enterprising realtor sold the land west of the track and the railroad controlled the area to the east. Although James McWilliams thought he had a good scheme going to create the township it eventually backfired. “Cahlan [one of the founders of the Las Vegas Review Journal] traced the failure of McWilliams’s ‘Original Las Vegas Town Site’ to two major problems ‘They had no indoor plumbing. There wasn’t enough assessed valuation so that they could pave the streets. They couldn’t do anything.’ To further handicap McWilliams, the railroad built the tracks so high that it was very difficult for wagons to cross from his townsite on the west to [Senator] Clark’s townsite on the east” (Land 42). The railroad company headed by Senator Clark was slated to hold an auction for land east of the tracks. McWilliams sold plots for a flat fee, and the railroad didn’t appreciate the competition.
The railroad barreled into town and held a much anticipated auction for the land on the east side of town. Once that land was purchased squatters who were perching on McWilliams’ side of town simply dragged their shelters to the new property. The railroad was strict about the policies and procedures of the company town that it set up. It was not controlled to the same extent that Boulder City would be later, but there were some strictures. The most relevant was the implementation of the no liquor law. No liquor was supposed to be sold outside of Block 16. “In accepting bids the railroad company stipulated that no liquor could be sold on any premises, with the exception of those built on Block 16. Outside that small area, if anyone in the new town sold liquor, his title to the land would revert back to the railroad” (Land 42). Block 16 quickly became very popular, but at the same time the liquor law was never truly enforced. The one incident that occurred was held up in district courts for days and the railroad never pursued the matter again. However the Block 16 legacy still exists. What developed out of Block 16 geographically speaking is downtown Las Vegas, but what grew out of it in reputation was more significant. This is where Las Vegas began to get its reputation as a town of the true Wild West.

(Photo 1: The Arizona Club, Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections)
Even though entertainment and the reputation began with Block 16, spectacle in Las Vegas did not begin until much later. Block 16 was the typical western style entertainment, honky-tonk bars and barmaids by the dozens. While it was rowdy and probably very wild it just wasn’t that different from any other western town. Block 16 gave Las Vegas a rough and tumble reputation, but it was not what truly established it as a maverick city, one of the main selling points of Las Vegas throughout history. What gave Las Vegas an edge was its liberal marriage and divorce laws. When that liberal attitude turned towards the legalization of gambling the effects of Nevada’s and subsequently Las Vegas’ reputation were not an issue because the marriage laws had paved the way. “Fear of national reaction was no longer a major concern, because Nevada already enjoyed a maverick image, thanks to its liberal marriage and divorce laws” (Moehring 20). The re-legalization of gambling, in 1931, helped add to Las Vegas’ image, even though the gambling had been there all along, but Las Vegas did not truly begin its journey into spectacle until the first of the many resorts was built on what would become the Las Vegas Strip.

Ironically it is Los Angeles’ own sense of morality that led to the creation of the Strip which is now one of Los Angeles residents’ favorite playgrounds. Before the building of the great resorts along the Los Angeles Highway, there was a small club called the Pair-O-Dice. It was purchased in 1938 by Guy McAfee. McAfee, who named the stretch of land outside Las Vegas the “Strip” after the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, left Los Angeles after Fletcher Bowron was elected mayor of Los Angeles and began a war on the corruption in Los Angeles. “Bowron declared war on the city’s illegal brothels, closing many of them down. Illegal casinos were the next target” (Moehring
42). Called a “moral crusade,” the war escalated and forced several gambling operations to pull up stakes in Los Angeles and go somewhere more lenient. Las Vegas was a natural choice. However, while this movement instigated the migration to Las Vegas from Los Angeles and began to cement the relationship between the two cities, it was still not the beginning of the entertainment spectacle in Las Vegas. The gentlemen who opened clubs along the Los Angeles Highway considered gambling its own entertainment. Tony Cornero, owner of the Meadows, and Guy McAfee were looking for a place to create a gambling operation, not looking to increase tourism. It was not until Tommy Hull came driving into town that Las Vegas began its journey towards pleasure Mecca.

Whether Hull was invited to town by local businessmen, or if the local myth about his car getting a flat tire is true, Hull saw the potential in Las Vegas and decided to build the first of what would become the “Strip” resorts. He called his resort the El Rancho and built it loosely around a western theme. It opened in April 1941 and was referred to as the first “swank” hotel in Las Vegas. There were other hotels in the downtown area, but the El Rancho was something else entirely. “Boasting a rustic interior, the main building housed a casino, a restaurant (later the Stage Door Steakhouse), Opera House Showroom, and several shops...A large pool and lush gardens contributed further to the El Rancho’s reputation as Las Vegas’s first ‘resort/hotel’” (Moehring 44). As the El Rancho opened its doors Hull made it a point to serve his customers the best, and in the process transported the best entertainment he could. The El Rancho’s first steady entertainment was a production show, featuring Frank Fay and the El Rancho Starlets, imported from Hollywood. The Starlets were Hollywood
dancers, with their proportions more voluptuous than dancers today (the standard
dancers’ size a size 12 by today’s standards). Over the years, from 1931-1960, the El
Rancho had many Hollywood stars in its 250-seat showroom, including Milton Berle,
Jackie Gleason, Jimmy Durante, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Peggy
Lee, Sammy Davis Jr., and Andy Williams.

(Photo 2: The Tropicana Line Girls, Las Vegas News Bureau)

(Photo 3: The Frontier Line Girls, Las Vegas News Bureau)

(Photo 4: The Thunderbird Line Girls, Las Vegas News Bureau)
The opening of the El Rancho created a building sensation. Not two weeks after
the opening, construction plans were announced to build the El Cortez. The El Cortez
differed in several ways from the El Rancho, the major difference being that it was built
in the city. The El Cortez was the beginning of the downtown Las Vegas building spree.
The El Rancho was built just south of town, located where Sahara and Las Vegas
Boulevard now meet, but the El Cortez was built in the center of town, the first resort
hotel built on Fremont Street. However, its opening seemed to be swallowed up in the
hype surrounding the second resort opening on the Strip.

Tommy Hull didn’t keep his impression that Las Vegas would prosper to himself:
he convinced other hoteliers that there was money to be made in the spacious desert.
R.E. Griffith and William J. Moore were on a supply run for one of their New Mexico
hotels when they stopped in Las Vegas on the way to Salt Lake City. After a one-night
stay at the El Rancho they were convinced of the town’s potential and began work on
another resort south of town. Buying the Pair-O-Dice Club from Guy McAfee, they tore
down the older building and began construction on a new resort, the Last Frontier. As
with the El Rancho, it was also loosely based on a western theme, although the interior
décor was lush and deliberately extravagant, which became part of the resort’s notoriety.
The Last Frontier opened in October of 1942 and immediately became the El Rancho’s
biggest competition.

The Last Frontier had everything the El Rancho had, and it had it on a bigger
scale: bigger showroom (seating 600 people), bigger pool, a bigger restaurant and it also
had a bigger theme. Not satisfied with just the décor being western, Moore looked
forward and offered stage coach rides, horse back riding, and eventually built what he
called the Last Frontier Village, which was a small townsite filled with western antiques and paraphernalia. It was the first time in Las Vegas history that incidental/visual entertainment was employed. The Last Frontier Village was a huge draw for both local and tourist crowds, and it was the beginning of public art in Las Vegas.

