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Audience Participation in Blue Man Group:
Success Through Authentic Character,
Adaptable Narrative, and
Accessible Space

Haley Lauren Flanders

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Audience Participation in Blue Man Group: Success Through Authentic Character, Adaptable Narrative, and Accessible Space

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Master of Arts

The relationship between performer and spectator is a constant topic in theatre since audiences are essential to any performance. Some contemporary performances strive to blur the line between the two by allowing audiences to participate during the show. Often, audience participation is despised and therefore avoided by spectators and theatre practitioners. However, Blue Man Group thrives on it due to their authentic character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space. Through my examination of the show as an audience member, I theorize that these three elements control the audience's willingness to participate in the production and in turn make the entire experience more rewarding and memorable as performer and spectator share roles in order to create this performance.

Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, and Phil Stanton co-founded Blue Man Group in 1987, and received their first official venue in 1991. Blue Man Group is a ninety-minute variety show that utilizes rock music, theatrical vignettes, and experiments with science, art, and modern technology to explore the ways in which humans express and communicate. This unprecedented show performs in multiple locations daily throughout the United States, Germany, and has also captivated audiences of all ages around the world. The most popular and recognizable element to the show is the humanoid Blue Man character. He does not speak or make large facial expressions. Instead, he mainly observes intently and follows commands, much like a spectator. His original physical attributes, honest behavior and communication, and authoritative presence through three performers grant him authenticity. His unique personality draws in an audience's interest and investment in the character and the entire production.

The co-founders identify the Blue Man Group adaptable narrative as "Neo-Vaudeville", mixing many forms of science and art together. The cast, crew, and audience take part in the show through tribal training, developing *communitas* as they watch and learn, call and respond, to the show's commands. The pieces that contain audience participation utilize various types of invitation, coaxing audiences into participation in effective ways. Through an exploration of visual and aural perception, spatial fluidity, and technology, Blue Man Group's use of space connects its audiences to the performance and helps them consider more deeply their connections with others. Thus people often participate during the show and enjoy doing so. This level of investment and excitement is necessary for successful audience participation. Thus Blue Man Group is a blue print for how live theatre can form a powerful relationship with audiences.

Keywords: Blue Man Group, audience participation, character, narrative, space, Chris Wink, Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, *communitas*, technology

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Introduction

“Experience the mystery,
the humor, the euphoria
and the indescribable celebration
of art, technology and music
that is Blue Man Group.”
(About the Show: Orlando)

With PVC pipes and sturdy drumsticks in hand, three silent blue-skinned percussionists stand attentively on stage and manipulate a makeshift instrument in front of a curious crowd. This musical piece is known as “Drumbone,” since the instrument is a cross between a drum and a trombone, changing pitches as these performers known as Blue Men slide three tubes in and out of one another at various lengths (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: “Drumbone” by Universal Orlando; “Drumbone”; Universal Orlando; universalorlando.co.uk, Web; 24 Oct. 2015.

The song is one of the most famous and recognizable in a Blue Man Group performance. Moreover, it demonstrates how this show strives to blend entertainment with efficacy—the power to produce a desired effect, particularly one that teaches and informs—by experimenting with popular art forms such as music and live theatre. It also educates audiences by mimicking scientific studies regarding humans and their everyday interactions with one another. While the Blue Men are off stage getting ready to perform this piece, a video projects the following text as a monotone male voiceover recites it:

Right now there is a virtually invisible network which links together millions of people who would otherwise be completely isolated from each other. This exciting technology has grown to become an incredibly complex web of connections that is so large and difficult to track that it would be practically impossible to estimate its total size. And even though most of us live alone in urban isolation, this system represents one of the few ways all of our lives are intertwined. This system is modern plumbing. (*Inside the Tube*)

The last sentence often evokes laughter from the audience as they most likely presume that the source of human connectivity would be much more philosophical, poetic, or scientific in context. On the contrary, he describes a literal connection between all people, labeling the pipes tucked away in buildings and buried in the ground as one of the only existing links binding all humans together. This overly simplistic analysis evokes spectators to consider more deeply the ways they form connections with others. By so doing, it prepares them to be more critically aware of the many methods Blue Man Group will employ to connect everyone together during the performance.

The video and voiceover then inform the audience of obvious facts, giving this pseudo science lesson an even more comedic twist. He informs that everything flowing through these pipes heads in one direction: “No matter where you are in the system, your input into it always flows away.” Yet occasionally the flow can reverse directions when pipes become blocked. The voiceover states that this forced movement back up the pipes suddenly makes them “interactive.” At this moment, the Blue Men enter and experiment with the Drumbone. One rapidly drums sixteenth notes near the edge of the instrument while the other two manipulate the three pipes until they collectively establish a solid tune and rhythm. They struggle at first to work together.

Yet once the melody is made, a rock band featured behind the Blue Men throughout the entire show instantaneously fleshes out the song with harmonies, beats, and other supportive instrumentation. By collectively making music, Blue Man Group molds this plastic plumbing tool into an interactive musical experience for all to enjoy.

For nearly three decades, Blue Man Group has been experimenting, inventing, and inviting audiences to experience their unique scenes and songs. The journey toward the invention of Blue Man Group began in 1987 with the three co-founders, Chris Wink, Phil Stanton, and Matt Goldman (fig. 2). They desired to create a variety show that would entice audience members to make a connection not only to the show, but also with the rest of the audience. They first created the character of the Blue Man and experimented with audience reactions by walking around New York City in full costume and makeup (*Inside the Tube*). The types of reactions were widespread. Many were taken aback by their appearance and walked away, most likely viewing them as bizarre street performers. Others took pictures of and with the Blue Men, most likely drawn to their unique skin color and alluring yet nonthreatening silence.



Fig. 2: Blue Man Group co-founders (L to R: Matt Goldman, Chris Wink, Phil Stanton) from Fernando Leon/Getty Images; “Matt Goldman; Chris Wink; Phil Stanton”; *Zimbio*; zimbio.com, 2 Apr. 2009; Web; 4 Oct. 2015.

After having selected the character’s appearance and signature skill of drumming (due to this shared talent between the three performers), they made various “pieces”—Blue Man

Group's term for the scenes and songs that comprise the show—that highlighted the creation and experimentation of art, and the urban isolation of New York City. The show has evolved into a ninety-minute one-act variety show known worldwide as Blue Man Group, utilizing rock music, theatrical vignettes, and experiments with science, art, and modern technology to explore the ways in which humans express and communicate. Although the pieces, and even some venues, change over time as the show travels and transforms, Blue Man Group has kept the same character and show title.

Wink, Stanton, and Goldman, after performing on the street and in other locations such as bars and La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, received their first commercial performance venue in 1991 at the famous Astor Place, Off Broadway. Since then, the show has opened and maintained venues in other major cities around the United States: Boston, Chicago, Orlando, Las Vegas, and a national touring show. They also have a current show in Berlin with an upcoming international tour. Blue Man Group has produced concerts such as “How to Be a Megastar Live!” and “The Complex Rock Tour Live,” which vary slightly from the one-act show discussed in this thesis. The three co-founders are no longer performing as the Blue Men, yet all assist in running Blue Man Productions in New York City, which oversees all of the shows. Hundreds of people have been cast as Blue Men, and the performance continues to be a staple in American entertainment due to its many locations, unique style, and lasting popularity among people of all ages and backgrounds.

Although one short piece in the middle of the show, “Drumbone” is a microcosm for the show's message regarding the power and necessity of collaboration. It also helps the Blue Men and spectators see things in a new way, rediscovering the power of creativity. Throughout the show, the Blue Men take the most absurd or commonplace items and mold them into a form of

artistic expression that speaks to and includes audiences in the invention. By doing so, everyone and everything becomes bonded, creating an unforgettable experience with live theatre.

Journalist Drew Campbell states:

The visual connectivity makes visible an underlying theme of the BMG [Blue Man Group]: everything you think, do, and say brings up connections to other people, places, and thoughts. The relationships seem simple enough at first. A Blue Man pulls on a PVC tube, it gets longer and produces a lower pitch. Ah, thinks the Blue Man. Cause and effect. Before the night is out, these simple causal relationships have expanded to include plumbing, human frailty, the internet (sic), knowledge, the act of seeing and believing and the origins of thought. Oh, and they pull paper all over the audience and dance with it. Everyone leaves elated, feeling connected to everything. (73)

The Blue Men's imagination and exploration open spectators up to the wonders of their own world and connect everyone during this process of discovery and interaction.

Over the years, the show's set list has been altered and updated to reflect society's trends and interests, particularly involving music and new types of media. Regardless, all Blue Man Group productions retain this overarching objective: "[T]he aim of the performance team is to create a collaborative, interactive relationship between the performers and the audience" (Jensen 81). Thus the show always contains various forms of audience participation ranging from individual to collective. Spectators are highly involved in the performance since the Blue Men occasionally venture into the house as they climb over seats, stare at spectators, and even depend on them to perform tricks. Some spectators are prepared beforehand with instructions and props while others improvise at the moment of Blue Man-human interaction.

Involving and relying on the audience so heavily could have caused the variety show to fail. As a spectator, my initial observation was about Blue Man Group's heavy dependence on audience participation, and the spectators' willingness to comply and invest in the experience. Through participating and closely observing the audience and the production, I developed an inquiry regarding this show's lasting success and popularity. After all, author Gareth White states in the beginning of his book, *Audience Participation: Aesthetics of the Invitation*: "There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation. The prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it on their audiences" (1). Risk must be considered when a show decides to hand the focus over to a spectator, rather than solely relying on the trained and rehearsed performers to provide all entertainment. Audiences can become nervous and embarrassed, unwilling to take part in any fashion, especially if they have not been prepared with what to say or do. Therefore the narrative flow could become interrupted or permanently altered, perhaps establishing a poor piece of entertainment for spectator and/or performer. This is simply not the case with Blue Man Group.

