

**AS THE STAGE TURNS  
TEACHING CLEVELAND REVIEW****BY JOHN PERSE**

It might be hard to believe, but at one time, not that long ago, an entertainment venue in Highland Heights was once considered one of the world's meccas of show business and live entertainment. If you're a Clevelander – you probably know what we're talking about. It was called the Front Row.

Jeannie Emser Schultz, the venue's longtime former director of marketing and publicity, has written a memoir capturing the unique energy of the Front Row in a new book, *As the Stage Turned: A Front Row Memoir*. It's an homage to everything, and I mean everything, related to show business and the cultural significance of the Front Row. Her narrative takes us on a detailed and behind-the-scenes firsthand journey of the almost 20-year history of what was considered one of America's most significant entertainment venues.

Where else would you learn that Roseanne Barr demanded, as a part of her contract, to have piping hot pizza at the ready when she exited the stage? Or that comedian Bob Newhart always kept a nude picture on his dressing room table of Anthony Newley looking backwards through his legs (Newhart told Emser Schultz it was one of the funniest pictures he ever saw)?

Emser Schultz's firsthand observations from the inner sanctum of the Front Row are relayed in vignettes which highlight her experiences from the planning stages of the venue to the construction, to the marketing and managerial issues, and to managing all the personalities that graced its stage. Emser Schultz leaves out few details. From the first concert (Sammy Davis Jr.), to the wrecking ball, the Front Row overflowed with stories. Kind of hard to believe that the venue, nestled in a quiet suburb of Cleveland, could explode with the kind of star power that it drew.

The book is divided into separate chapters with each chapter focusing on a specific aspect of the inner workings of show business, the many personalities, and the realities of the Front Row experience. Particularly interesting are the stories of the entertainers themselves and the myriad issues associated with booking, scheduling, catering to, and ultimately, the performances themselves. The details of this immense undertaking are fascinating, and Emser Schultz leaves out no details. For example, several days into Sammy Davis's opening run at the Front Row in 1974, he received a phone call threatening his life. Also, the only way Frank Sinatra would agree to perform there was if he and his entire entourage could rent out the Shaker Heights home of Larry Dolin, the founder and president of the Front Row.

Then there were the contract negotiations with the various performers and the "riders" associated with their contracts. Without naming names (you will have to read the book yourself) many of the performers had riders which included special dressing room decorations, unique foods and beverage requests, as well as access to illegal substances.

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Located on Wilson Mills Road near I-271, the Front Row was a centerpiece of the entertainment world from 1974 to 1993. The diversity of the live acts included Las Vegas-style entertainers, rock and roll bands, comedians, “professional” wrestling and even academic and political speakers. The diversity of the on-stage talent was matched by the diversity of the audiences in attendance. Even more unique than the wide range of acts, was the fact that the stage rotated during each performance. Interestingly enough, Emser Schultz relays the fact that on more than one occasion, the performers became distracted or even disoriented because of the revolving stage. At the time, the Front Row was designed and operated to provide the ultimate theater experience.

Even though the Front Row closed in July 1993, it merged with the Playhouse Square Foundation and acts continued to be booked at Playhouse Square. Although the Front Row building was destroyed in 1995 to make way for a Home Depot, the memories of amazing performers and their amazing performances live on in Emser Schultz’s engaging, and dare I say, entertaining, memoir.