The Last Frontier also had a small production show imported from Hollywood. But while Hull’s had a steady lead in the production the lead role was rotated at the Last Frontier. Big name entertainment proved to be the key and names like Ronald Reagan, Sammy Davis Jr., Phil Harris, and the Osmond Brothers all played there, rotating between several Las Vegas engagements. Incidentally Reagan’s act was not favorably reviewed and did not attract a large following. It was the only time that the future president played to the Las Vegas crowd outside of the political arena. Every hotel that was built on the Strip had a line of girls who simply modified their dances around whoever was playing that night. “Essentially the type of production that we were seeing on Las Vegas stages tended to be surrounding a star with a number of long-legged, but fully clothed, tap dancing, or dancer-type of performers, but there was an emphasis on the dance, not on nudity, and there was an emphasis on the Headliner” (Tratos). The names of Hollywood stopped over for a quick visit and a quick gig, the line girls welcomed them and they had an act with panache. However, there were not amazing technologies used in competition between the hotels. The competition was the names of the headliners: the shows were based on their personalities. Which of the hotels were able to snag the biggest names in Hollywood this week, this month?

The Strip exists. where it exists, in an effort to reach out to Los Angeles and draw in the crowds that escape the city weekly. “If you look at the selection from the
downtown hotels to the New Frontier on the Strip and "Bugsy" Siegel's Flamingo on the Strip, what they were doing they were heading towards Los Angeles going farther and farther on the old LA Highway...that metaphor really works relatively well that we were already moving towards Los Angeles early in the '40's" (Tratos). Los Angeles residents have two getaway choices, Palm Springs and Las Vegas, and Hull was betting on Las Vegas growing in popularity. “As the Hollywood entertainment group had gotten accustomed to traveling from Hollywood to Palm Springs, and Palm Springs had become a place where the Hollywood set escaped to, it wasn’t that much farther then from going to Palm Springs a little farther down the road to Las Vegas” (Tratos).

Here the entertainment was all in the showroom, but a small showroom. The intimate seating beginning at 250 guests to a rousing 600 are now what we consider lounge-style entertainment. Added to the size of the showrooms, the seating was arranged in dining room format with the stage on one side of the room. Today when we think of big name shows and showrooms we think of auditorium or theatre style seating in rooms upward of 1000 people. The showroom in Las Vegas began with the headliners strutting their stuff in routines that closely mirrored the idea of the Johnny Carson show, with laughs and style being the larger sellouts (unless they were trading in on their vocal or dancing talents). It was a show unlike what we have today, because it was one that focused entirely upon that headliner’s personality, and everything else was superfluous. We do have shows today where we “plug in” stars. EFX being the most prominent, but here the show remains the same with only a few adjustments to focus on the headliner. But the headliners sold themselves and their own personalities on the stage. And their era was only beginning with El Rancho and the Last Frontier.
During this time, while the Strip was still young, 1940's, downtown began its development. The El Cortez was followed by several other resorts and casinos which reached a new plane with the introduction of Steve Wynn to Las Vegas. Wynn descended on Las Vegas with a vengeance, buying interests in casino after casino, and creating his increasingly lavish visions. His first enterprise that set him on the Las Vegas, and the national, map was the sign for the Golden Nugget. Wynn commissioned a neon sign for the Golden Nugget which included ... volts of electricity. It was known as the “brightest spot on earth.” and the idea was so successful that the other resorts downtown soon copied that brilliant idea. In less than a year the Las Vegas downtown area was known as “Glitter Gulch.”

With the introduction of the neon movement in Las Vegas the city itself introduced a new theme in advertising. The city hired Maxwell Kelch to advertise Las Vegas as a vacation and development spot; his campaign was successful but soon the city hired Steve Hannegan and Associates to promote Las Vegas. His campaign was extremely successful, bringing Las Vegas into the national spot light as a pleasure center that could compete with Palm Springs and Florida. The campaign began with the idea of Las Vegas as the “gateway to Boulder Dam” and began to grow as the interest in Las Vegas seemed without end. In turn Las Vegas was graced with the attention of one of the Mafia’s best, and a new resort along the Strip was constructed to compete with the El Rancho and the Last Frontier.

The western themed resorts were soon joined by the Flamingo. While depicted in the movie “Bugsy” to have literally sprung out from a barren desert it was, in actuality, the third hotel developed on the Strip. Also in popular belief is the story that Benjamin
Siegel, "Bugsy," had a vision of a luxury resort in the middle of the desert and moved the sun and the moon to create that vision. In reality the Flamingo was already half built when Siegel took over the debts and the hotel on behalf of his Mafia contacts. While Siegel saw himself as the inventor of Las Vegas, what he was instead was a catalyst for a reinvention of the style of Las Vegas. "The Flamingo was the turning point because it combined the sophisticated ambience of a Monte Carlo casino with the exotic luxury of a Miami Beach-Caribbean resort" (Moehring 49). What follows is the stuff of legends and a huge transitional era in the life of Las Vegas.

Siegel's huge contribution to Las Vegas is not the actual building of the Flamingo, although it still stands today; instead, it is the style that he built into it. While the western themed hotels played off of the idea of the desert motif, the western frontier, the old west, Siegel instead built an oasis of pleasure in the middle of the sand. His pleasure was the pricey elegance that was previously unknown to Las Vegas at the time, but popular in Los Angeles and on the East coast. The Flamingo had everything you could want, including a dress code. Siegel drew heavily on his contacts in Hollywood to increase star-percentage of the patrons as well as the entertainment in his hotel. The Flamingo was unique in several ways. The first was that it was the first hotel overtly backed by the Mafia. The second was that it had two grand openings. The first opening was not a rousing success. The Mafia, feeling the financial bite from Siegel's pleasure oasis, as it was several million dollars over budget, demanded that the hotel open, so Siegel held an opening in December. It failed. Although some Hollywood stars showed it was a sparse crowd. The second opening in March was much more successful, but Bugsy
was still killed two weeks later in his Palm Springs home, for his financial misadventures with his backer's money.

After Siegel's murder, three associates from Chicago walked into the offices of the Flamingo and took over operations. They hired Gus Greenbaum to manage the hotel and who brought in a publicity manager and started a local advertising campaign. The dress code was abolished as Siegel's resort, which he had prided on exclusivity, became the casino for the masses. With its slogan "Everybody Welcome" (McCracken 63) and its elegant décor, the Flamingo became one of the favorite places in Las Vegas. On stage at the Flamingo were stars like Jimmy Durante, who played opening night. With the introduction of the Mafia to Las Vegas a whole new era began for the Strip.

That era began with complaints. The state, driven by the outrage of local business over the flagrant presence of the Mafia, began to license the gambling trade. Gambling had been legal in Las Vegas for over fifteen years, but what the state was doing was introducing a required gambling license. One of the stipulations of that license was that the owner of the casino, and that included all owners, could not have any connection with organized crime. This new regulation didn't stop the Mafia from having interests in Las Vegas. They simply formed front companies with point men to build and run the casinos for them. While some were denied gambling licenses, many did slip through the cracks until Las Vegas had a reputation for being run by the mob. Supported by the notion that the Mafia had declared Las Vegas a free zone. "Mafia families were given credit by some citizens for keeping the town relatively quiet and crime free. George L. Ullom, an early resident, said: 'Apparently the word was out, 'Look, if you're going to do something, you don't do it in Las Vegas. Keep Las Vegas clean.'" (Land 100).
When the Mafia came to town, apparently welcomed with open arms from the Las Vegas public, it only increased the maverick reputation of the town without drawing any real censure. It was accepted that 'such things will happen; after all it's Las Vegas, what else can be expected.' The ironic thing is that with the increase in the Mafia there was an immediate up-scaling of the entertainment end in the casinos. Greenbaum at the Flamingo began bringing in television personalities and stars including Nat King Cole, Lena Horn, and Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. The other hoteliers followed suit and the true grand age of the headliners was born.