No matter the result of the audience participation, giving such power and presence to the audience immediately creates an environment wherein spectators are performers. Likewise, the performers become spectators as they attentively observe the reactions of the audience and respond in character to the new situations brought about by the unscripted spectators. All in all, everyone becomes more aware of his or her surroundings and more conscious of the possibility that anyone may receive the spotlight at any moment. Although this potentiality can distress and turn people off from attending this type of live performance, Blue Man Group has continued to be successful all over the world because of their crafty and captivating methods of audience

participation, fusing the performer and spectator together to where the entire event becomes a unique experience shared and created by all in attendance. The sharing of roles between performers and spectator fuels Blue Man Group's lasting success as it evokes willful audience participation through an authentic character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space.

Since the show is in numerous locations at one time and is constantly being updated, it is difficult to view and analyze all Blue Man Group performances throughout time and space. For this thesis, I am critiquing the set list at the Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas in November 2013; the US national touring production in Salt Lake City, Utah, in April 2014; the Boston production at Charles Playhouse in June 2014; the Astor Place production in New York City in July 2014; and the revised Las Vegas production (Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino) in June 2015. This thesis is a close reading of these productions from my perspective as an audience member and participant in events such as the "Behind the Blue Experience" in Las Vegas. My interpretations and theories about the show are meant to provide future practitioners with questions to consider when utilizing audience participation in their own productions, possibly applying Blue Man Group's methods regarding the manipulation of character, narrative, and space.

My research supports the ideologies and objectives expressed by Blue Man Group themselves (creators, cast and crew), and those who write about this performance group. Throughout this thesis, I quote Wink, Stanton, and Goldman (whom I hereby refer to as the co-founders) from documentaries, public interviews, and souvenir programs. My research also includes personal interviews with stage managers and Blue Man actors, and articles written by technical designers. I quote narration and text (the same in all venues) used in the show and on the official Blue Man Group website. I reference newspaper and online journalists, critics, and

entertainment industries in an effort to highlight real spectators' experiences with the production and the ways they describe and analyze the show.

Since my major argument centers on Blue Man Group's effective methods of audience participation, much of my academic research stems from scholars who specifically study the use of audience participation in contemporary performance practices. Gareth White's book *Audience Participation: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (2013) is the principal source for my research and argument, along with authors quoted in this book. His book "attempt[s] to treat audience participation as an art, and to explore what is entailed when we do so. [His] main strategy has been to think of the audience participant, their actions, and their experiences first as performers, and second as the material or media that are manipulated by the procedural author as an artist" (197). White considers the invitation extended from the performer/performance to the spectator as an authored procedure. He then explores what aspects of the participant can be manipulated, and what that process is like for both performer and spectator. He also strives to uncover how aesthetics relate to a spectator's understanding of the performance and their willingness to accept the invitation. He concludes that audience participation can "temporarily re-shape our social being" (206) and allow people to see themselves anew, having become more self and socially aware after the interactive experience.

My research also includes academic writings from a handful of scholars who have addressed Blue Man Group in both published and graduate student work. Published works include a *Theatre Journal* article entitled, "Approaching an Analog–Digital Dialectic: The Case of the Blue Man Group," by Lian Amaris. She uses Steve Dixon's *Digital Performance* terminology to examine how percussion, objects/props, gender, and the audience's attention are manipulated through the use of computerized media and how it changes the viewing experience

“when an animation stops being projected and starts being embodied” (573) by the performers, spectators, or both¹. In her book, *Theatre in a Media Culture: Production, Performance and Perception Since 1970*, Amy Petersen Jensen uses Blue Man Group as a case study in her chapter entitled, “Theatrical Space in Mass-Media Culture.” Under the topic of technology and the exploration of new theatrical space, Jensen concludes that Blue Man Group solidifies the theme of audience connectivity and interaction by the show’s clever use of media: projections, cameramen, scrolling text, and mixing live action with prerecorded images.

Graduate student work (theses and dissertations) on Blue Man Group include Susan Kattwinkel, whose dissertation, *Contemporary Variety Theatre: Using Techniques of Performance to Decrease Performer/Spectator Distance*, contains a chapter entitled “Blue Man Group – Tribes and Technology.” She examines the show in 1995 and determines that the Blue Men’s tribal nature, parodies of modern art and technology, and desire to unite the audience with one another through participation “suggests that survival in the modern world depends upon our willingness to come out of our cubicles connected only by plumbing, break the cultural trance, and view our daily life as sacrosanct, experiencing it as part of a community” (169). Sean A. Fidler’s thesis entitled, *Why Is America So Blue?: A Performance Analysis of the Blue Man Group that Demonstrates the Deeper Cultural Significance within the Structure of its Performance*, explores how the group uses ritual, theatre anthropology, postmodern aesthetics, and semiotics to create a character and world that attract and engage American audiences. I also reference a concert review by scholar Stephen Harrick, whose dissertation on the history of Blue Man Group is forthcoming.

¹ For more information, refer to the following citation: Dixon, Steve. *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. Print.

My thesis is adding to the academic conversation regarding Blue Man Group's practices and theories by offering a more comprehensive analysis of the show's use, of audience participation. Overall, the amount of academic work on Blue Man Group is minimal. The show's many locations and widespread fame has turned it into commercial entertainment for the masses, which can make it appear less noteworthy or pertinent in academia. While I am interested in the social importance and impact of Blue Man Group in the entertainment industry and all over the world, this topic is not entirely within the scope of my thesis, which focuses more on the practices Blue Man Group employs to achieve effective audience participation. It is my hope, however, that this thesis and its references to scholars' work will credit Blue Man Group's foundational theories and objectives regarding live performance and their analysis and treatment of the relationship between performer and spectator. I theorize that the show's effective methods are contained in the elements of character, narrative, and space. Their efforts coax the audience to accept the invitation to invest in the experience and take part in the encompassing world of Blue Man Group.

Chapter one examines the authenticity of the Blue Man character. The most popular and familiar element to the entire show is this humanoid protagonist. His physical attributes, behavior, and methods of communication make this pseudo alien unique, honest, and authoritative. During the show, the spectators fill in where the Blue Man lacks and both bond through this sharing of roles, providing wholeness to the narrative. Lastly, the quantitative component of three as one, and one as three—three performers portraying one character, and one character only existing fully when embodied by three people—makes the Blue Man Group tribal and communal, which serves as a theme for the show, and encourages the audience to join their “tribe”. Also by giving the Left, Center, and Right Blue Men slightly different personalities, the

show becomes a comedy as a Blue Man acts out from his two counterparts. The alien becomes even more alienated, which evokes both laughter and empathy from the audience. He may seem peculiar, but he is still human (enough) and his quirks inspire the spectators to embrace their inner child and develop a sincere connection to the Blue Man character and one another.

Chapter two scrutinizes how Blue Man Group's adaptable narrative structure motivates audiences to participate in the variety show. The co-founders categorize their production as "Neo-Vaudeville", mixing multiple forms of entertainment, and homing in on acts that have proven to please crowds throughout American history. By steering clear of any one art form, they also intrigue future spectators, essentially guaranteeing that the show will contain something for everyone. The framework of a variety show allows for the performance to add, update, or remove a piece without needing to start over or remove signature pieces. Blue Man Group's tribal methods of the auditioning, training, rehearsing, and performing the show demonstrates how the entire production is founded upon the concept of community and improvisation. The band and Blue Man's techniques reflect the call-and-response communication between performer and spectator during the show. Lastly, this chapter dissects the four major types of invitations, as analyzed by White: overt, implicit, covert, and accidental. I then describe various pieces in the show to demonstrate how Blue Man Group invites participation using all four types, teaching both audience and performers to adapt to these moments of interaction.

Chapter three reveals how Blue Man Group makes their physical space accessible to its audiences. The show highlights the function of the eyes and how visual perception gives humans access to their surrounding world, helping them interpret and connect with others. I then discuss how the fluidity of the Blue Man's performance space and the audience's access behind the stage before the show ("Behind the Blue Experience" in Las Vegas) and after the show ("VIP

Experience All-Inclusive” in Las Vegas) connects its viewers through close proximity and creates a more meaningful, memorable experience with the entire performance. Lastly, I examine how technology is employed and parodied in the show to explore how society progressively considers it the main resource for gaining access to the world and to one another.

Blue Man Group is not just a variety show; it is a multisensory experience that awakens the mind and creates a natural bond between everyone at the event. This unprecedented show’s use of authentic character, adaptable narrative and accessible space illuminate how to bond performer and spectator together through the sharing of roles. The entertainment and efficacy of a Blue Man Group show resides in each spectator’s journey toward inquiring, discovering, and sharing a memorable experience with the show and the rest of the audience. By sharing roles and responsibilities, performer and spectator bond and ultimately obtain a feeling of *communitas*. “*Communitas*” is a term originated by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, defining it as a unifying, organic sense of camaraderie among people that represents “the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person, a relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness” (274). Blue Man Group’s clever and enticing performance techniques train and invite audiences to participate in the show. By so doing, the production unites everyone and achieves its goal of celebrating the joy of live theatre and the excitement of creating it together. Wink states:

At Blue Man Group, we have always believed that there are particular cravings and needs hardwired into all of our DNA. If you are a member of the human race, chances are you desire to be a part of a tribe, to express your creativity and most importantly, you seek out experiences which make you feel fully alive. Over time,

life seems to temper that desire, we often suppress it. The Blue Man Group performance was created and is continually re-created with that basic human need in mind. Ideally, we can have a collective euphoric experience together.

(Entertainment News)

Having experienced this form of *communitas* first-hand, I confirm that audiences achieve this feeling through participation, collectively welcoming the invitation to help author this unique production with the Blue Men. The show's most effective methods of captivating and motivating their audiences reside in their authentic character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space. Together, all three components propel the show's lasting fame and popularity.

Although pieces of the Blue Man Group puzzle will continue to change over time, the goal to unite a group of people in a live theatrical event will always remain at the forefront of the operation, driven by the audience's involvement in the production. Thus Blue Man Group can be a blueprint for successful audience participation in live theatre. Their theories and practices can benefit and inspire future productions that strive to utilize such a risky, yet rewarding, method of entertainment and storytelling.

