A Man of Appetite

35 years ago, Caesars founder Jay Sarno realized we wanted the same things he did

BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

Toward the end, Jay Sarno, father of the Vegas theme resort, was big-bellied, full-cheeked and insatiably hungry. He was known on occasion to diet, which meant replacing his breakfast salami with filet mignon. He rehabilitated his bum ticker by hoisting an ice-cream cone in each fist. He had philandered his way out of a marriage, gambled his way out of a million and dreamed his way out of the casino business. He hoped to remedy this state of affairs with girls, dice and dreams.

Indulgence, for Sarno, had always been part of a creative process. You want something. You taste it. You re-create it, writ large, for the world. If you want to party like Bacchus, you build the Bacchanal Room and serve six-course meals with neck rubs and bottomless wine goblets.

"His insights all came from his own appetites," says Don Williams, Sarno's right-hand man at Circus Circus in the late 1960s and early '70s. "Get prettier girls, build bigger buildings, get better restaurants, have bigger gamblers around. All these things came from his loins, not his brain."

Sarno was the Freud and Ford of Las Vegas, the first in town to fully realize the link between our dreams and our appetites. The central assumption of his career was that we wanted the same things he did.

Once upon a time, Sarno decided he wanted a palace. So he built one and called it Caesars. That's plural, no apostrophe. Every guest was an emperor. Sarno knew that we, too, had dreams. We, too, were hungry.

CAESARS PALACE OPENED ON AUGUST 5, 1966, WITH A THREE-day party featuring 1,400 well-heeled invitees, an Andy Williams-fronted show and a busty blond Cleopatra as greeter. The Palace wasn't just a resort, it was a pageant. It was a wild baroque dream of imperial antiquity, and the artifacts of the dream were everywhere, from the come-hither Roman costumes of cocktail girls to the curve of the bathroom faucets. Out front, a statue reproduction of the Winged Victory of Samothrace reached skyward from a great oblong pool—a headless sentry leading you to a place where you, like fiddling Nero, were welcome to lose your head. For the first time, a Vegas hotel was all about storytelling, suspension of disbelief.

From 1965, when construction began, to 1969, when he sold the Palace, Sarno worked ceaselessly to create the resort experience he wanted. He kept his hands on as many facets of the operation as possible. While designing the Palace, he traveled to Europe and photographed columns, pilasters, rooftops and flying buttresses. He spared few expenses. He wanted marble sculpture, so he headed to the town where Michelangelo had obtained marble.

The hotel's theme, in truth, was not Imperial Rome, but Sarno's vision of it: Faithfulness to that vision was more important than verisimilitude. Sarno had the help of talented designer Jo Harris, who would often tone down or transform or harmonize his exuberant con-

Photo courtesy of Caesars Palace.

cepts. But, in the end, the place was Sarno's, and it kept him running.

"He was on the phone constantly, because something important was happening at the hotel," recalls his son, Jay Jr., in the book *The Players* (University of Nevada Press, 1997). "It constantly pervaded his existence."

Sarno's wife, Joyce, and their four children had to catch him on the fly. "The family would go to see Dad because it wouldn't work the other way around," Jay Jr. says in the biography. "We would go live in the hotel for about a month every summer, on holidays, on weekends. We would run into his office and jump on his lap, and it did not distract him."

He could roll out of bed for dead-of-night calls and make million-dollar decisions without pausing to clear his throat. Come dawn, his son recalls, Sarno would dash off to breakfast meetings, "his hair going off in these Einsteinesque directions," and take charge of his empire. A diabetic, Sarno sometimes gave himself insulin shots in the middle of these sessions without breaking phrase.

The only way he knew how to approach life was to attack it.

Sarno was a high-stakes gambler, and not always a particularly good one. He admitted losing $1 million in casinos—including his own—from 1972 to '74. "He made terrible gambling mistakes," Williams says. "He didn't know shit about money management. But they still feared him, because if a guy can take a loss, he can also get on a streak and take the house for a hundred grand, which in those days could really hurt a casino."

In the casino, Sarno's favorite game was craps. Outside the casino, he'd bet on just about anything. "During the promotion of Circus Circus prior to its opening, we were in the Playboy Mansion in Chicago," Williams recalls. "Hugh Hefner shows us the first video game I'd ever seen in my life, and Sarno says, 'I'll bet you $10,000 my assistant can beat you.' I said, 'Jay, I don't even know what I'm looking at!' But I won."

On the golf course, Sarno's opponents rarely left without a good deal more cash than they'd brought (see Page 54). He also enjoyed basketball, and once won $10,000 off a guy who said Sarno couldn't sink a long shot on the basketball toss at Circus Circus.

Every area of life was a proving ground. "We'd go to the gourmet room at Caesars and get a bucket of steamed clams and sit there and eat and keep the shells and see who had the highest pile," Williams says. "And if it was close, he'd want to count them."