Instead of the relatively small scale entertainment venues that were in the El Rancho and the Last Frontier, the management of the Mafia casinos came to the conclusion that the money to be made in Las Vegas was from the gambling, and they'd do anything they could to get people to the tables. That meant that not only did flashy entertainment have no maximum budget (as long as it pulled in the crowds) but that if the entertainment did not clear a profit that was fine, as long as attendance increased. There were literally millions of dollars thrown at the entertainment industry in Las Vegas, and no real expectation to turn a profit.

This high spending in entertainment lead to the real headliner profile being increased and advertised in Las Vegas. Before, in the El Rancho and the Last Frontier,
there were relatively well known names, but no one really on the “A” list. That changed with the Flamingo and the rest of the resorts on the Strip. Television personalities and movie stars considered Las Vegas a convenient way to make quick money. Playing Las Vegas became the equivalent of playing Palm Springs: light, entertaining and enough cash to make it worth your while. And Las Vegans promoted their city in any way possible.

It was in the beginning of the 1950’s that the Nevada Test Site opened, and instead of seeing it as a black cloud over everything the city was trying to accomplish, Las Vegas promoted the explosions of the nuclear bombs as local spectacle, going as far as holding a “Miss Atomic Bomb Pageant.” As the focus on entertainment and spectacle grew, Las Vegas was introduced to one of its biggest sensations, Frank Sinatra, who quickly dominated Las Vegas entertainment.

The Chairman of the Board, Frank Sinatra, was at a low point in his life when he first came to Las Vegas. He arrived with the intent of getting a six-week residency so that he and Nancy Sinatra could divorce, making way for his marriage to Ava Gardner. During his brief residency in September of 1951, he debuted at the Desert Inn. The Desert Inn had been open for less than a year when they signed Sinatra as a headliner. The morning after the performance he was featured on the front page of the Morning Journal where he received decent reviews, with one excellent remark. “The guy is one of the greatest showmen seen in these parts,” [Bill] Willard wrote, [The Las Vegas
Sun's entertainment reporter], particularly impressed by 'I'm a Fool to Want You' — the all-too-revealing song Sinatra recorded earlier that year" (Weatherford 11). Sinatra received his divorce and left Las Vegas for his Hollywood career, returning for his last engagement at the Desert Inn in 1952.

By this time, Las Vegas had begun its frenetic expansion and growth, thanks to the business prowess of the Mafia. In 1952, both the Sahara resort and the Sands opened, followed by the Showboat and the Rivera in the next couple of years. By 1959, three more major resorts had opened, The Fremont, The Tropicana and The Stardust, as well as the first Las Vegas Convention Center. Also the Nevada government tried to offset the rumors and allegations of organized crime's involvement with the gambling trade by establishing the Gambling Control Board. While this rapid expansion and growth was occurring, in 1953 Sinatra returned to Las Vegas with a splash.

Opening the Sands' Copa Room, "the centerpiece...this 395-seat (later expanded) supper club — the room that would lift the Sands above anything yet seen in Vegas" (Weatherford 11), Sinatra began a performance schedule and contract that would tie him to Las Vegas and the Sands for over a decade. The Copa Room was managed by Jack Entratter, a New York native. Described as an impresario, he was extremely influential in the careers of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Lena Horn, Jimmy Durante and more. Entratter cashed in all the favors he was owed and heightened the awareness of first-rate talent in Las Vegas. "Entratter spent a million bucks booking a diverse mix of stars with publicity value, including Tallulah Bankhead, Edith Piaf, and the ingenious teaming of opera star Robert Merill with jazz legend Louis Armstrong" (Weatherford 13). Sinatra
would become a regular, indeed "Sinatra became synonymous with the Sands; legend would have you believe that he performed there all the time" (Weatherford 14).

However, as with most legends, this one was based in fact but became exaggerated with distance and time. While he did have several engagements with the Sands over a fifteen year period, there were some years that were entirely left out, or that only showed him in one performance. But when he was not working at the Sands, Sinatra was playing in the casino, in the pool, and in the hotel rooms. "He was always there," remembered Freddie Bell. "You'd never know when you were gonna see Frank. It was a close-knit group in those days. Fly in and fly out, you know? You gotta understand he partied pretty heavy in those days" (Weatherford 15). And so he did. He gambled, drank, and laughed his way through Las Vegas. He considered the Sands his own personal playground, and he used it as such.

Sinatra was the biggest recurring headliner in Las Vegas. When he had a falling out with the Sands, in 1967, just after it was purchased by billionaire Howard Hughes (also a beau of Ava Gardner), he was welcomed with open arms at the newly opened Caesars Palace. Before the big falling out with the Sands, Sinatra, by accident, created one of the most legendary acts of the Las Vegas showroom. As part of the new traditions of the Las Vegas performer, it was considered a courtesy that if an artist was closing a show while one was opening, then the closing artist would attend the next show. In one such instance the Rat Pack had its beginnings. In 1958 Judy Garland opened her act at the Sands, with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin in the audience as guests (Martin's show having just closed the night before). She invited them up to the stage, they went; Las Vegas then had a twenty-minute preview to the beginnings of the Rat Pack. By January
1960 the relationship had been cemented. “In January 1960, the Sands marquee said enough: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop, in equal (if descending) billing. ‘Which star shines tonight?’ asked the newspaper ad, which explained that from January 20 to February 16, the Rat Pack would be onstage every night together, or in satisfying combinations of two of more” (Weatherford 19).

The Rat Pack show itself had little visual spectacle involved. While it consisted of a rotating cast, normally two of the headliners would be available; the ‘fluff’ numbers surrounding the stars were very similar to every other chorus line numbers. The spectacle and uniqueness of this act lay not in its visual appeal, but in the witty repartee and the relationships between the actors. The Rat Pack, while having a basic format, prided itself on spontaneity and the ability to entertain without all of the other trappings.

Throughout Las Vegas’ evolution and growth, Sinatra and his style remained a constant until his death in the 1990’s. He put Las Vegas on the entertainment map, not only by performing there for several years, but also by encouraging his friends and his colleagues to follow suit. The headliner was the first entertainment wave to wash over Las Vegas and it fit the style of the hotels and the casinos of the time. Sinatra epitomized
the ideal of the suave singer/performer, not only on the stage but also in the casino with his high strung fits, gambling wins and losses, and his rocky but close friendships with the Mafia. Where Jack Entratter was able to spend millions of dollars on booking names to Las Vegas, Sinatra was able to use his charm and personality to do the same. He was a consistent and wonderful asset to the resorts, but great headliners are few and far between. The Las Vegas entertainment community looked in a different direction for the future.
CHAPTER THREE

THE BIG SPENDER'S EXPECTATIONS

That future began with something that was already there, technically. What the new wave of Las Vegas entertainment was, was nude, dancing girls. Redd Foxx once said, "The way I see it, Las Vegas is based on gambling, drinking, and women. That's the big three" (Weatherford 219). The chorus line had been a part of Las Vegas from the very beginning, ever since Block 16, but this was a chorus line with a twist.