Chapter One

The Authentic Blue Man Character

“Remember that time when you were little
And one of your imaginary friends took your hand
And led you into a world that looked like yours
Only brighter?
No? Me neither.
That’s what Blue Man Group is like.”
(About the Show: Boston)

Determined to create a unique theatrical experience that thrives on energy, imagination, and artistic expression, the co-creators formed the most invariable component to the Blue Man Group show: the Blue Man character. From this, they generated the show’s title, unified the character among three separate bodies, and labeled the vibrant trio as the protagonist and focal point of advertising (fig. 3). The Blue Man’s lasting popularity and familiarity illustrates the power of character authenticity in relation to audience investment and appeal. His physical, behavioral, communicative, and quantitative elements make the Blue Man truly authentic. As the audience notes similarities and differentiates between themselves and the character, they become more familiar with him, and choose to participate during the performance in order to gain a stronger connection with him and all other spectators.



Fig. 3: Blue Man Group Photo: Commercial on a Bus by Bert W; *Trip Advisor*; tripadvisor.co.uk, Jul. 2014; Web; 17 Oct. 2015.

This chapter employs the term authenticity to reference the Blue Man's originality. The Blue Man is extremely unique in his physical appearance; no other character looks quite like him. While the PVC percussion and other captivating spectacles are major selling points, an overall draw to attend any live entertainment is the chance to share a space with the performers. Thus the Blue Man character is the eye-catching ingredient that captures spectators' curiosity, lures them to the box office, and secures their attention as they watch him perform in front of them. His recognizable look and quirky behavior label him as an authentic one-of-a-kind character, fully originated and patented by Blue Man Productions.

Section one examines the Blue Man's original and unique physical attributes, revealing signifiers and interpretations of his exterior elements. His outlandish appearance includes his blue skin, bald head, and black costume with a secret chest compartment. These particular characteristics entice an audience and blend the weird with the well known. The Blue Man is original, but feels familiar since he is clearly human. But his outward appearance and absurd behavior make him truly foreign and awe-inspiring. Even though his outlandish traits partially alienate him from his intrigued onlookers, he still strikes a chord with them because he represents and consequently reveals fundamental human desires and ideal character traits: "they come from the part of us that wants to play, to connect with others, and experience the simple joy of being alive" (Wink). This statement properly sums up the goal of Blue Man Group and elucidates what their headlining character is meant to resemble.

The Blue Man also obtains authenticity in the honesty and realness surrounding his behavioral traits and communication skills. He was designed to be approachable and genuine, never appearing deceitful, untrustworthy, or a showy performer simply seeking praise. "He is not trying to make an impression. He just *is*." (*Inside the Tube*) Section two discusses how the Blue

Man's behaviors and methods of communication give him honesty and sincerity. He looks like an audience member of his own show, exploring the space and responding organically to all he sees. His quirky behaviors consist of minimal facial expressions yet constantly alert eyes, impeccable hearing, and the ability to catch food from far away. These mannerisms excite audiences, propelling them to participate as they assist with a trick or become present through vocalization. His lack of speech reveals the communicative power of other senses such as sight, hearing, and touch. Although he is mute, he plays percussion and speaks through his music, emotive eyes, uninhibited dance moves, and comprehensible hand gestures. As he interacts with spectators, there is never a separation between character and actor, even when he meets and takes pictures with spectators after the show. His sense of wonder and curiosity about the human spectators and the show's various happenings make his reactions appear natural and honest.

The spectator's investment in the Blue Man and his equal investment and trust in his audience makes the participation more desired rather than unappealing or risky. At the beginning of the show, the Blue Man could be perceived as an untouchable celebrity. Yet spectators soon identify him as a new, yet approachable, brand of human. They connect with him through fundamental methods of communication such as eye contact and gestures. Audiences appreciate his simple and genuine nature. Moreover, his courage, trustworthiness and innocence inspire spectators to employ these qualities as well by accepting the invitations to participate. Once everyone takes part in the show, a fusion is formed not only between performer and spectator, but also between everyone in the crowd.

Lastly, authenticity refers to the Blue Man's authority over the production and franchise. While other artists may perform or adapt some of their pieces into their own act, it cannot be labeled an authentic Blue Man Group show without the authored presence of the patented three

Blue Men supplied by Blue Man Productions. Also, the character can only be identified or function fully in the context of the Blue Man Group show; he is authentic to the performance, and thus his presence makes the entire show authentic. Furthermore, he is only whole when with his two identical counterparts. Section three explores how quantity grants the Blue Man an authoritative tribal support system and sets up comedic and competitive routines. The theme of community and genre of comedy give this character and the entire production more appeal and lasting popularity. Through originality, honesty, and authority, the Blue Man character gains authenticity and attracts all types of audiences. He propels all to willingly participate in order to build a memorable bond with the authentic Blue Man.

1) Physical Attributes

The Blue Man is most easily defined and recognized by his outward appearance. His head and face are painted cobalt blue. He is also bald; the actor wears a bald cap and pads over his ears and underneath the cap, giving the appearance that he lacks both hair and ears. For his costume, he wears solid black fabric from his neck to his feet: a long-sleeved turtleneck shirt, pants, and shoes. At first glance, his clothing possesses no ornamentation. However, in the middle of his shirt, over his heart, is a mechanism called the chest hole, which instills suspense and surprise as liquids eject from it without warning. Each element authenticates the Blue Man as original and gives him a uniquely identifiable presence among viewers. When in full costume and makeup, an actor is unmistakably and uniformly a Blue Man, ready and equipped with the outer elements to evoke an audience's wonder and motivation to connect with him.

The Blue Man's most identifiable quality is the cobalt blue grease paint. The face paint acts as a mask, somewhat hiding his natural appearance. It also unifies him with his two Blue

Men counterparts to where the three are practically indistinguishable from afar. Most importantly, the face paint reveals more than it hides. The co-founders state that the paint is meant to unmask and liberate the character, metaphorically removing insecurity and self-doubt that mankind feels in society:

When we wear a mask, we are freed from our own identities, our own personalities, and own egos. We become less self-conscious. We stop thinking so much. When our attention can be removed from tending to our precious little circumstances, we become open to feelings and actions that are more authentic. All of the energy we normally expend to manage our appearance in the eyes of others becomes available for more creative endeavors.

(Blue Man Group: “Blue Man Group Education”)

This demonstrates how a desire for authenticity motivated the co-founders’ decision to give the Blue Man character a pseudo mask of blue paint, believing it could remove preexisting cultural labels, individual identity, and in turn reveal the power of the human spirit. Perhaps they were suggesting that underneath humanity’s differing outer layers and masks is a fundamental blue-colored core that yearns to create and free from judgment and self-depreciation.

Wearing the blue paint also makes the Blue Man more authentic regarding his portrayal of honesty. The mask frees the character from preconceived stereotypes, and in turn, awakens him to his own creative power and capabilities he might have been afraid to show, had he not been covered in blue. Coating the face with paint thus paradoxically removes all symbolic masks of societal pressures and expectations, affecting how humans think, act, and communicate with one another. It makes them more honest toward themselves and others. The co-founders hope the positive effects of the Blue Man and the blue mask will figuratively rub off on the audience

during the show, encouraging them to participate in the many interactive moments: “The character’s lack of self-consciousness has given them the courage to be creative and forge ahead and try something new, regardless of whether you feel silly doing it. You have to shed the self-consciousness” (Wink). Through his brave, unencumbered actions, the Blue Man invites everyone to search for their authentic self, escape any bonds of prejudice or fear, and become blue on the outside: liberated, creative, and confident on the inside.

So why the color blue? The co-founders are asked this question the most. Their initial reasoning is based on the process of elimination rather than inspiration or semiotic interpretation. While listing potential color options during the character’s inception, they realized Yellow Man was already the name of a reggae musician. Green had the implication of Martians and red would remind people of the devil. Orange made them look like clowns and the makeup did not come in purple. Their conclusion, other than that blue was the only available color without a plethora of preexisting implications: “The truth is, blue just felt right” (Wink). Perhaps a deeper examination of color can conclude how blue, which is so significant that it resides in the name of the production, may have aided in the Blue Man’s authenticity and immense success with audience members of all ages and backgrounds.

Studying the comprehensive effects and interpretations of color discloses how visual artists—even performers—can speak to, and connect with, all kinds of spectators. As photographer Bryan Peterson explains, “Color is so obvious, and just like the air we breathe, it’s everywhere. A path toward creative image-making benefits from a much higher awareness of the color that surrounds you” (78). Blue Man Group utilizes the concept of color throughout the production to emphasize how colors carry signifiers and emotive qualities that awaken senses and help people become more invested in, and aware of, everything that surrounds them. Color’s

immense power to motivate creativity and ignite a sense of awareness is echoed in Blue Man Group's current slogan: "Dare to live in full color" (Entertainment News). More color means more possibilities. The power of color supports the show's choice to fill the performance with eye-catching color, including the character's face.

Blue skin is the Blue Man's most authentic, intriguing, and recognizable quality, making his costume and identity distinguishable, since blue bares no resemblance to any natural human skin tone. Blue skin also removes any signifier of age, culture, ethnicity, social status, nationality, or race. Painting his face such a bright color while maintaining his human facial features marks him as an original brand of human. He therefore appears less like an off-putting freak, and more like an approachable man with skin of a foreign shade.

Blue is a powerful choice for a character's identity since it is one of the three primary colors, is vastly ubiquitous in the natural world, and is strongly associated with a wide range of human emotions. The popular Color Code personality test describes blue personalities as "do-gooders. [...] [C]onnecting, creating quality relationships and having purpose, is what motivates and drives these people. They bring great gifts of quality and service and are generally loyal, sincere, and thoughtful." (Color Code) This definition supports the synonyms of sincerity and honesty associated with authenticity. Moreover, Peterson observes, "Blue is the infinite sky. It is a cool color, able to calm and nurture. It's refreshing, soft, safe, and dependable. It is sensitive and peaceful." (77) Blue surrounds all mankind with the earth's blue skies and oceans; the color therefore permeates the world shared by humanity.

