

Best Seat in the House

They go where they're told and leave when the celebrities show up. But these faces in the crowd feel like they're part of the glitz when they line up to sit.

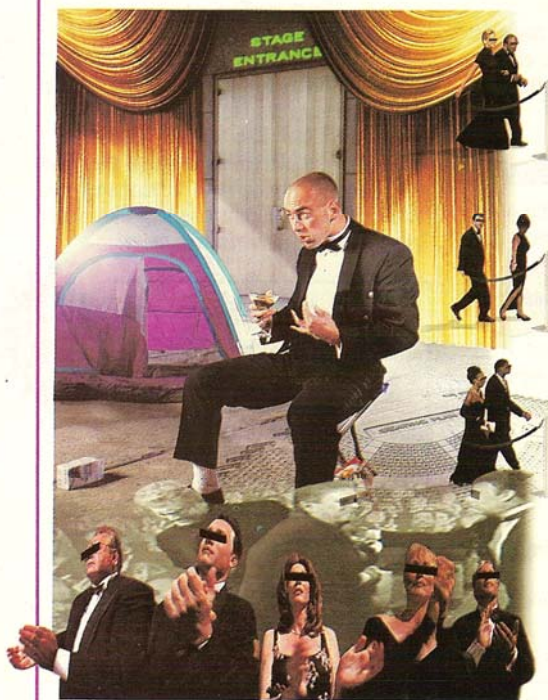
Are you ready for a great show?" a woman with a sleek bob asks the crowd that's lining the sidewalk along West Jefferson Boulevard in downtown Los Angeles.

Her name is Minerva. Stuffed into a body-sculpting black Lycra dress, she is a cross between Elvira and Lily Munster. She also is a Hollywood nobody, who, for one night, has morphed into a Hollywood somebody. Minerva wears the accessories of importance — a badge around her neck that reads "all access" and an electronic device in her ear that allows her to communicate with the production crew backstage at *Frank Sinatra: 80 Years My Way*.

Yes, I'm ready to watch an all-star cast salute Ol' Blue Eyes in a made-for-TV musical extravaganza on the eve of his eightieth birthday. But right now, as I stand outside Shrine Auditorium, shivering in the breeze, what I really want to do is get away from Minerva's authoritarian gaze and sit down inside the theater. And the closer to the stage, the better.

This isn't a sure thing. You see, I've been hired (albeit for no money) by Seatfillers, a California company that provides civilians for televised special events so that auditoriums look packed — even if half the stars are sipping drinks in the lobby or freshening their makeup in the powder room. That's why you'll never see an empty seat at the *American Music Awards*, *Daytime Emmys*, *People's Choice Awards*, or other celebfeasts. I'm here with my friend Jean and 200 strangers who also hope to rub shoulders with the rich and famous. If we're lucky, we'll fill seats in the first fifteen rows — the "camera rows." If we're unlucky, we'll be exiled to the corridor to watch the action on closed-circuit TV.

For ninety minutes, we've been standing here, in gowns and cocktail dresses, tuxedos



JOSH MITCHELL

by Cynthia Hanson



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and navy suits, awaiting final instructions for what could be one of the most exciting nights of our lives. After all, an impressive roster of Frank-o-philes is scheduled to perform, including Tony Bennett, Natalie Cole, Roseanne, Paula Abdul, and Patti LaBelle. Without Seatfillers, how else could a writer from Chicago and an attorney from Los Angeles — two thirty-one-year-olds with zero connections in Hollywood — even dream of inhaling the same rarefied air as celebrities, much less sit beside them, in seats that cost \$1,000 a pop?

"It doesn't look good," says Greg, the thirtysomething guy in front of us. He slips off his loafers and plops down on the sidewalk. He's a veteran seatfiller and knows the drill. "Seatfillers always call more people than they need," Greg says, scanning the crowd, "and it appears they called *way* too many tonight. The show's a sellout. They probably won't need everyone."

This is not what I want to hear after traveling 2,000 miles and practically starving for two weeks so that I could fit into my gown.

"Hey, there's Alan Thicke," Greg says, pointing to the darkly handsome driver of a black Porsche. Thicke, who played the buffoonish talk-show host on NBC's *Hope & Gloria*, stares at us as if we're carnival freaks. But no matter. This "sighting" makes me a believer. I was beginning to think that we'd never lay eyes on *The Real Thing*.

Suddenly, a petite brunette in a strapless sapphire sheath appears out of nowhere and flails her arms to get our attention. She's carrying a clipboard and walkie-talkie. And she's wearing an "all access" badge. The Instruction Lady, at last.