With the growing popularity of Las Vegas and the continual development of new resorts on the Strip, the competition was getting fierce. Each new resort opening up competed with lights, space, and with headliners. But instead of upping the stakes with the headliner talent, the Stardust set the whole Strip on its ear, when they brought in the Parisian Dance Review, the Lido de Paris, 1958. "This was the first time that we changed the conceptualization as to being a American location to an International location ...[Las Vegas] now brings in this show and because it's Parisian and because it's a well established entity ... that means you are dealing with a show that has some cultural overtones to it. It comes to Las Vegas and it is a sensation" (Tratos). This does not mean that the Stardust ignored the more traditional ways of competition: the Stardust had the

31
biggest sign in town. "The Stardust's sign ... required 32,000 feet of wiring, 7,100 feet of neon tubing, and 11,000 lamps. It could be seen for over three miles" (McCracken 80).

The show was also the biggest in town. Not only was there nudity, the Lido women had a sense of elegance and style surrounding the Parisian revue. In a sense there was more titillating enjoyment, more spectacle in watching French women rather than homegrown American girls. Especially since the year before, Harold Minsky during his Minsky Follies was publicly criticized for the first bare breast in a showroom, shown at the Dunes. "Before you knew the women were naked, but they were always hiding it. There were feathers, dances, or something else in the way," Suzanne Ernst states. "you were only able to see glimpses, but Minsky was blatant." In the Lido de Paris the nudity was not seen as shameful and only added to the idea of the sophisticated Parisian women were costumes and jewelry that sold an iced sex appeal. There was a cool elegance to the dances and the ways the women handled themselves.

The women brought over from France lived in a type of media frenzy where their lives were impossibly glamorized. Probably the most famous picture of them is their first night off the airplane eating their first American meal, a hot dog. "We're no longer isolationists, we're no longer simply looking internally at Nevada and our connection with Hollywood and LA, we're now looking throughout Europe, and we're now looking at other places. That sensibility literally led...to the Lido and to the Stardust being hailed as a brand new Strip hotel. We're going to hearken to the
idea of European sensibilities" (Tratos). With the changing audience (from the Hollywood crowd to the national big-spender) and the international attention that World War II forced on the American people, the awareness of European culture was heightened. The women of the Lido allowed the high-rollers and the patrons of Las Vegas to absorb a small dose of that culture. It also allowed them to see a different stature of women. The women in the productions on the Strip were typically a size 12 dress size; the Lido had very specific qualities it required of its dancers. "Before a girl could become a member of the line she had to meet three requirements: She had to have extensive ballet training, stand a minimum height of 5 feet, 8 inches - with most of that as legs - and radiate beauty" (McCracken 82). The show was such a huge success that less than a year later the Tropicana opened Folies Bergère.

The shows themselves featured the women. They had more in common with the production shows still seen today than the headliner shows that held sway over the Las Vegas stage until then. The Lido had sixty women billed in the cast and at most only one third of those women actually appeared bare-breasted. The rest of the women were dancers, while the nudity became the focus of one number. Interspersed with dance, modern, classical and tap, was a promenade. It was during the promenade that the bare-breasted women, with the elaborate headdresses, escorted by male dancers, strolled the stage in a stately walk. Indeed balance and grace was the most importance aspects of the showgirls, being able to walk down eight-inch rises, in four inch heals, without looking at the floor or jiggling their assets.

While these shows were battling for the audience of Las Vegas, there was another type of entertainment that was making its mark on the Vegas crowd. In another part of
the casino, away from the showrooms, there were lounges. The lounges were designed so the gamblers, high rollers, spouses, patrons, and guests could take a short break, have a drink, and relax in between a few rounds of poker or blackjack, etc. Then someone decided that the people in the lounges also needed to be entertained and the lounge show was born in Las Vegas.

The lounge show is an interesting phenomenon. "It wasn’t about the acts or the show. Most of the performances, people talked straight through, but then they put Shecky Green, or someone like him, up there and people stopped talking" (Ernst). The lounge was designed to have light entertainment and it ended up inventing a new venue for the performer. "The thick smoke. The clinking of glasses. Chatter and Laughter. And tumult. Tumult? That’s the word Keely Smith and other veteran lounge acts use to sum up the unique vibe of the lounge" (Weatherford 45). The lounge began as a meeting place. It was the great equalizer in Las Vegas. The place where the high roller and the walk-ins interacted and created the ambience that is Las Vegas. "The lounge provided the motion," says Weatherford, the place for the good time (45). There was no formalized show to begin with, it was simply the place to meet people and see people. With the showroom you paid money, sat down, saw the show, applauded, left and whispered or talked about the performance with your companions. But the lounges had an informal air, "It was the place with no wall between performer and audience, no pretense, and seemingly no script" (Weatherford 46).

The first real lounge act was introduced in 1954. The Mary Kay Trio, a brother and sister Mary and Norman, with a comedian Frank Ross, played at the Last Frontier and created a sensation. Their style was freewheeling and completely improvisational.
and it was Frank Ross that started it all. "He's the guy who started that whole concept of tumult comedy, of not having routines and jokes. Someone would get up and go to another table and he would refer to it: 'What are you doing over there? You should be over there" (Weatherford 49). The style that was first introduced by the Trio was adapted by the Rat Pack for their showroom shows and quickly spread beyond the Frontier as all the other resorts jumped on the success bandwagon.

Jumping on that bandwagon took some ingenuity. Most of the lounges were set up to handle light musical entertainment, not full out comedy routines. In fact, most of the stages were actually behind the bar; Freddie Bell reminisced "We did a lot of choreography, and we kicked over the bottle in the first show" (Weatherford 50). But the lounge soon became a popular form of entertainment. The hotels started building bigger stages and placing the stage in more prominent positions. But while the Mary Kay Trio revolutionized the style of the lounge, the performer that made the lounge famous was Louis Prima.

Most of the revolutionary events in Las Vegas history seem to be accidents, luck, or just the winds of fate. All three are why Prima, who was flat broke, with a pregnant wife, telephoned an old connection, Bill Miller, the booking agent for the Sahara, to ask for a job. Miller, an old friend, gave Prima and Keely Smith a two week gig in the lounge, in 1956. They were an overnight hit. Their two-week Thanksgiving engagement was extended through the holiday season into January, where the couple was asked to
stay on again, this time for the foreseeable future. Other lounge acts around town included the Treniers at the Starlite Lounge in the Riviera. Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five at the Sands resort, and the Mary Kay Trio over at the Last Frontier.

But Prima had the wildest show around. "The couple played upon their age and physical differences – the brash Italian lurching, gyrating, and mugging, while his thin wife in the Dutch-boy haircut kept her distance and looked on calmly, either in amusement or in horror" (Weatherford 54). The band was kept to a quartet for spatial economics and the act simply happened every night, five times a night. With the success of Prima's show it was only natural for other zany lounge shows to spring up among the casinos. Freddie Bell the Coolers, Mickey Katz are just a few of the names that emerged.

Throughout the years "the lounges had become almost as important as the main showrooms" (Weatherford 63) because the lounge acts remained at a constant artistic level while the main showrooms varied, depending on the headliner for the evening and the audience for the Parisian revues. The acts themselves attracted bigger and brighter names. Shecky Green became the main lounge star at the Riviera and new names were being added to the mix all the time. It was that incredible success of the lounge show that signaled its demise in the early 1980s.