By 1969, Sarno was at the top of his game—smart, fearless and, apparently, unstoppable. It might have been a good time to hold on to the dream he'd just built, the one that had proven so wildly successful. But he was already on to something new, something wilder than Caesars. So he sold Caesars for $60 million, just three years after spending $24 million to build the place.

Sarno was always the life of the party, even when that party featured, from left, Nate Jacobson, Tony Bennett and Ed Sullivan.

SARNO HAS A PLACE AMONG THOSE dreamers—Howard Hughes, Orson Welles, Bill Clinton—for whom American life, contrary to the old chestnut, has not one, but three acts. Triumph is trumped by farce, and then comes tragedy. Farce is usually the most compelling of the acts, the one that includes all of the clues to the initial triumph and the ultimate tragedy.

With the opening of Circus Circus, Sarno's hunger for the vibrant, earthy stuff of this world was on display as never before. All around you, play and chance and temptation and the face, at

Photo courtesy of Caesars Palace.

once seductive and repulsive, of the carny.

No less a luminary than Howard Hughes speculated that Sarno, in fulfilling his own dreams, was building something that would not, could not, should not work. The whole concept, groused Hughes, was downright undignified. This was not your father's Vegas. Or even your big brother's. It was Jay's Vegas, and welcome to it.

"Las Vegas is like movie sequels," says longtime local television journalist Bob Stoldal. "When someone comes up with a good idea, someone else copies it and comes up with 'Hotel II.' That wasn't [Sarno's] style. He wanted to come up with something new."

Sarno was a fan of the circus, and he thought the theme would be cost-effective. This was a man who never saw a dollar he wouldn't squander, but this time his logic seemed financially sound. Headliners were commanding good money to play showrooms such as the Circus Maximus at Caesars; there was constant pressure to get a bigger star for the next act, and that meant paying still more. Meanwhile, as Williams says: "There's all these interesting people who can do these amazing things, and they don't cost shit. The highest paid circus star in the world worked for nothing compared to Vegas headliners. We'd give [patrons] a chance see the best entertainment in the world, 24 hours a day, for free."

Of course, whatever Sarno saved on talent, he could be sure to spend on spectacle. Circus Circus was not simply to be the best; it had to be the *most*. Sarno recruited the top circus talent from around the globe and created for them a venue unlike any other.

Circus Circus opened to overflow crowds on October 18, 1968. The occasion was broadcast live on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Viewers, even those who had been to Caesars, got a good look at something utterly new to Las Vegas. At Caesars, theming had meant dressing up the amenities resort visitors expect anyway. Every casino has cocktail waitresses; at Caesars, the waitresses wore togas. Every tourist wants to eat; at Caesars, they ate at the Bacchanal Room. Every building has walls; why not adorn them with columns, arches, porticos? Circus Circus, in contrast, gave visitors something completely ancillary to the Vegas experience: the circus. In your face. All day long. While trapeze acts swung about above the casino, the high-rollers Sarno courted were trying to keep from crapping out below. How do you wager $10,000 when someone is about to fall on your head? Meanwhile, the midway operators to whom carnival attractions had been entrusted were carrying on in classic carny style, cheating visitors out of whatever they wouldn't give will-

Photo courtesy of Caesars Palace.

ingly. In a casino, where plain dealing counts for everything, this was hardly a welcome sign.

But the place was spectacular. Circus Circus blended dark Vegas and Disney Vegas with bald impudence. Children who came to see Tanya the Elephant always had the chance to bump into Babbette Bardot of the "Nudes in the Night" show. Another attraction was an enclosure surrounded by turn-of-the-century peep-show viewers. When guests looked in, however, what they saw was not a grainy black-and-white flip book, but a real woman, really dancing, really taking off her clothes. Elsewhere, patrons could descend from the midway mezzanine to the casino floor by means of a fireman's pole or swimming pool-like slide—shortcuts that were removed when one drunk too many landed in the craps pit with broken limbs.

Sarno, who just two years before had made a smashing success with the proposition that America dreamed of Roman grandeur, suddenly had decided that what America really dreamed of was running off to join the circus. His circus was as compelling as his Rome: At Circus Circus, he had proven that he could accomplish just about anything.

Except profits.

Sarno had trouble paying off the construction loans. In 1969, the Nevada Gaming Control Board almost closed the place. In 1970, Sarno helped keep the property afloat with a personal loan of $200,000. His partner, Stanley Mallin, later estimated that Circus Circus lost more than $5 million in its early years. The property drew plenty of lookie-loos, but not enough gamblers. And there was no captive market. Circus Circus had no hotel rooms, and Sarno's ability to build them was dependent on forces wholly beyond his control.