"You'll go inside in fifteen minutes," she begins. "Once we've identified the empty seats, we'll send you into the auditorium in small groups.

Look for me at the front of the stage. I'll wave you down the aisle and direct you to the empty seats. Move quickly — and duck if you end up near TV cameras. The aisles must look clear. When the talent returns to the seat, you *must* leave. If you refuse, you will *never* work for Seatfillers again. You cannot argue with the talent. Go out to the hall and wait for another seat assignment."

She takes a breath. "Questions?"

I want to ask where the restrooms are, but someone beats me to it.

"In the downstairs lobby," Instruction Lady replies. "But they're off-limits to seatfillers during the show."

It's going to be a long night.

My journey to Shrine Auditorium began last summer, when I decided to visit Jean in Los Angeles after I read about Seatfillers in a women's magazine.

"This is totally off-the-wall," Jean said, when I described how Seatfillers works. "And that's exactly why we should do it."

Becoming a seatfiller takes a letter introducing yourself, a résumé, and a recent color photograph. Plus a little luck. That's because hundreds apply to be seatfillers — even though it means providing their own transportation, working for free, and renting or buying formal threads. It's run by Jackie Stathis, who mobilizes bodies for a dozen network events in L.A. and New York each year, including the *Soul Train Music Awards*, *VH1 Honors*, and the *Cable Ace Awards*. For each assignment, Stathis reviews her files and chooses between fifty and 300 people (veteran seatfillers get preference). Locals receive confirmation letters a week before the show; out-of-towners are called two weeks in advance, so they can make travel arrangements.

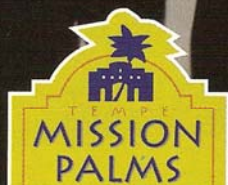
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grade? "I'm not looking for a certain look," Stathis insists. "I'm looking for quality people, so I pay attention to their letters. What's their job? Their hobbies? Why do they want to be a seatfiller? If somebody writes, 'I really, really, really want to go to *Soap Opera Digest Awards*,' it means we'll have problems later. I can't hire anybody who will be aggressive with the talent or get so excited they faint."

Rules are strict: No schmoozing

For ten minutes, we watch

as Ray Charles gets out of his

limo, Tom Selleck jokes with

security guards, Dennis Franz

adjusts his bow tie.

with celebrities (unless the celebrity initiates it), no cameras, no tape recorders, no autographs. Stathis, who founded Seatfillers three years ago, says every experience is different. Sometimes, a seatfiller plays musical chairs, sprinting around the auditorium for the entire performance. But if a seat isn't sold, or if no one claims it, a seatfiller can spend the night in the same spot — front row included. And there's always a chance a celebrity will hand over tickets to an after-the-event party.

"Think we'll get seats?" Jean asks. She's a model-thin, blue-eyed blonde, and, in her tailored pink cocktail dress and bone suede pumps, she looks country-club chic. Instruction Lady would have to be blind to hide her in the hallway.

"Yep."

I suspect I'll land a decent seat on the fashion quotient of my outfit alone — a black silk-and-lace ensemble with a mermaid skirt a la Morticia Addams.

Minutes later — nearly two hours after we had arrived — Minerva prances down the line and hands out plastic ID bracelets. A beefy guy in a tuxedo is two steps behind her, wielding a purple stamp that he presses on the backs of our hands.

"It's show time, people," Minerva purrs.

I feel a rush of adrenaline as we enter the auditorium (through a side door, for the hired help) and file into a warm corridor. Sixty chairs are lined up. Jean and I collapse in the last row.

A TV monitor shows the activity at the VIP entrance. An enormous white door leads out to white steps covered with — you guessed it — a red carpet. The carpet extends into the driveway and up to the door of a white limousine. Out steps Nancy "These Boots Are Made for Walking" Sinatra. A muscular, suntanned man whisks her past the *paparazzi*.

For ten minutes, we watch as Ray Charles gets out of his limo, Tom Selleck jokes with security guards, Dennis Franz adjusts his bow tie. Then, the camera zooms in on two dozen celebrities gathered backstage for an official photograph. There's Little Richard! Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme! Tony Danza! Hootie and the Blowfish! Paul Reiser!

"It's Paul Reiser," I say, grabbing Jean's arm.

She looks at me as if I've lost mind. Paul Reiser, of NBC's *Mad About You*, is one of my favorite actors, largely because he reminds me so much of my husband.