It was stated earlier that the lounges were the places to mingle, talk, and meet. That had not changed throughout the years, but when the performers on the main stage developed a fondness for performing impromptu in the lounges, the management at the casinos made a hard decision. In very simple terms the lounge acts worked so well that they worked themselves out of a job. While the lounge was the lounge, it was not a place
to gamble, and that was the bottom line. When the resorts felt that they were losing gambling income because the lounge show was drawing too much attention, and not only for the show but also for the people in the lounge and the ambience of mingling with the high rollers, the resorts fazed out the lounge show. It is best stated in *Cult Vegas* by a reminiscing Trenier, "When Frank finally arrived, the Treniers led into '(Theme From) New York, New York' by joking about Sinatra's recent designation as an African tribesman. As the tune began to build, Sinatra announced, 'They're playing my song,' and walked up onstage. 'The people looked [into the lounge] and saw Sinatra onstage, and they came like a cattle call ... Security guards were going nuts. They said, 'Get him off! Get him off! He's clearin' out the casino!' I said, 'You tell him to get off' (Weatherford 78). The lounge act is now an extinct art form in the Las Vegas show.

Although there are some remnants left, Cook E. Jarr being one of the most famous lounge performers still around, and some lounges carry comedy routines, most of the lounges are now top forty bands.

Visually the changes in shows and the changes in the hotels façades from 1941, when the El Rancho opened, to 1958, when the Stardust opened, were stunning. Pictorially Las Vegas begins as a barren desert with one resort on the outskirts of a small city, but by the opening of the Stardust over ten resort/hotels opened on the Strip and even more in and around the Block 16 area, now more commonly called downtown Las Vegas. The Fremont Hotel, which opened in 1956, was the tallest building in the state, and downtown's answer to the Strip's Riviera. By the late
1950s a type of competition evolved between the Strip resorts and the downtown hotels. It escalated when the Las Vegas' City Council attempted to annex the sites of the Strip hotels and make them officially into part of the Las Vegas city area. The goal was to gain the taxes that Tommy Hull and the rest of the hoteliers had avoided when they built their resorts outside of city limits.

The city explained the move by saying that the Strip resorts were actually a part of Las Vegas because they derived their revenue from tourists who came not to see them, but to see "Glitter Gulch." This is a hard concept for tourists and residents to believe today. The downtown area of Las Vegas was more glitzy at the time than the Strip was.

This action happened in 1946, so the El Rancho and the Last Frontier were the resorts in question, with the Flamingo in the construction process. The owners of the El Rancho, the Last Frontier, and the Flamingo organized an effort to create a township of their own and hence negate Las Vegas' claim. They called their area Paradise Valley and were officially awarded township status in 1950. after fighting off several annexation claims by Las Vegas. This added to the bitter battle between the downtown hotels and the ones on the Strip.

But in the late 50s downtown casinos fought the Strip with their lush lounges and the bright lights, while the Strip fought with luxury and innovation, and then later with the same bright lights. *The Lido* and *Folies* were both tools in that war. Here was the type of entertainment that the big spenders that were the life-blood of Las Vegas could
appreciate and enjoy. On a purely economic level it was more cost efficient for the hotels to maintain a show like *The Lido* or *Folies* than it was for them to hire a headliner. Then, in 1966, after several years of relatively standard growth and development, some astonishing things happened.

Howard Hughes visited Las Vegas and eventually ended up staying, for awhile. On his visit, thought to be a short one by the management at the Desert Inn, who after several weeks started complaining that Hughes was monopolizing their best rooms. Hughes bought the Desert Inn. He was irritated by the Silver Slipper next door because the shoe that rotated to advertise the casino reflected light into his hotel window, which disturbed his rest, so he bought that casino too. He then went on to buy several more Las Vegas casino properties, including the Sands, the Castaway and the Frontier. Hughes' desire to own Las Vegas properties was the decisive stroke that began to push the Mafia out of positions of ownership in the casinos. Hughes only lived in Las Vegas for four years, most of which he spent in his hotel suite at the Desert Inn. As his beginning in Las Vegas began inauspiciously, so did his ending: "Howard Hughes, often called the phantom financier since he established permanent residence in Las Vegas in 1966, is involved in a disappearance from Nevada under circumstances even more mysterious that his secrecy-shrouded arrival. He was spirited away from the Desert Inn the evening of November 25 and even his top aides profess no knowledge of his whereabouts" (Land 131-2). While his time in Las Vegas was brief Hughes had a vision of the city years down the road. He envisioned a high-class clientele and a high-class atmosphere permeating Las Vegas. In pursuit of that vision he went so far as to protest the opening of Circus Circus, stating that it wasn't the 'right' kind of casino to be built in Las Vegas.
Secondly, the same year that Hughes arrived in Las Vegas, Jay Sarno completed part of his dream. The building of Caesars Palace was complete, the first Strip hotel to see the advantages of the themed resorts and execute a fantasyland. Originally called the Desert Palace, but Sarno renamed it after he felt he was spending enough money to see an emperor comfortable. Caesars opened with a bang. The opening night party cost more than a million dollars and the guest list consisted of nearly 2,000 people. For entertainment Caesars actually did two things for Las Vegas: they kept Sinatra around, and they introduced boxing. This was the first time that big sports were showcased on the Las Vegas Strip and it started a lucrative business that continues even today. Other astute businessmen also began building hotels.

Kirk Kekorian had begun construction on one hotel by himself. The International was raised just east of the Strip, opening in 1969. It was home to some of the most famous concerts of Las Vegas history, including the Elvis Presley engagements, which were always sold out. Kekorian moved on quickly building the MGM Grand, which housed another Parisian revue Jubilee, directed and produced by Donn Arden. The next startling event, that turned Las Vegas on its ear, three years after Hughes arrival, was the final push to remove the Mafia from Las Vegas. The State of Nevada approved corporations owning gambling facilities and organizations. Less than a year after that approval the Hilton bought both the International and the Flamingo, which meant a huge shift for corporations.
The success of the Parisian revue was well documented, proving itself again with the success of *Jubilee* which opened fifteen years after *The Lido de Paris*. But, with the buyouts by corporations beginning to occur two very important factors were introduced into Las Vegas. The first was the idea of the corporations having a reputation to maintain outside of the city of Las Vegas. The corporations had stockholders and boards of directors to answer to, and if a show were to get too wild, then it would affect the corporate image. The second was that the corporations expected every department of the resort complex to turn a profit. When Jack Entratter was booking star headliners with his millions of dollars, he was not recouping that money from their performances. For the first time in Las Vegas history entertainment departments had a maximum budget and were required to show a return. The difference was in the philosophy behind the private owners and the corporations. The private owners felt that if patrons were gambling, which is where they made their profits, then an entertainment department in the red zone was fine, because the big name stars and splashy revues brought patrons inside the hotel. However, corporations were of the philosophy that the only true way to turn a profit was to have all departments in the black. These two factors led to further changes in Las Vegas entertainment.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAMILY'S DISNEY VEGAS

The year is 1989 and a new era in Las Vegas is beginning: Steve Wynn's Mirage is opening. The building of the Mirage is a turning point in Las Vegas history, not because it was the newest resort of the Strip or even that it was the best designed, but it was the first mega-resort. "Las Vegas had always had themes, if you look at Caesars and the rest of these resorts. Steve Wynn just did it on a little bit different scale, what we call the mega-resort ... Where you want to keep people in your casino, and you want to provide them all the entertainment options they could want, all the food options, eating options; in other words, there would be no reason for them to leave your property" (Walton). Wynn packaged the best of Las Vegas – the gambling, the luxury, the fantasy, and the wonder – in his creation and it worked.