Blue is paradoxical since it also personifies sadness in the expression, "Why so blue?" The color's fundamental connection to sadness is comically portrayed in the sitcom *Arrested Development*, when Tobias Fünke sees an advertisement for Blue Man Group and assumes that

they are a support group for depressed men (“The One Where Michael Leaves”). The range of emotion associated with blue becomes even more fascinating and contradictive when the Blue Man’s behavioral characteristics, such as his limited facial expressions, are compared with his skin tone. Perhaps the color blue is a perfect fit because it allows the audience to interpret a vast array of emotions on an otherwise silent and practically stone-faced specimen.

Although it came about by process of elimination, blue likely felt right because of the color’s numerous connotations, making the Blue Man character even more inviting, comforting, and familiar because of his eye-catching skin tone. The evocations and representations of blue culturally unmask the Blue Man and make him more admirable and appealing. Blue emotes both serenity and sadness, personifies a pleasant personality, and resembles the natural world shared by humanity. Perhaps the blue skin labels the otherwise simplistic character as more complex, ergo, more human. If anything, the makeup certainly makes the character more reproducible, allowing for about sixty male—and female on the rare occasion—actors to embody the Blue Man at its various performance locations, making Blue Man Group a more accessible and influential form of entertainment around the world. The show’s accessibility will be analyzed more in chapter three.

Another famously authentic attribute of the Blue Man’s appearance is his sleek bald head. Wearing a bald cap is practical in nature to this production: it increases the ability to disguise the actor, unify the performers’ physical appearance, replicate the character, and proliferate performance locations. It also conveniently hides and secures the ear monitors, tucked under the padding and the bald cap, allowing the Blue Man to hear the music even though his ears are entirely covered. But more importantly, his baldness is symbolic and exotic, fueling the audience’s curiosity of this alien character with his bright skin and hairless head. While the

baldness initially assimilates him as a being from another planet, it is more noteworthy to scrutinize how his lack of hair gives him such inspiring and paradoxical human qualities.

As motivation to bald the Blue Man, the co-founders studied the appearance and effects of Marvel superhero, Silver Surfer (fig. 4). To them, his absence of hair revealed a sense of strength, masculinity, seriousness, and confidence—qualities they desired for the Blue Man (Wink). They also considered the acting style of Japanese Butoh performers who shave their heads and cover themselves in white chalk to depict the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings during World War II, and the deathly state of the victims.² The co-founders “felt that the baldness of these dancers added to their emotional nakedness and vulnerability. It also seemed to contribute to a sense of tribal unity and primal freedom.” (Wink) In Butoh, the power is in the absence. By omitting more decorative elements of the human exterior, only the skeletal core remains to be observed and interpreted. Mankind is stripped to its barebones, unveiling its organic, unadorned core. This relates to the function and purpose of the authentic Blue Man, who connects with the spectator through fundamental human communication, and ignites imagination and participation through honest connection with the audience. Furthermore, when the co-founders analyze the Blue Man, they often utilize the words “tribal” and “primal” to describe how the character resembles a basic structural framework of humanity and its potential.

² For more information on the history, performance styles, training of Butoh performers, refer to the book at the following citation: Alishina, Juju. *Butoh Dance Training*. Eds. Corinna Torregiani and Inc ebrary. Singing Dragon, London; Philadelphia, 2015. Print.



Fig. 4: The Silver Surfer from the Animated Series *Silver Surfer* by DrBat; *Wikipedia*; wikipedia.org, 28 Mar. 2005; Web; 17 Oct. 2015.

While the components and contexts of Silver Surfer and Butoh performance do not correlate with the Blue Man on every account, it is imperative to note that the semiotics behind existing characters aided in balding the Blue Man. The absence of hair has been implemented in other art forms and performance styles to imply specific traits and evoke emotional responses from audiences: a yearning to care for, depend on, or even be like the bald character.

Just as with the color blue, baldness contains paradoxes, making the Blue Man more mysterious and arbitrary. It gives him a more exposed, clean look that successfully blends strength with vulnerability; he has nothing to protect his head, yet perhaps he does not need protection. The baldness also spans ages by reflecting the innocence and purity of a newborn baby, or the wisdom and experience of the aged. His agelessness reflects his personality, which continuously fluctuates between that of a naïve child and an intelligent adult: exploding with charisma and silliness, while still silent, often stoic, and serious. The co-founders believe his baldness ultimately gives him “both the commitment of a hero and the emotional nakedness and curiosity of an innocent” (Wink), marking him respectable and approachable, possibly even inspirational. He may look like an alien, but these inferences make him very human in

disposition. The binaries of baldness widen the interpretations of the Blue Man character, making him more mystical, intriguing, empathetic, and fundamentally human.

The Blue Man's costume follows the minimalistic style of his bald head: a solid long-sleeved black turtleneck with matching pants, socks, and shoes. Theorizing on the symbolism behind this monochromatic apparel justifies the character's appeal and enticing persona.

Regarding the complexity of the color black, color expert Leatrice Eiseman observes:

To some, it is sinister and eerie; to others, the height of sophistication. In fact, no other color evokes such a variety of feelings. At various times it is described as foreboding and funereal; magical or mysterious; suave, sexy, or sober; powerful or pretentious; practical, yet glamorous. But always it is a presence not to be ignored [...] Black has come to denote great chic as well as the ultimate in elegance and drama—on the body as well as in the home. It also signifies solid, basic strength—a deep abiding powerful presence. (116)

While the many interpretations of this color showcase the vast potential interpretations of the Blue Man, the color black in relation to strength, power, and mystery most accurately support the character analysis. His all-black outfit labels him intriguing, authorizing, and in stark contrast to the vivid colorful atmosphere in which he finds himself. Black makes him the slightly alienated other while multiple colors fill his art, audience, and soon enough, his own body.

Stereotypically, a large number of professions working in the arts wear all black: theatre stagehands, performance artists, musicians, and visual artists. For stagehands, the solid and simple black apparel allows them to blend into the backstage area and be less visible as they perform set changes or other technical cues. The outfit serves as a neutralizer or even an eraser, purposefully drawing attention away from the body performing the act, maintaining the

spectator's focal point on the act itself. A performer or visual artist wearing black also sends a similar message to observers, as if to say, 'Look at the art, not at me.' Reading this intent onto the Blue Man's costume reflects his objective to get the audience into the act through participation; in his mind, the spectator is just as much a performer as he is, and should be observed just as thoroughly as the Blue Men. Thus by sharing roles, the audience and Blue Men become both the artist and the art. Furthermore, the dark costume illuminates the Blue Man's head, helping audiences to focus on his facial expressions and interpret his silent reactions.

Since the Blue Man's costume is as plain as possible, showing no sign of distinct fashion trends, decorations, or fabrications, his costume procures his wide-ranged popularity and timelessness. He is not for a specific time or place; he is for everyone everywhere. However, the neutrality of such plain black fabric slightly estranges him from his human audience, who are most likely adorning a more complex pallet of color and texture. Here he balances his character between the weird and the well known: the human and the alien. The Blue Man does not look like exactly like his audience; instead, he stands out due to his plainness and nonconformity to fashion trends. He simply does not have a fashion sense; or rather, he is sporting his own ensemble that is authentically Blue Man. His unembellished clothes also give the impression that he is simple-minded and takes pleasure from simple things. Other types of variety shows such as circuses, concerts, and sketch comedies use costumes as a major part of the spectacle; the Blue Man is frankly unfamiliar with that concept, and with human fashion in general. This causes the audience to search for other parts of the character and performance by which to be entertained, drawing their attention to the lights, sounds, paints, food, and most importantly, to one another.

The black costume also acts as a blank canvas, giving focus to the objects that end up on it. Since black is the absence of color, any color is compelling on a black background. During the

show, paint splatters and food smears, allowing elements of the scene to literally stay on the Blue Man long after it ends. In a metaphorical sense, the ebony apparel reveals how experimentation with art—whether music, theatre, visual art or others—requires a full investment, vulnerability and exposure of self. As the art ends up on his costume, the Blue Man becomes his art, and vice versa. This motivates spectators to embrace the character’s curious exploration of art forms and invest in the experience through individual interpretation and collective participation.

Since the Blue Man showcases his creative process in his art, it is fitting that the co-founders were inspired by the painting techniques of Jackson Pollock. His pieces such as “One: Number 31, 1950” (fig. 5) capture the liberation, energy, and emotion behind making art: flinging paint in every direction, letting it fall where it will, never fully mandating the brush stroke, pattern, or color combination. Likewise, the Blue Man creates arts as he freely splatters paint during iconic pieces called “Opening Paint Drumming” and “Drum Finale,” which open and close the show. As the three Blue Men play percussion on large black barrels, vibrant yellow, red, and orange paint splash up and down, occasionally onto the stage and their costume. Making the art and music bonds him and his counterparts, and greatly entertains the audience (fig. 6). Thus while it may seem chaotic and unruly at times, his messes and splatters on his all-black outfit identify him as the child-like, uninhibited part of each spectator that still desires to imagine, play, freely express, and make a mess in the process of creation.

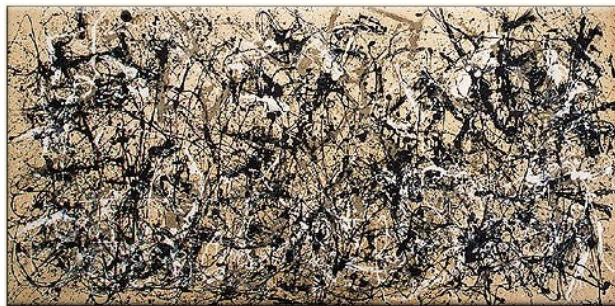


Fig. 5: “One: Number 31, 1950” by Jackson Pollock; *Jackson Pollock Biography, Paintings, and Quotes*; Jackson-pollock.org, 2011; Web; 15 Oct. 2015.