"I hope I sit next to him," I say wistfully.

Minerva interrupts my fantasy. She stands in front of the TV and counts bodies. "You, you, and you — stay," Minerva says, pointing to three people in the first row. She sends three women in red sequin dresses to the

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back of the room. "We're seating men in tuxes and women in black gowns in the front rows for the start of the show. We'll try to get to the rest of you later."

The Hand Stamper starts ejecting people.

"Say 'hello' to Paul for me," Jean says, winking. "I'll meet you in the restroom after the show."

Seconds later, I'm standing in the back of the auditorium. Life-size posters of Sinatra adorn the stage, musicians tune their instruments, and ticket-holders rush to their seats. The air is thick with the scent of Van Cleef & Arpels perfume.

Sure enough, I'm caught up in the magic of the moment. My heart pounds. My hands sweat. My body trembles. A million scenarios race through my mind: What if I trip and stumble down the aisle? Or violate a seatfiller commandment?

What if my bad side ends up on TV?

Instruction Lady is in front of the stage. I scurry down the aisle.

"Black lace," she calls, pointing at me. "Over there, front row center. Hurry."

Me? Front row center?

I take my seat and smile at the woman on my right.

"Another seatfiller," she says, rolling her eyes.

I notice her bracelet. "Have you done this before?"

"Three times," she replies. "I'm a secretary. I need some excitement."

Figures I'm next to a seatfiller — and a real charmer, too. But looking left, I see there's an empty seat between me and Gregory Peck. *The Gregory Peck*. I haven't been this close to fame since I sat next to John F. Kennedy Jr. in a college anthropology class.

I stare at Gregory Peck, hoping to

make eye contact. When he turns in my direction, he doesn't so much as crack a smile. I tell myself the night is young and continue scanning the theater.

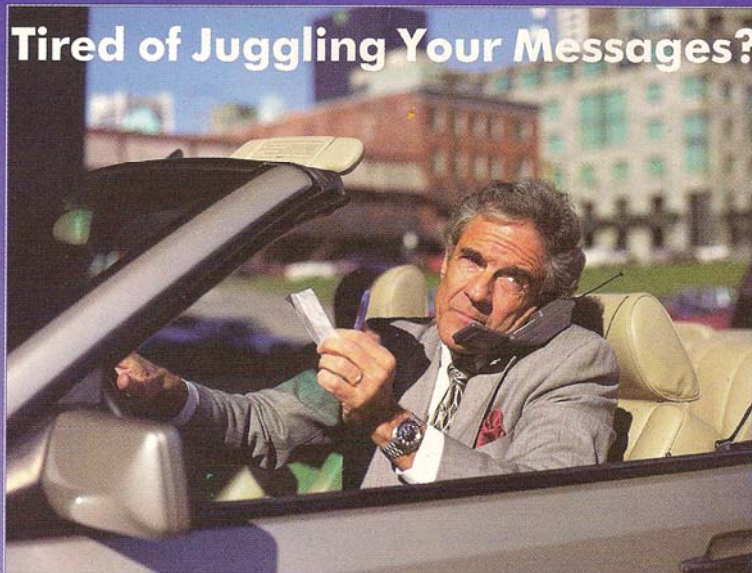
Five seats to my right, there's a very pale Bob Hope. Three rows behind me, there's a very suntanned Phil Hartman, of NBC's *News Radio*. And over on the left, Angie Dickinson is strutting to her seat. I turn around to find a parade of tuxedos in front of me — Robert Wagner, Tony Danza and, oh my God — could it be *Paul Reiser*? It is! I smile, but he doesn't notice me.

Suddenly, the lights dim, and the announcer thunders, "Ladies and gentlemen — Bruce Springsteen!"

The audience jumps to its feet, and The Boss is center stage, introducing The Chairman of the Board. I applaud wildly and smile my widest smile as TV cameras zoom in on the front row.