The Mirage was unique in several ways. It played with the idea of a themed resort: without over-emphasizing the theme, it kept alive Siegel's interpretation of the pleasure oasis in the desert, and it introduced the magic show to the masses. The theme, South Seas, features "deluxe and super-deluxe rooms, king parlors, hospitality suites, and six lanai bungalows with private gardens and pools" states McCracken, "an outdoor volcano surrounded with water falls and lagoons erupts with fire and smoke every fifteen minutes and draws large crowds of spectators. The South Seas theme is further promoted by a lush tropical garden in a 90-foot-high, glass-enclosed atrium and a 20,000-gallon,
wall-length aquarium” (102). This oasis in the desert, featuring immense pools and fountains as well, is truly the first mega-pleasure resort founded in Las Vegas. For Steve Wynn, it was a huge gamble in two ways. His first gamble was budget; the Mirage cost $610 million dollars. The second gamble was in his choice for entertainment.

Wynn introduced a huge magical production show, Siegfried and Roy, with no nudity, this at a time when the reigning shows on the Strip were the topless Parisian revues. Two of the most successful magic acts in Las Vegas history began as opening acts to the larger showgirl revues. Siegfried and Roy were the opening act for the Lido de Paris and Lance Burton was the opening act for Folies Bergere. When The Lido closed, Siegfried and Roy expanded their illusionist act and made top billing at the Frontier. With the opening of the Mirage, Wynn, who had seen the illusionists’ show and their house receipts, offered the pair a contract which promised the act their own theatre at the Mirage. “Illusionists and master showmen Siegfried and Roy ... are featured in a Mirage showroom constructed especially for them by Wynn” (McCracken 103).

Siegfried and Roy accepted and a new wave of entertainment in Las Vegas was born. Within two years Las Vegas was the magic capital of the world. Siegfried and Roy stepping on to a stage at the Mirage alone did not make Las Vegas a magic Mecca. Nor did it become one when Lance Burton stepped up from his small show at the Hacienda (after he left Folies) to the large stage at the Monte Carlo. The acts were the catalyst for the major movement of the magic support industries to Las Vegas to occur. Most of the major production companies involved in magic are now located in Las Vegas. In addition, every major magician has some connection to Las Vegas: David Copperfield, Penn and Teller, and the Masked Magician have either played to Vegas audiences on a
regular basis or have most of their support mechanisms here. "Magic created an industry in Las Vegas, but not until the support mechanisms moved in and based themselves here. That's how you tell when there is employment available in a field. You have a better chance at getting a job where the support industries for the profession you want to work in are" (Tratos). The magic shows highlighted in Las Vegas are moments of visual spectacular. The loose storyline of Siegfried and Roy involves a wicked queen and the battle between good and evil. Audiences do not attend for the story, however. There is liberal use of pyrotechnics and animatronics; the use of both creates reshaping scenery and a sense of wonder in the audience. The age of magic is not yet over. There are still six major acts playing on the Strip that involve magic in some way, and some do not show any signs of closing.

While Steve Wynn had doubtless looked at the numbers involved in the magic shows, it is doubtful that even he had any idea what the promotion of magic shows on the Strip would do for and to Las Vegas. Wynn took a chance and it paid off in full. That chance coincided with the gamble he took opening the Mirage. As stated before, this was the first mega-resort on the Strip. It was also the turning point in the international reputation for Las Vegas and the turning point for entertainment. "The most significant reinvention of Las Vegas is the Mirage" (Rothman).

But in reality the next phase in Las Vegas entertainment began before the Mirage was built. It began with Jay Sarno and his second dream. Sarno, owner and builder of Caesars Palace, began construction on a new casino immediately after Caesars was completed. It opened two years after Caesars did, in 1968, and its name was Circus Circus. The reason that Circus Circus was not the 'turning point' in Las Vegas history
was two-fold. The first was that Sarno’s vision was not of a classier or more upscale Las Vegas; instead, he is often attributed with saying, “I cater to mass, not class.” The second was that the resort, which wasn’t technically a resort, was not a success for a long while.

When Circus Circus first opened, it not only disturbed the billionaire Howard Hughes, who was trying to build a more sophisticated image for Las Vegas. It also disturbed the tourists because they were charged a fee for entering. “Sarno astonished other critics by charging tourist admission to Circus Circus. (Las Vegans who could produce I.D. were admitted free.) Potential visitors apparently shared Hughes’s reservations about the pungent aroma from the circus animals in the new casino, and the number of gamblers who were ready to pay admission to any casino turned out to be limited. Circus Circus got off to a very slow start” (Land 163). The idea of the world is largest carnival in a permanent residence was not appealing enough to save Circus Circus those first few years combined with the fact that it was just a casino. There was no hotel, no resort, to draw in tourists. Sarno lost much of the money he had collected with Caesars Palace and sold Circus Circus to William Bennett. Bennett was able to turn the property into a success by building a hotel, cleaning up the circus animals’ messes in the casino, not charging admission and lowering all of the prices. “[Bennett] turned Circus Circus into low-roller heaven” (Land 163).

While it did not revolutionize the entertainment of Las Vegas or add to the local prestige, Circus Circus did two very important things. The first is that it added to the idea of fantasy and spectacle on the Strip. The successful casino was no longer simply a luxury resort such as the Flamingo or the Tropicana, but it was the fantasy. With the success of Caesars Palace and Circus Circus, the new casinos must compete not only with
gambling and luxury, but also with fantasy. "It wasn't the gambling that attracted people. It was the fantasy. [Sarno] understood down to his shoes that they came here to get away from whatever it was at home, to lose themselves in Las Vegas" (Land 160). The second was that Circus Circus began attracting middle class Americans with children. This was the advent of Las Vegas for the family, but it didn't reach fruition until after the Mirage was built, with the opening of the Excalibur.

Built for families with children and designed as the family vacation resort, the Excalibur opened in 1990 with an eye on attracting Middle America. "In the 50's the hoteliers said if we sell sex people will come ... and it worked. When the market got bigger ... then you have to calm down the sex, you have to become more family oriented ... and that works" (Tratos). This was an interesting time in Las Vegas history, because Las Vegas was in the process of reinventing itself in two different directions. The Mirage was the beginning of an upscale international Las Vegas and the Excalibur was the beginning of Las Vegas as an American family vacation resort. Though the Mirage chronologically was first, the success of the Excalibur and residual success of Circus Circus convinced the developers of Las Vegas of the validity of the family market. In the next three years, three separate resorts were built with the family theme in mind.

From the Circus Circus Enterprises, the new Luxor opened in October 1993. This family theme resort, with its Egyptian theme, is unique among the Las Vegas Strip hotel not only because of its shape, a pyramid, but also because of its color scheme. The bronze glass that covers the surface of the pyramid is reflective. In the day it becomes enhanced by the color of the sky, and by night it seems to absorb the light that the rest of the Strip throws off with such enthusiasm. The Luxor allows visitors to live a fantasy.
that of being a great Pharaoh. Just twelve days later Steve Wynn opened his family-themed resort, Treasure Island. The resort, based on Caribbean pirate waters, as described by romantic writers and poets, adds not only visual spectacle to Las Vegas, but also two new shows. The first show was free; the second has spawned a legacy that is carrying Las Vegas into the new millennium.