Fig. 6: “Drum Finale”; bestoflasvegas.com; Web; 20 Oct. 2015.

Lastly the uniform black costume helps the Blue Man temporarily take on the role of spectator and likewise share the role of performer with the spectator. As audiences sit together in the dark, they also appear as a uniform blank canvas, ready to witness and experience the live performance together. As the Blue Men enter the audience during the show, his black costume helps to hide him, causing the spectators to stand out and receive more of the intended attention. Therefore spectators transition into the role of performer more effortlessly.

While the blue grease paint, bald cap, and black costume are the most apparent characteristics of the Blue Man’s physical attributes, the costume’s secret feature instills him with more mystery, interest, and originality. The center of his long-sleeved shirt contains a hidden element directly over the heart called a chest hole. During two scenes, mashed-up banana (meant to resemble devoured Twinkies) and brightly colored paint spew out of his costume like a hose, splattering onto the stage and sometimes the audience, causing the Blue Man to “find himself in situations that you and I would not normally find ourselves in” (*Inside the Tube*). This surprising and often disturbing characteristic alienates the Blue Man more from his human viewers, yet makes him all the more entertaining, unpredictable, and exciting to examine.

Since these explosions happen to the Blue Man involuntarily and unexpectedly, the chest hole automatically makes him vulnerable and susceptible to his surroundings. His vulnerability draws in the sympathy and support of the audience, and gives a stronger impression that the Blue Man is also a spectator, curiously observing the facets and rules of his world (even his own body) and reacting sincerely to each unique situation. Overall, each outward element of the Blue Man—blue face, bald head, black costume, and chest hole—is designed to intrigue, engage, and inspire audiences to this original character. As a result, they support and strongly invest in him, accepting his invitations to participate in his show and achieve *communitas* through their combined efforts.

2) Behavior and Communication

The Blue Man's behavior demonstrates how even the most minimalistic communication skills can make contact with another human. Since the character is mute, he speaks entirely through nonverbal methods of interaction. Observing the Blue Men communicate with one another trains the spectator to adapt to these fundamental methods. By sharing roles and learning to speak to one another, Blue Man and human create a sense of wholeness to the show and form *communitas*. This is due to the trust, realness, and honesty evoked by the Blue Man's authentic behavior and modes of communication.

The Blue Man's heightened senses give him an array of unique behavioral traits and allow him to leave a meaningful impression on his viewers as they learn to communicate with him. His expressive eyes invite the audience to read and interpret his expressions and thoughts through sight. His ears, although covered, are also very astute; he responds to any sounds made by the crowd by searching for the noisemakers with his eyes. He also loves to play with his food, giving

him a level of innocence and childlikeness. Even though he cannot speak, he creates a musical language through playing percussion. He also complexes his character when he transitions from stoic body stance to spastic dancing at the end of the show. Lastly, the Blue Man cues and communicates with his audience through comprehensive hand gestures. Overall, the Blue Man's limited modes of conversation spring the audience into action as they clap, cheer, sing, and dance, and respond in kind to hand gestures. By so doing, the Blue Man invites audiences to take part in his show and fill in where his character lacks.

The Blue Men's most expressive facial feature is "their large penetrating eyes...[which] actively take in everyone and everything around them" (Fidler 14), remaining cautious and alert at all times (fig. 7). Eye contact immediately signals that a channel is open for communication, which is crucial for the Blue Man since he is mute. Although eyes are a physical attribute, studying the function of the Blue Man's eyes is more appropriate in the context of behavior and communication since they attribute greatly to his ability to converse and connect with the audience and each other.



Fig. 7: Blue Man Group co-founders showcasing the character's expressive eyes and alert stance. L to R: Phil Stanton, Matt Goldman, Chris Wink; posted by AllStarSuperman; comicvine.com, 8 Aug. 2013; Web; 15 Oct. 2015.

Perpetuating an open channel of conversation with the audience is crucial to the show's objective and the character's honesty and dependability. If the Blue Man covered up his eyes or did not animate them, the audience could not trust or connect with the character as quickly; the spectator's sense of personal risk would skyrocket, and it would be much more difficult to accept the invitation to participate with such a foreign and mysteriously quiet character. Gareth White defines risk as the possible sacrifices made by a spectator during audience participation: "opportunities for embarrassment, for mis-performance and reputational damage, such that the maintenance of control and the assertion of agency that projects this decorum is important to the potential audience participant, especially at the moment of invitation" (73). Therefore the show's first invitation for collective participation is handled carefully through eye contact between Blue Man and human.

After the Blue Men perform the opening musical piece entitled, "Big Cyc" featuring them as silhouettes behind a sheet, the sheet is removed and the Blue Men stand on a barely decorated stage. Then they get close to the edge of the stage and stare at the crowd, practically motionless and clearly confused. Their simple stare nonverbally welcomes the audiences into the realm of interactive live performance. Fidler notes: "The image of the Blue Man sells it all. A lovable blue-skinned creature whose behavior and actions are like those of an innocent child. This is the image that they wanted to create" (30). The Blue Man's eyes evoke this sense of innocence and hyperawareness, gaining trust and support from spectators who share a collection of sentiments with him: excitement, alertness, apprehension, naivety, and a natural curiosity about the strange world surrounding the show. Typical spectators enter a show equally as innocent, expecting to sit and observe the entire time, never directly interacting with, or being acknowledged during the show. When the Blue Men stare directly at the audience, spectators immediately question the

identification and forthcoming roles of spectator and performer. This demonstrates the power of eye contact and the inquiry instantly established when performer and spectator acknowledge that they clearly see one another.

As the Blue Men glance back and forth at one another and the audience, their stoic stares and slight shock suggest that the human is a new and interesting specimen to them. Moreover, in this moment the three do not seem to know they are the main performers of the event. Together, spectator and performer wait in this moment to see who will act out first, exemplifying how the two share roles in the production: both seem to think they are the spectator and that the other is the performer. Everyone waits, not sure of the relationship between Blue Man and human.

A Blue Man performer mentioned that he loves to hold this introductory stare for a long time, reading the energy of the audience while getting them used to the absence of the fourth wall (Rackett). In theatre, the “fourth wall” is the imaginary barrier at the edge of a proscenium stage that presumably separates the worlds of performer and spectator. This interaction is the audience’s first invitation to participate by applauding the Blue Man’s entrance, chuckling at his surprised face, and often choosing to stare right back at him, anxiously awaiting his next move. In this interaction, both fulfill the role of performer and spectator, setting up the participatory structure for the remainder of the show.

It is important for the Blue Man to connect with his audiences through eye contact since his eyes are the sole expressive part of his face. While humans utilize countless facial expressions on a daily basis to convey emotions and responses, the Blue Man does not even nod or shake his head to indicate ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Likewise, his mouth remains still and shut except for when he eats food. The Blue Man’s eyes are also a key humanizing factor since they are the only fully exposed body part on his costume; everything else is covered by paint or clothing. And

since the performers keep their original eye color, eyes are the most human and individualized element of the Blue Man, serving as a portal to the person underneath and a necessary commonality between performer and spectator.

His eyes depict some sentiments, yet only a few in comparison to the audience's eyes staring back at him. In fact, the performer is trained to indicate only four main phrases, mainly through his eyes: "1) *What is that?* 2) *Oh shit!* 3) *Wait.* 4) *Yes, this is wonderful,* or *Yes that's it*" (Fidler 39)! These inner thoughts often correlate with a spectator's inner monologue during their first Blue Man Group experience, unsure of how to identify and interpret the Blue Man character or the show as a whole. Since the Blue Man reciprocates the emotions and quandaries of his spectators as he stares at them and other objects during the show, audiences become more willing to participate and share roles with him because "eye contact represents the most perfect reciprocity in the entire field of human relationship" (Argyle and Dean 289). His eyes create a shared dialogue with his audience, and make him more relatable and comprehensible.

The Blue Man's silence liberates and expands the imagination of his audience. In a practical sense, muting the character unifies him among the sixty or more performers that portray him at one time across venues. By the same token, muteness eliminates any potential language barriers, making the Blue Man more accessible, approachable, and openly interpretative for each audience member, regardless of native tongue. This accentuates the Blue Man's extensive appeal, empowering each spectator to translate and identify with him in his or her own language.

On the other hand, the Blue Man's silence may be frustrating and confusing to spectators who prefer a more traditional storytelling mode, wherein performers speak dialogue and convey a comprehensible plotline. Such annoyance with the Blue Man's muteness is satirized on the NBC television comedy *Community*, wherein the character Troy Barnes, at a moment of pending

death, exclaims his biggest regret in life: “We’ll be stranded here forever. And I’ve never seen Blue Man Group!” A few moments later, he shamefully confesses, “I *did* see Blue Man Group. I just didn’t get it! Why can’t they talk? They have so much in common” (“Intro to Felt Surrogacy”)! Troy’s distress reflects how spectators naturally yearn to comprehend and relate to characters in order to enjoy fully the viewing experience. Troy felt that verbalization would have given the Blue Men a stronger relationship with one another, thus granting the show a clearer narrative and an easier point of access for him as a spectator.

Troy’s lament is also comical because the Blue Men do not just have a lot in common; they are one character embodied by three performers. Taking this into consideration, perhaps the Blue Men do not need a verbal language to converse with one another because they share similar thought processes. Whatever the reason, his silence catalyzes an exploration into the meaning and methods of human communication, motivating the audience to do something about the disparity between them and the Blue Man. Through eye contact, they form a better understanding of the character and think more deeply about what they have in common with him and the other spectators. Most importantly, the absence of voice makes an audience yearn for presence in the show, willingly taking on the low-risk role of collective vocal performer and quickly realizing the influence of communal audience involvement.