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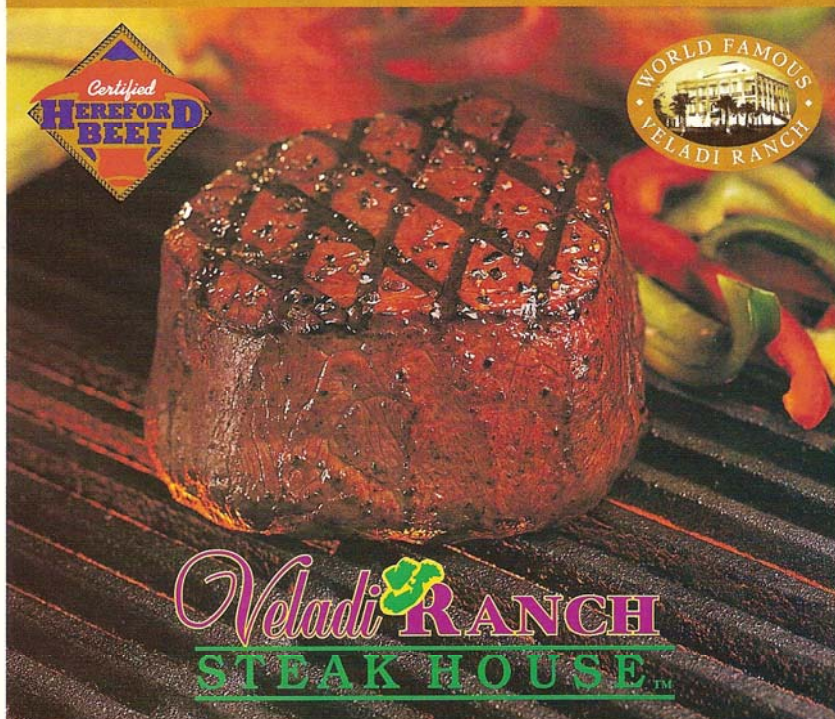
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Inside, I'm praying for a traffic jam in Bel Air.

But before I sit down again, I feel a hand on my arm.

"Go," whispers Instruction Lady, who is patrolling the aisles. "And duck."

TV cameras, which are taping the performance for ABC, swarm around the front of the stage. I hunch over, but in the dark, I can barely see where I'm

Terrific. I've nearly tripped

Angela Lansbury, and I've

been spotted in the aisle.

Feeling doomed, I sprint to

the back of the theater.

going. Before I know it, I almost collide with Angela Lansbury. Two more inches, and America's favorite sleuth would have been on the floor. I envision the headline: "Angela Lansbury Knocked Out by Disgruntled Seatfiller."

"Get down," a cameraman barks.

Terrific. I've nearly tripped Angela Lansbury, and I've also been spotted in the aisle. Feeling doomed, I sprint to the back of the theater, hang around to hear Springsteen's final chorus of "Angel Eyes," and then join the seatfillers-in-waiting in the corridor.

I look for Jean, but don't see her, so I assume she's in the audience, enjoying what I'm now watching on TV: Natalie Cole singing a jazzy rendition of "They Can't Take That Away From Me." Within ten minutes, just when I'm convinced my career is over, the Hand Stamper signals me to return to the auditorium and Instruction Lady waves me down toward the stage.

Please, put me in the front row. Please, give me another chance. I promise not to smile or look at anybody.

Instruction Lady directs me to the third seat of the second row. So it's not quite what I had in mind. But as I sit down, I notice I have an unobstructed view of Brett Butler, star of ABC's *Grace Under Fire*, who has an aisle seat in the front row. (For the record, she's even prettier in person.) I'm so close to Anthony Quinn, I could sneeze on him. And, when I turn around, I see a constellation of stars nearby: Jon Lovitz, Wayne Newton, Martin Short, Christian Slater, Charles Bronson.

As Paula Abdul hip-hops through "Luck Be a Lady" and Ray Charles belts "Ol' Man River" with more soul than a 100-member gospel choir, I wonder when my luck will expire. Surely, I'll be bounced again, along with the seat-fillers I'm sandwiched between.

But this is where I stay for the rest of the show. I have a clear view of the stage, Brett Butler's profile, and the cameras glued to the first two rows.

I'm having so much fun that I pinch myself to make sure it's not a dream. By the time I meet Jean in the restroom, my mouth and cheeks are quivering from incessant smiling.


"How'd it go?" I ask.

"I was two rows behind Raquel Welch," Jean says. "I watched her mug for the camera the whole night. Did anyone talk to you?"

"Brett Butler. She looked me in the eyes and said, 'Hey.'"

"Hey?"

"It's Southern for 'Hi.'"

So I didn't sit beside a celebrity or get invited to a post-party. But I got a "Hey." And I saw Hollywood legends perform Sinatra's greatest hits. Not bad for five hours' work. I'll always have precious memories of a priceless evening. As Sinatra might say, "They Can't Take That Away From Me." 

Cynthia Hanson is a contributing editor at *Chicago* magazine and a career columnist for *Cosmopolitan*. She is still waiting for her fifteen minutes.

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