Like the Mirage, Wynn built Treasure Island to be both eye-catching and unique. To add to the atmosphere of the pirate waters, Wynn staged his own naumachia in true Roman fashion. Every evening, starting at 5:30, there is a live sea battle between the HMS Britannia (originally called the HMS Francis Drake until there was an ethnic-centered protest) and the Hispaniola, and every night the crowds are packed to see the free spectacle. The second show actually started in a tent behind the Mirage. Steve Wynn happened to see a performance of Cirque de Soleil a few years before he opened the Treasure Island. He liked the show so much he invited them to perform in Las Vegas. Cirque agreed and set up their tent behind the Mirage. The show was wildly successful, so while Treasure Island was being constructed Wynn worked out a contract with Cirque for the entertainment in his new resort which would include Cirque's very first permanent venue. *Mystere* was born.

*Mystere* is actually a compilation and reorganization of several of Cirque de Soleil's best routines tied loosely together by a theme. At first, it was not a rousing success. This new spectacle offered audiences something they were not yet prepared for. It took two years for audiences to appreciate what Steve Wynn was offering but he stood by his choice. "The thing about Wynn that is the most interesting... his sophisticated cultural sense... he's got a better ear to the ground in a cultural sense that most of Las
Vegas does" (Rothman). Mystere may not have been a rousing success at first but its marketability level grew exponentially, and it introduced a new type of entertainment to the Las Vegas showroom. Until this time, the king of the Las Vegas showroom was magic, with the driving force being Siegfried and Roy. Mystere offered no magic, simply the human form in all its wonder and beauty. If Magic was the King of the Showroom. Cirque was the Crown Prince.

Opening only two months later than the Luxor and Treasure Island was the MGM Grand. Billing itself as the largest hotel in the world (in actuality it is the second largest) construction costs rose up to a billion dollars for not only the hotel, but for the theme park and two showrooms. While not having a theme in the same sense as the Luxor or Treasure Island, the MGM plays heavily on its movie connections. The staff is called cast members and the walls are covered with movie memorabilia, keeping with their loose Hollywood MGM theme. Barbara Streisand opened the hotel with two nights in their main showroom. For a while the MGM showrooms were oriented for concerts and traveling shows, but by 1995, two years after opening, the MGM had spent 68 million dollars on preproduction costs for a new show.

With magic no longer being the only driving force in Las Vegas entertainment, large scale production shows, offering elements of magic, Cirque’s beauty, and the lounge shows interactive comedy were created. MGM built its own version of this new style of Las Vegas entertainment and called it EFX. When EFX first opened in 1995 it was the most expensive show on the Strip. Starring Michael Crawford and including elements of magic, illusion, fantasy, time travel and 3-D cinema techniques, the show started with a consistent following and great popularity. EFX was designed to surround
a headliner, very much in the same way that the line girls surrounded Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra of old. David Cassidy, Tommy Tune, and Rick Springfield have all taken turns being the star of EFX. Despite its expensive beginnings, the large scale production show was actually an economic decision. "They realized that headliners cost a lot of money and with a production show you could still provide entertainment ... and be more cost effective" (Walton). While the pre-production costs can be high, the weekly costs of a production show are significantly less than headliner shows. It is on this principle that EFX, Splash, Storm, and Imagine were opened.

Not all of these production shows succeeded. Imagine closed after two years and other Las Vegas shows have come and gone throughout the years. Sales drop as the audience dynamic changes so Las Vegas entertainment is forced to reinvent itself. Shows that no longer hold the audience appeal, such as the Lido de Paris, close. All of the new entertainment styles after the opening of the Mirage were geared toward a different audience, just as the hotels were. The production show consists of loud music, a dance troupe of both men and women (both fully clothed), pyrotechnics, acrobatics, flying, animatronics, video and film, and anything else visually oraurally spectacular that the producers can think up. New resorts were being built in rapid succession, including the Monte Carlo, the Stratosphere, the Rio and New York, New York. Las Vegas had redefined itself again on both the property and entertainment levels. No longer were the Parisian revues, the showgirls, or the tipsy lounge singers what sold in Las Vegas showrooms. The large production shows, magic shows, and Cirque shows had changed the direction of entertainment to a family-oriented Las Vegas and shown that
entertainment could be both acceptable to middle America and unique enough to preserve Las Vegas as a 'world apart'.

In that 'world apart' exists a legend and icon. Elvis Presley, while long dead by the time of this level of sophistication of Las Vegas, falls in the third era, because he has become something other than himself. He always was. George Sidney, director of *Viva Las Vegas*, had this to say about being "friendly" with Elvis. "I think we became as friendly as you could with an illusion. When you meet him, he's behind a piece of glass and for those two minutes, that's best you'll ever know him" (Sidney). But while Elvis was an illusion of sorts, even to Las Vegas, performing here in 1956 and failing miserably, returning in 1969 to play to audiences at the International, and succeeding, he was not a major movement in Las Vegas history. It would be more accurate to say that Las Vegas clutched to the illusion of Elvis, the legacy of Elvis, and turned that legacy into spectacle. Not the actual king. Here Elvis was the dream and the dream became the façade, but unlike an architectural façade owned and designed by one hotel/corporation, this façade belongs to the people and the dreamers of Las Vegas, and it is a tradition in a town with few traditions. And that dream is incorporated into the image of Las Vegas, enhancing both the dream and the city in the process.
As with the opening of the Mirage in 1998, Steve Wynn once again redefined Las Vegas with the opening of the Bellagio. "The $1.25 billion resort hotel, the most expensive ever in Las Vegas, promises to do for Las Vegas in the late 1990s what Wynn's Mirage did for the town in the late 1980s – set a new standard for quality and excellence" (McCracken 112).

After the success of Treasure Island and the rest of the family resorts in Las Vegas, Wynn decided it was time to return to his original direction: the International Playground. "Steve [Wynn] looks around and says 'you know what, we don't want to be family oriented. Get the strollers out of Treasure Island. We'll be fun, adult, but we got to be adult, we cannot be kid based'" (Tratos). The developers of Las Vegas agreed with the sentiment and later in that year the Venetian opened, followed in successive years by the Paris, a renovated Aladdin, and the Palms.

With the new standards of excellence and the idea of 'fun adult' in mind, Wynn asked the Cirque organization of design a new show. It cost 70 million dollars for preproduction and set the new standard for Las Vegas entertainment. "Look at something
like an *O* show, while it is still totally clothed and still very artistic it is clearly not kid based" (Tratos). It has yet to be surpassed. It has yet to be paralleled. As the Bellagio is set on a lake, its structure a replica of an Italian village, *O* has incorporated the Bellagio's theme of water, elegance, and sensuality into a truly unique experience. At present, *O* is the pinnacle of Las Vegas entertainment.

But in Las Vegas the adage, 'nothing is constant except change.' is familiar territory. While the sheer beauty and grace of *O* has yet to be surpassed there is a contender in the wings for the most popular show in Las Vegas. "There's a New Show in Town" is the advertising slogan for *Blue Man Group*. Appearing in the Luxor theatre, *Blue Man Group* tries to again redefine Las Vegas entertainment into something a touch more avant-garde than the production shows and a touch more 'hip' than the elegant *O*. Brought in from New York and totally redesigned for the Las Vegas audience, *Blue Man Group* involves video technology, drum beats, and an odd discovery-based humor. While it does not contain the beauty of the Cirque shows, it does give the audience a sense of wonder, not a wonder at grace or beauty, but a sense of wonder at themselves or everyday items.