The Blue Man obtains a voice through sharing his role of performer with the spectators, inviting them to fill in the vocal void. Through cheers, applause, recitation, laughing, and singing, audiences excitedly exert their presence throughout the show. The motivation to be heard at a Blue Man Group show may be explained through Eugenio Barba’s concept of the virtue of omission³. Fidler summarizes Barba’s theory, stating that “it is not always what

³ For more information on Eugenio Barba, refer to citation: Barba, Eugenio and Savarese, Nicola, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hill Inc. 1991. Print.

happens onstage as it is what is not happening onstage that engages the audience. The virtue of omission is when a performer executes an action but the action continues after the movement through space is complete” (35). Since the show feels somewhat incomplete without some form of vocalized conversation between live performers, audiences grant themselves permission to act as the communal voice of the show, consequently sharing the roles of performer and spectator with the Blue Man. The audience often deems this collaborative experience very rewarding as they provide a vocal energy to the show—one that the Blue Man could not supply on his own.

Lastly, the muteness of the Blue Man could label the show as a silent comedy, akin to the acting styles of early twentieth-century silent film, namely slapstick. Just like with the Blue Man, silent film performers possess a quality of timelessness and talent as they entice an audience through sight and nonverbal sound. Film creator Julian Dutton praises the powerful influence of silent performers and their ability to inspire others to interpret and recreate what they do: “[I]t sets out the argument that far from being the unsophisticated cousin of verbal comedy, slapstick has often achieved a greater level of satire and humanity than linguistic humour; and that it persists as a dynamic creative force, ripe for reinvention by anyone with the creative will to do so” (v). The Blue Man’s humor and language are more lasting and ingenious because they are entirely unscripted and interpretive. He ultimately speaks to his spectators through silent communication, motivating people to employ these fundamental methods in order to establish a relationship with him.

The Blue Man has a hyperactive sense of hearing, allowing him to establish a call and response with his audience. Although his ears are barely visible under his painted bald cap, he can hear the audience extremely well. His quick and visible reactions to their noises match the hyperawareness of his eyes; he can always see and hear his spectators. When the audience

laughs, shouts, and claps collectively, the Blue Man acknowledges it by quickly turning and searching for the location of the audible intrusion, which then evokes laughter from the crowd. This typically turns into a game throughout the show, as the audience receives validation and affirmation by the Blue Man's constant awareness of, and reaction to, the live soundscape.

His hypersensitivity to sound encourages audiences to not only spectate, but to speak up and temporarily take on the role of performer from their seat. Likewise, as the Blue Man turns and stares, he instantly becomes a spectator, giving attention to the live nature of the audience and responding accordingly. He customizes his set of reactions to the individuals in attendance, becoming more honest in the eyes of the audience as he does so. His real time responses make him evermore present in the moment, presumably not tied to a script at each interaction. His attention to the audience invites the audience to follow suit and be more present and involved during the show, feeding the impulse to improvise and be heard.

The Blue Man also has an eccentric taste for sweets. While he does not use his mouth for communication or expression, he uses it to entertain. He employs unhealthy eating habits as a talent by making music out of the snacks and catching them from far distances. During the show's inception, the cofounders hearkened back to the vaudeville entertainers, noting that a performance must showcase a skill that the average spectator does not possess. In their humble opinion, they had no outstanding talents other than drumming. However, "we could catch things in our mouths" (*Inside the Tube*). Throughout the show, the character catches what the audience believes to be gumballs and marshmallows in his mouth at a fast pace, from a far distance, and in large quantity. He then spits them out and creates paintings with the splatted paintballs and statues with the soggy marshmallows. Later, an audience member throws a piece of Toblerone chocolate into the Blue Man's mouth. The three Blue Men also make percussive music with

Captain Crunch cereal and eat Twinkies with a female audience member they have invited onto the stage. All of these pieces will be named and discussed at length throughout the thesis.

Perhaps the decision to have the character only eat sweets and to play with his food was intended to make the Blue Man appeal to the children in the audience, and more importantly, the child inside of everyone that wants to play and have fun. Regardless, his food choices and skillful methods of consumption certainly give the character a younger, more innocent and honest persona. His unique food-catching talents could also categorize these parts of the performance as a stunt show, a circus act, or even a magic show. This trick baffles audiences by hiding the secret recipe to some of the edible props. Overall, emphasizing and analyzing the Blue Man's senses—sight, hearing, and taste—showcase how his bizarre behavioral characteristics add to his authenticity and intrigue audiences of all ages. As he stares, listens, eats, and responds, he creates a unique form of communication with his onlookers supported by a new vaudeville platform that will be analyzed in chapter two.

Blue Man Group is also considered a multisensory show due to its musical element. The co-founders theorize that artistic expression and creativity is innately ingrained in all humanity; at one point, everyone has felt the desire to make art of one kind of another (*Inside the Tube*). Collectively listening to, and participating in the live music of Blue Man Group unleashes that instinctive yearning to create and celebrate artistic endeavors. Music naturally appeals to the imagination. Aaron Copland observed that “it is the freest, most abstract, the least fettered of all the arts: no story content, no pictorial representation, no regularity of meter, no strict limitation of frame [to] hamper the intuitive functioning of the imaginative mind” (7). Additionally, since most Blue Man Group songs do not contain lyrics, music supports the notion that art is always open to interpretation and intended to liberate creativity and the imagination.

Besides his physical features, the character's outstanding percussion skills are the most impressive and identifiable talent of the Blue Man and the production. Quite often the Blue Man is advertised through action shots with his unique instruments: a PVC pipe marimba featured in a piece entitled "Pvc4" (fig. 8), large bass drums, mobile drum kits surrounding his body, and the aforementioned metal barrels for splattering paint. Percussion is a principle selling point of Blue Man Group, enticing music lovers to witness an unconventional rock concert experience surrounding three nameless performers portraying the same alien character. Most importantly, when the Blue Man plays percussion, his music both energizes and silences the audience, giving the proper focus to his musical method of communication and expression.



Fig. 8: PVC Marimba "Pvc4"; bluemangroup.com, Web; 16 Oct. 2015.

Percussion also permits the Blue Man to converse through music's tribal essence. Blue Man Group employs the term "tribal" on many occasions to exemplify how the show unites and connects performers and spectators through the natural process of *communitas*, and wanting to be part of a group. As Susan Kattwinkel observed in her examination of the group, "the tribal impulses are most strongly represented in the drumming. The rhythm pieces, which compose the largest proportion of the show, are compelling, and generally unaccompanied by anything that might distract the listener from the full impact of the drumming" (*Contemporary*, 161). Drums and auxiliary instruments accentuate this authentic "sense of tribal unity and primal freedom"

(Wink) especially since percussion is utilized in numerous music styles throughout time and location. The production's concept of tribal unity will be analyzed throughout the thesis.

The mere act of playing drums has prolonged Blue Man Group's popularity, especially the Blue Man character. Musicologist John Mowitt emphasizes the importance of percussion, particularly the drum, in music history and humanity: "As an instrument long associated with the very emergence of music, the drum has a rich musicological significance...use of the drum has been codified in various ways by diverse cultures" (6). This supports the theory that percussion is an operative artistic outlet for attracting and connecting with different spectators across cultures, backgrounds, and aesthetics. Percussion is at the core of rudimentary musical language, so it is fitting that the Blue Man would select it as his instrument since he personifies the necessary basics for connection and creativity.

Percussion is physically demanding music to perform and visually entertaining to watch. Therefore the Blue Man corporally makes his art and communicates through it, emphasizing how body language and music can give a silent character more personality and voice. Whether clapping, striking, pounding, stomping, or shaking, percussion requires the forceful action of a body part with the accompaniment of a surface, object, or other body part. The Blue Man must invest his entire being into his performance and vice versa. Mowitt explains that in order to play percussion, the performer and the performed should act as one unit:

The drum is a richly catachrestic instrument [...] in possessing a body, a skin, a head, and a voice, the drum has long represented the expressive interiority that we call the subject, the human being [...] The drum cannot be represented without figuring it through the body [...] By the same token, of course, the body has also long functioned as a site of percussive beating. (6)

This supports the theory that the Blue Man's body cannot be fully activated without its percussive function, nor can the percussion perform itself without the investment of the Blue Man's physical commitment.

Likewise, Blue Man Group cannot function or be fully activated as a show without the full investment and participation of the audience; they are as much of the performer as the Blue Man. His immense effort to put on a show propels an audience to return the favor and put in more conscious effort to listen and respond. Percussion helps the Blue Man convey music as a powerfully fundamental method of communication, inviting the audience to participate in the artistic moment. The end of each Blue Man Group song evokes the equally percussive response of applause, establishing a shared call and response dialogue that unites both Blue Man and human in a strictly musical conversation. As a result, performance and spectator become a more tribal entity, bonding with one another through the creation of music and celebration of the Blue Man's talent.

Percussion's visual, palpable, and emotive qualities exhilarate an audience since the loud volume causes them to feel the music, not just hear it. The drums get their blood pumping, their ears pounding, their heads nodding, and ultimately establishes a clearer comprehension of the Blue Man character: he is most alive and united with his counterparts when he is drumming. The percussion gives the Blue Men a shared function and purpose, consequently unifying the audience as well. When they see how important and innate drumming is to him, audiences become more invested in his music and all other traits surrounding the character.

Regarding the Blue Man's physicality, Fidler notes, "the nonverbal curiosity of the Blue Man character creates a sort of curiosity for an audience and thus draws its attention to the Blue Man's actions" (Fidler 34-35). Even though he starts off in a stiff and cautious stance, his body

loosens up throughout the performance, just like a spectator, as they all become more comfortable in this shared environment. While character and spectator share many emotions and moments of interaction, “he doesn’t understand our customs or the way we do things, but I think you see that he catches on pretty quickly [...] the Blue Men look silly and different, but they are having fun doing what they’re doing” (*Inside the Tube*). Throughout the show, he puts on costumes, plays new instruments, and learns how to dance. As he performs potentially embarrassing actions, the Blue Man remains unfazed and unashamed due to his self-confidence and genuine obedience.