SARNO'S HOTEL CAREER HAD, FROM THE start, been bankrolled by the Teamsters Union pension fund. Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa and money-manager Allen Dorfman had arranged for the money that had built Caesars and Circus Circus. By the late '60s, though, the Justice Department was tightening the screws on the Teamsters' loans to Nevada—and Sarno was the number-one target because of his friendships with Hoffa and Dorfman. The money pipeline was pinched. Sarno hoped he'd be able to make a success of Circus Circus on the strength of spectacle alone; he could not. The casino even experimented with charging admission, but the idea flopped. For the first time since he had arrived in Vegas, Sarno had to defer his dreams. A planned roller coaster, which would shoot through a hole in the ceiling, do an outdoor 360 and return to the midway, was shelved. Sarno, who in his heyday delighted in telling off his doubters and then proving them wrong, had reached an impasse.

In 1974, Sarno and Mallin leased the property to William Bennett and William N. Pennington, with sale to follow. By 1975, the new bosses had their hotel tower and had turned Circus Circus into one of the most profitable operations on the Strip. Sarno, whose marriage ended the same year, kept a suite at the hotel and remained there, a flashy phantom, watching rooms upon rooms go up at the big top where he was no longer ringmaster.

It turned out that Sarno was right. Tourists did want both the Colosseum and the big top. The new rooms were priced to lure middle-class America to the hotel, and guests came in such numbers that high-roller disdain for Circus Circus no longer mattered. Left to the masses, Jay Sarno's farce and failure became a cash machine that would fund castles and pyramids all down the Strip. "Sarno was ahead of his time," Stoldal says. "People said 'Circus Circus just doesn't work. It's not Las Vegas.' Clearly that wasn't true."

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Sarno never built another Vegas hotel. His last, great ambition was to construct the Grandissimo, a 6,000-room behemoth that would feature fountains and waterfalls and a roller coaster. No lender would assume the risk.

"His intention had been to build a dozen more places," Williams says. "Before he went down the tubes, before the Teamster money got shut off, he thoroughly intended to just keep building."

Without that money, Sarno, the P.T. Barnum of the Las Vegas Strip, was just another front who'd lost his backing.

"All the connected people, all the wiseguys, knew he was inextricably tied to Hoffa and Hoffa's machinery, and that was all going downhill," Williams says. "When you lose your luster, your muscle, your financial support, your place in the gaming fraternity, that's hard. You don't have a hotel anymore, so you can't

grab some broad and say, 'Let's go to my hotel.' The Grandissimo was a pipe dream he'd had for a long, long time. It never had a prayer from day one. But that was the only way for him. He had to keep working on it and doing things that appeared to be progress. But he knew it wasn't going to work."

Sarno stayed hungry. His appetite had never steered him wrong, so he let it keep driving. But there was nowhere left to go. He ate and philandered and golfed and gambled and dreamed and died of a heart attack, in his bed, in the suite he still kept at Caesars. It was 1984. He was 63.

IF THERE WERE SEEDS OF TRIUMPH IN Sarno's farce, there also had been a lot of farce in Sarno's triumph. Ground zero of the Caesars mystique (and, perhaps, the Vegas mystique) was the Bacchanal. There, waitresses wearing tiny togas served up sex appeal and pricey, artery-clogging meals. Today, you can watch a robotic Bacchus emcee a production from the Forum Shops' fountains; back in the day, however, you could be your own Bacchus. "Wine goddesses" poured the purple stuff from shoulder height. After the main course, you could pause for a neck and shoulder massage. And the goddesses were known to peel patrons a grape or two. The place was old school; it was also one of the last Vegas outposts of old-school loyalty. Many of the same waitresses worked there for decades.

The Bacchanal Room was the culinary epicenter of Sarno's Vegas consumption fantasy. Here, more than anyplace else in his empire, restraints were relaxed. Of course, even Sarno couldn't make all of his dreams come true. As one story goes, he once hoped to put piranha in the Bacchanal restaurant's fountain pool. At each seating, a baby pig was to be sacrificed to the gods, or, more immediately, to the appetite of the toothy fish. Apparently, the Health Department took exception to this bit of blood sport, and the plan was nixed.

The Bacchanal Room closed last year. It was replaced by an upscale Euro-Asian restaurant called 8-0-8. The famed old Caesars screen facade, whose curlicues simultaneously summoned classical grandeur and the swinging '60s, has given way to more literal Roman rendering. Thirty-five years have remade the house of Caesar, as they have the whole Strip. It's common these days to say the Vegas of Sarno's triumph is dead, done in by inelegant farce and humorless elegance. But Vegas is still about hunger and dreams. It still strives to build fantasies as flawless as the Palace. And Jay Sarno lives on in every looming tower, leering statue and dancing fountain on the street. His spirit, one imagines, is asking for more. ■