"Avant-garde doesn't sell in Las Vegas. To sell avant-garde you have to clean it up to mainstream, and that's what happened with *Blue Man Group*. The week before *Blue Man Group* opened in Las Vegas they were on an Intel commercial. That's not avant-garde ... That's the part that Las Vegas sells the best" (Rothman). While *Blue Man Group* may not be totally avant-garde in concept anymore, it is still to the left of the mainstream when compared to other theatre productions. There is very little of Las Vegas style spectacle in the show, except for the blue men themselves, and what is so
spectacular about the show is the blue man's reaction to the ordinary. Their interest and curiosity stimulates the audience and so the audience comes to wonder at the simplest of things. It is an odd contrast to the overt spectacle luxury of Las Vegas.

With the growing sense of artistic culture in Las Vegas, there is the return of the Parisian revue and the showgirl is once again rising in prominence. "As Las Vegas becomes more and more of a convention ground, a kind of interesting phenomenon takes place ... the return to sexiness again ... you have the opening of shows like Bottoms Up, Skin Tight, Midnight Fantasy. La Femme is here because of the market changing when the conventions are in town" (Tratos). Even though recent news articles have suggested that the Las Vegas showgirl is a "Dying Breed", more 'skin shows' are opening to cater to the older, male-dominated convention trade. Each show has its own special identity.

For example, Bottoms Up, actually a Las Vegas regular which returned recently, sells humor along with sex and La Femme sells the exotic French ideals along with feminine flesh. While Las Vegas moves forward, the return of these shows is indication enough that the audiences will never be completely predictable.

It is that lack of predictability that begs the mention of a Las Vegas, American Icon. Elvis Presley, while long dead by the time of this level of sophistication of Las Vegas, falls in the fourth era, because he has become something other than himself. He always was. George Sidney, director of Viva Las Vegas, had this to say about being "friendly" with Elvis. "I think we became as friendly as you could
with an illusion. When you meet him, he’s behind a piece of glass and for those two minutes, that’s best you’ll ever know him” (Sidney). But while Elvis was an illusion of sorts, even to Las Vegas, performing here in 1956 and failing miserably, returning in 1969 to play to audiences at the International, and succeeding, he was not a major movement in Las Vegas history. It would be more accurate to say that Las Vegas clutched to the illusion of Elvis, the legacy of Elvis, and turned that legacy into spectacle. Not the actual king. Here Elvis was the dream and the dream became the facade, but unlike an architectural facade owned and designed by one hotel/corporation, this facade belongs to the people and the dreamers of Las Vegas, and it is a tradition in a town with few traditions. And that dream is incorporated into the image of Las Vegas.

But as Wynn envisioned. Las Vegas is not toning down the spectacle of its luxury resorts, instead investing even more in the sheer beauty and wonder of itself. Indeed it is Siegel’s vision of an oasis of pleasure all over again. With that shift to beauty and wonder come sophistication and the need to be internationally based. The Bellagio began opening the doors to high class culture when it was built and offered not only a rose garden but a stunning art collection. The Venetian has tried to latch on to that high-brow culture by opening two art galleries, the Guggenheim and the Hermitage. Both opened in 2001 and have proved to be successful. Steve Wynn’s own art collection is being shown at the old Desert Inn, soon to be remodeled into the newest of the Wynn
luxury resorts. Fine art is being displayed on the walls of the casinos and the hotels and tourists are not missing the idea of Las Vegas as high art either.

**Blue Man and Beyond**

In the new millennium, Las Vegas has the unique opportunity and position to be on the cutting edge of high-technology and avant-garde entertainment. While the production budgets of the spectacles will never again have the same freedom that they had under Jack Entratter, the money backing the pre-production costs of the Strip exceeds any where else in the world. Here entertainment has the budget and the facilities to lead the way into the future. As more esoteric shows flourish, like *Blue Man Group*, the images of the Las Vegas spectacle will adjust accordingly, and as Celine Dion prepares to open her new show at Caesars the age of the headliners may receive new life.

The Las Vegas show moves in a rather odd cycle. While it seems to move forward, discarding ideas as they fall out of fashion, Las Vegas actually collects as it moves on. Like the Roman Empire before, with their broad ranging spectacle and their ability to absorb and adapt cultures, Las Vegas uses the past to expand and extend their spectacle. In the headliner era, with the dancing tap girls, the *Lido de Paris* changed the shape of Las Vegas spectacle not by replacing the show, but by absorbing it and restructuring it. Instead of the highlighted headliner, the highlighted act was the bare-breasted show girls in their finery, surrounding by the dancing tap girls and various other vaudeville routines. The spectacle adapted and moved forward. While Cirque de Soleil does not highlight nudity, it does highlight the human body in its beauty and athleticism, which is simply a different approach to the idea of showgirls.
Las Vegas is in a state of transition. In the last two years *Blue Man Group*, *Tony and Tina’s Wedding*, *Storm*, *Chippendales: the Show*, and *Midnight Fantasy*, have all either been developed in Las Vegas, for Las Vegas, or have moved to venues on the Strip. Also, in pre-production are two new Cirque de Soleil shows for Steve Wynn’s new resort, one new Cirque de Soleil show for the MGM Grand, and Celine Dion’s show, which will include Cirque de Soleil elements. It looks as though the future of Las Vegas spectacle will be dominated by Cirque de Soleil productions.

However, none of the uniqueness and mystery will be lost if the new era follows the past. Instead of replacing shows the Cirque de Soleil company will probably adapt and adjust the trends of current Las Vegas shows to create something unique, but also something with a great debt to the past. If Celine Dion is successful in her four-thousand seat theatre, then every other hotel group will be looking for a viable headliner to play the Las Vegas Strip, until it becomes too expensive and the cycles of Las Vegas will adjust and begin again. However, this time the growth and the transitions in the spectacles will be a noted feature in the changing history of Las Vegas, as interest in the creation and the survival of Las Vegas remains a topic of interest for historians.
Permission to Use Copyrighted Material

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

I, Shahnaz Khan, holder of copyrighted material, photographs from the Las Vegas Strip from my personal collection hereby give permission for the author to use the above described material in total or in part for inclusion in a master’s thesis at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

I also agree that the author may execute the standard contract with the University Microfilms, Inc. for microform reproduction of the completed thesis, including the materials to which I hold the copyright.

Shahnaz Khan

Name

Signature 4.29.02

Date
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jaime Lee Rana Koran

Local Address:
5751 E. Hacienda #256
Las Vegas, Nevada 89122

Home Address:
521 S 3rd Ave
Oak Harbor, Washington 98277

Degrees:
Associate of Arts, Liberal Arts, 1995
Cottey College

Bachelor of Arts, Theatre, Writing, Literature, 1999
Graceland College

Thesis Title: Lights, Audience, Profit: The evolutions of the Las Vegas Spectacle

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Professor Ellis Pryce-Jones, MFA
Committee Member, Professor Davey Marlin-Jones, BA
Committee Member, Professor Robert Brewer, MFA
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Evelyn Gajowski, Ph. D.