For example, in the piece “Time to Start”—which will be discussed more throughout this thesis—the voiceover commands everyone to perform a list of rock concert movements. The audience and Blue Men obey. One of the last movements is entitled “The Behind the Leg Stretch.” While spectators read this one as a joke and do not attempt the gesture, the Blue Man does as he is told. Even though he does not succeed, he receives laughter and cheers from the audience as he falls to the ground behind the marimba. His curiosity and willingness to try new things is not only an entertaining behavioral characteristic; his commitment to take on these physical challenges, never caring what others think of him, encourages the audience to do the same as they stand up and dance to a song called, “Shake Your Euphemism.” The lyrics command the audience to “shake your booty” while all three Blue Men demonstrate.

To convince the audience to experiment outside their comfort zone, the Blue Man starts off more stoically and slowly build up to these uninhibited dance moves. This progression of the Blue Man’s physicality throughout the performance—neutral to expressive, cautious to crazy—typifies the envisioned expedition for the audience’s comfort and interaction level with the show. Fidler observes that the Blue Man has a particular stance from which all movements start (refer

to fig. 4): “From a technique standpoint, they appear to have a resting or starting position. The legs of the stance are set apart in a wide saddle-like stance with bent knees, and feet that flare out. The arms are bent at the elbow and the forearms and hand reach out above the waist” (42). This is a neutralizing stance that lacks distinctive personality traits, yet it marks the Blue Men as cautious and alert observers, much like a spectator. As the show unfolds, he becomes more comfortable in his blue skin, willing to explore different dance moves and forms of expression.

The Blue Man’s advancement toward bigger choreography and physicality entices audiences of all ages and flexibility to add their own dance moves to the show, showing support for this courageous character. His entertaining body language helps the audience decipher his personality, reading him as friendly and welcoming. Moreover, since his dance moves are more comedic than impressive, his quirky choreography grants permission for all types of dancing and skill level. There is no reason for spectators to be embarrassed or feel like the show expects them to move in any particular way or showcase actual talent; everyone is just meant to have fun. In fact, the Blue Man’s awkward dancing should make him more honest and approachable to the audience; it is as if he is one of them. His honesty, innocence, and bravery encourage the spectators’ support, and guide them to accept the invitation to participate and be like him. He “reacts a little bit different than you and I because he doesn’t have ego to get in the way. He’s not self-conscious” (*Inside the Tube*). This is why his simple techniques of persuasion are appealing to an audience: the Blue Man does not make people feel as if they are being forced or manipulated to participate. Their attraction to the character naturally coerces a crowd to take part in order to connect and communicate with him.

The Blue Man’s hand gestures further develop his ability to communicate and interact with audience. He wears cobalt blue gloves to support the illusion that his skin is blue, and assist

with his ability to hold mallets and drumsticks. Yet more importantly, his hand motions form an interpretive gesture-based language with the audience, and keep the performer in character at all times. After interacting with a spectator during the show, the Blue Man grabs the person's hand and raises his or her arm in a celebratory fashion, which ignites applause as spectators cheer. In instances when the Blue Man invites a spectator onto stage, he slowly puts out his hand, expecting the person to take it and follow him wherever he goes. This comprehensive gesture illustrates how the Blue Man's alien behavior and communication remains human enough for spectators to recognize and properly respond during moments of interaction. He is indeed strange, but his hand gestures are familiar.

Spectators are also commanded to use their hands in order to become communal performers with the Blue Men. For example, in "Time to Start" some of the familiar rock concert movements are "The One Armed Fist Pump" and "Wave Your Hands in the Air Like You Just Don't Care." This simple act of collective participation and "seeing thousands of people 'raise the roof' all at once is simultaneously comforting, amusing, and ripe with the potential for *communitas*," (635) according to a review by Stephen Harrick. Kattwinkel defines Turner's term as a moment "in which the audience can feel like they are creating and expressing common sentiment along with the performers and each other; a goal of active spectatorship, with the belief that the physical engagement may strengthen mental engagement" (*Audience*, x-xi). Indeed *communitas* is the quintessential goal of a Blue Man Group show, uniting audiences and performers as they follow commands and learn to create this show together piece by piece.

The act of applause is also a hand gesture performed by spectators and helps sustain a positive relationship between performer and spectator during live performances. Author Dennis Kennedy accounts the power of applause in Western tradition: "applause is the most obvious

indicators that miscellaneous spectators have become an audience. It is part of a larger set of social behaviours related to the reception of performance” (17). Thus communal hand gestures such as applause unifies people and identifies them as a collective audience. Accordingly, the Blue Man’s emphasis on hand communication makes him more akin to a spectator since they both act and respond to one another through translatable hand gestures.

However, the alien Blue Man is not entirely familiar with all traditional human behavior, particularly in settings of live entertainment. His unique reactions further authenticate his character and keep him in the performance mode at all times. At curtain call, the Blue Man acknowledges his audience to thank them for their attendance and willful participation. However, in order to keep the humanoid behavior in tact, instead of waving like a human, he straightens out both arms, spreads out his fingers, and points both flat palms in the direction of the audience. He does this gesture to the three main sections of the house, to the individual participants that assisted with the show (fig. 9), then to the band members and stagehands that have joined them onstage for the final bow.



Fig. 9: Blue Man Group Curtain Call; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders. 20 June 2015.

Since “gestures are always social in meaning and subject to social regulation” (Kennedy 17), this moment identifies how the Blue Man is not unaccustomed to the traditional, cultural methods of performance ritual. Yet he still remains understood by his human audiences, who accept his behavioral differences, and adapt to his method of communication by mirroring the hand gesture back to him (fig. 10). At this instant, performer and spectator have created a shared language, echoing Kennedy’s statement: “Audience gestures are not universal, they have histories as well as phenomenologicals, they are temporally and culturally shaped” (16). The Blue Man’s gestures shape and mold his spectators to match his way of speaking, essentially joining the two worlds by responding through the same gesture of appreciation.



Fig. 10: Blue Man Group Curtain Call Audience Hand Gesture of Appreciation; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders. 20 June 2015.

Next, the cast and crew hold hands and bow in unison as the audience applauds; this is typical behavior for a curtain call. That being the case, the Blue Men do something slightly different: they hold one another’s hands, but they do not bow. Instead, they continue to stare stoically at the audience, as if they were unfamiliar with the bowing gesture (fig. 11). In the theatre realm, the curtain call signals the moment when actors typically stop acting and bow as themselves, revealing the end of the performance and return to reality. If a Blue Man bowed at the end of his show, he would remove his character, unveiling the human performer underneath.

In addition, the bow would make it apparent that he knew he was acting instead of living the experience like a spectator of his own world. By keeping the Blue Man in character during the curtain call, the audience never sees a separation between character and performer; he remains an innocent spectator of his own show. Just like the audience, the Blue Man is to be perceived as an honest and real being, experiencing all pieces, exchanges, and events for the first time.

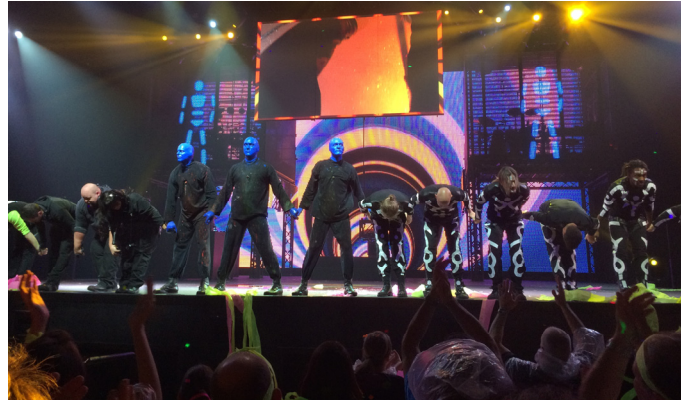


Fig. 11: Blue Man Group Curtain Call Bow; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders. 20 June 2015.

The Blue Man continues his characterized hand gesture in the lobby after the show, saying ‘thank you’ with his hands. He also gives autographs by touching his face and placing his finger onto the spectator’s face or program. Thus the authentic Blue Man signature is a blue fingerprint. By staying in character and interacting with the audience, the Blue Man becomes even more honest, real, and approachable to his fans. In return, his fans become like him by emulating his behaviors; often spectators do not talk to the Blue Man during the post show. Instead, they speak through eyes and touching hands, showcasing that they have adapted to his methods of communication in order to interact with him.

Theatre theorist Susan Bennett implores, “The act of leaving the theatre is always important. It may provide a welcome release and the end of an interpretive activity. On the other hand, the buzz of an excited audience, slow to leave theatre, continues the interpretive process

and is likely to enhance the experience of that production in the individual's memory [...] to increase the pleasure of the event" (164). Since the entire show thrives on audience participation, it is imperative that the Blue Men allow audiences to receive access to the character during the post-show. If spectators had wanted to participate more individually with a Blue Man during the show but were not selected to do so, this gives everyone the chance to receive one-on-one interaction with the Blue Man—not just with the performer, but also with the character. In a way, the whole experience feels more authentically real when the audience has the chance to meet the characters.

A Blue Man performer observed that during this interaction, no spectator approaching the Blue Man has ever been remotely scared of him or overly apprehensive about this moment of contact. On the contrary, spectators desire to touch him, see him up close, get a picture with him, get his autograph, and show their appreciation for him (Rackett). This positive reaction would not be possible without the Blue Man's authentic behavioral traits and modes of communication.

3) Quantitative Component: The Power of Three

The Blue Man's appearance, behavior, and communication styles demonstrate his authenticity (originality and honesty) and defend his lasting appeal in live entertainment.

Another attractive element to the Blue Man, along with his aforementioned qualities, is credited to the character's quantitative component. Although the show's pieces and methods of audience interaction have been altered over time, Blue Man Group has consistently performed with three Blue Man actors at every performance. The set number of three creates the group aspect of Blue Man Group, and assists in the production's major success by instituting authority with a tribal theme and comedic structure.

The three Blue Men represent the concept of three as one: three bodies all identified by one character. They simultaneously represent the appearance of one as three: one character requiring three bodies to make up its identity. This dual representation demonstrates how quantity factors greatly into a character's authentic qualities and overall identity. An iconic visual representation of the Blue Man depicts him standing next to his identical counterparts. All three are labeled as Blue Men, only distinguished by their stage position in relation to one another: Right, Center, and Left. Since the Blue Men are one in purpose and function, it is purposefully difficult for a spectator to tell the three Blue Men apart, even if they vary slightly in height, weight, age, sex (on rare occasions), or ethnicity. A study of quantity and character exhibits how themes of community and the genre of comedy can arise and affect an audience's willingness to form a relationship with a character and counterparts.

The co-founders are often asked about the reason behind three Blue Men in the show. At the start, three was selected because it was the number of artists committed to the project:

We started out with more, but when chance dealt us circumstances where only three remained, something clicked. Maybe it had something to do with how three is a great number for visual composition. Or perhaps it was because three people seemed like the minimum number to evoke the sense of a 'tribe'. Or maybe it was because three performers seemed ideal for comedic triangulation and one-upmanship. (Wink)

The effective visual composition will be discussed further in chapter three. The remaining two points—the significance of tribal identity and comedic competition—relate to the Blue Man's personality, representation of a unified populace, and ability to affect a spectator's willingness to support such an alienated being.

The tribal essence of three is the most important reason for having three performers in Blue Man Group. In this context, “tribal” is being used figuratively to denote a strongly communal—even familial—bond between performers and an audience. Postcolonial or ethnic context does not apply directly to this use of the term. The word “tribe” connotes a compellingly cultural, generational, and enduring sense of unity and purpose rather than the word “group,” which could suggest a collection of only partially associated people or things. Hence “tribe” is embraced during Blue Man Group cast and crew training (which will be discussed in chapter two), and used in the written and spoken descriptions of the production. Yet “group” is a more approachable and appealing word, even though titling the three performers as the Blue Man Tribe would not wrongly depict the relationship between the uniformed trio.

The Blue Men’s sense of tribe exhibits the proper blend of mystery and familiarity needed to engage and activate a live audience. The cofounders often stress the importance of thinking of the Blue Men in terms of a tribe. Without his two partners by his side, he would be inside a vacuum on stage, alienated from the audience and his environment. As a result, he would appear too foreign, and the audience would not be as willing to interpret, trust, or build a connection with the mysterious and lonely Blue Man.

The Blue Men are three separate beings, but working together as one organism, always knowing the location of the others in the group. Since the three Blue Men function so well together and have a very clear connection and sense of communication with one another, it motivates the audience to desire that same connection with one another and the character. Tripling the character instantly gives him more shape, weighted influence, and stronger presence, making him more in charge of his atmosphere, rather than completely subjective to it. The

palpable connection between the three makes the character more intriguing and more enjoyable to watch as they interact with one another.

Compiling three performers into one character brings about the show's desired outcome regarding the audience's involvement with, and interpretation of, the Blue Man character and his surrounding world. Three is large enough so that the Blue Men have a visible support system, yet conveniently small enough that the audience senses an invitation and desire to interact with them. Three is the smallest number that can categorize people as a group or tribe (*Inside the Tube*). This aspect is crucial since a performance with only two Blue Men would most likely form such an inclusive connection between the duo, making the request for group participation not as prevalent or inviting. Spectators would not feel needed; the relationship and narrative would already feel complete with the presumable call and response between the two performers onstage.

On the other hand, a twosome could also instigate a competition between the two Blue Men—one versus the other—causing a division between spectators as they cheer for one and heckle the other. Dividing the audience, or causing any disapproving outlook on the Blue Men or other audience members, is the opposite intent of a Blue Man Group experience. This theory of numeric composition is supported by its affect on visual art. Peterson concludes that anything in the amount of even number “runs the risk of recording a composition that is undefined and subsequently, indecisive. When objects and subjects are treated equally, they often...cancel one another out.” An odd number, such as three, can therefore allow “one element that clearly has more importance than the others” (96) to properly stand out, and not fall by the wayside due to other equally important components. By that account, three Blue Men cuts down on the audience's ability to manipulate the show or misinterpret the character. Instead, it allows a Blue

Man to stand out from the group if he so wishes, without being canceled out by his counterparts. And stand out he will.

The key to the Blue Man's attractive personality is his comedic timing, usually occurring when his actions drastically stand out from the other two Blue Men. His knack for humor labels the Blue Man Group as comedic variety show, which lures in spectators who prefer the type of live theatre that provides a good laugh. Yet more importantly, his comedic nature forms a deeper level of familiarity and common ground between the Blue Man and human. At first glance, all three Blue Men appear to be the exact same character with matching physical attributes and behavioral qualities. This extreme uniformity creatively personifies the collection of unidentified audience members at the show. Jill Dolan observes, "[T]he spectator's individuality is subsumed under the assumption of commonality; their differences from each other are disguised by anonymity" (1). The dimming of the lights melds all viewers into one singular mass, just like the Blue Men's similarities clump them into one singular being. However, the three Blue Men, just like the audience, will soon react and experience things in many different ways, causing the audience to ponder more deeply on how each Blue Man—or even each spectator—might be interpreting each moment of the show. Thus the three collectively resemble a uniform audience, but often react as individuals, forming a bond of familiarity with the audience.

At the show's inception, the cofounders knew they wanted Blue Man Group to be a comedy, especially since they believed that entertainers can make up for limited talent by being funny (*Inside the Tube*). Through character experimentation, they quickly learned that three is the smallest number that can contain an outsider. Since the Blue Man is already an apparent outsider to the human audience, it seemed amusing to picture a group—or tribe—of outsiders that occasionally contained an even bigger outsider, meant to reflect "the part of all of us that

feels like a fish out of water, no matter what mask of cultivation we put on the outsider, there's a part of us deep down that feels like an outsider" (*Inside the Tube*). His uniqueness from the audience and from the other two Blue Men is therefore meant to strike a chord with all spectators, empowering and relating to those who have ever felt like they did not belong.

Throughout the show, the Blue Man becomes an outsider to his tribe by making a decision that alienates him further from his counterparts. The common comedic trope consists of two Blue Men doing the exact same action, followed by the third attempting to copy the action, yet failing miserably or misinterpreting the action. Often, the two blankly stare at the third Blue Man in disapproval, resulting in a roar of laughter by the audience. These moments signal to the spectator that even though the character may seem serious and bizarrely inhuman and unemotional at the start, he is full of personality and witty comedic timing, resulting in a steady soundscape of laughter throughout the entire production.

Laughter is fundamental to the aesthetic of comedy and can singlehandedly formulate a sense of community—or tribal unity—among the entire audience. Whether making a mess of Captain Crunch cereal (fig. 12), crunching too loudly, flinging Jell-O into the audience, or wearing a completely outlandish outfit, the Blue Men humor strives on playful competition with one another, evoking laughter from the audience. White, referencing work of Robert Provine, explains the common language of laughter: it is “an unconscious, non-verbal vocalization that fits around conversation, and is shared by all the members of a group: it is a signal of belonging to a group” (130). The buffoonish action of the third Blue Man breaks up the audience's silent inquiry by queuing them up to laugh at the ridiculous situation, and to become more unified and invested in the show's unpredictable character and narrative.⁴

⁴ For more information, refer to the following citation: Provine, Robert. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. Print.



Fig. 12: Captain Crunch Number by IsafariUK; *Photo Bucket*; s181.photobucket.com, Web; 15 Oct. 2015.

Depicting the outsider in a group of outsiders also builds a sense of empathy and a support system from the audience, as they frequently applaud the odd Blue Man out for being bold enough to build his own identity and make independent choices. Regarding audiences and shared emotions, White states that empathy “give[s] them greater investment in the situation, and more motivation to explore it through participation” (44). Dutton supports this theory by connecting comedic interpretation to a spectator’s sense of empathy for the characters:

The great comedians do not pretend--they show us, time and time again, their own failure; they are acting out the truth in front of us and that's why we love them. And visual comedians display their failure in its most basic form—by falling over. So I would venture to assert that the dominant instinct invoked by the greatest visual comedy is not *schadenfreude* at all, but empathy. (3)

“*Schadenfreude*” is a German term referring to pleasure derived from someone else’s misfortune. At Blue Man Group, the audience neither wishes for, nor finds funny, any harm brought to the Blue Man. Instead, they empathize with his moments of being an outsider.

In silent and physical comedy, characters fall down to depict failure. While one Blue Man falls over during his “Behind the Leg Stretch,” the character never dramatically falls over during

the performance. He is not meant to look too clumsy or worth disrespecting. Instead, his mishaps occur through his inability to respond in the same fashion as his other two counterparts, or his lack of familiarity with certain props and people in his space. Thus the effect of an outsider among the performers causes the audience to accept the Blue Man into *their* group, cheering him on and creating a stronger communal bond between all spectators. Overall, the comedic triangulation of characters gives them a sense of authority over the production and procures the audience's attention throughout the show; knowing that a Blue Man will change up his routine and add new elements to his personality keeps all three Blue Men unpredictable and engaging to watch. Stimulated by the tribal and comedic implications of three performers embodying one character, the Blue Men work together to unite the audience through laughter and a love of this enticing outsider.

Conclusion:

The undeniable fame and success of the Blue Man Group is not tied to the masked human performers underneath, but to an attraction to the authentic character, created specifically for the function of this variety show. The Blue Man strives to unite its audiences in a celebration of all humanity and the power of imagination. By closely examining the physical attributes, communicative and behavior skills of the Blue Man character, along with the inferences of three performers portraying a humanoid prototype, the authenticity of the Blue Man proves to motivate audience participation by sparking a spectator's desire to connect with him. He is authentic in his originality, honesty, and authority. He communicates with spectators and his counterparts through a shared language discovered and employed during the show.

Theorizing on the symbolism of the Blue Man's outward appearance and scrutinizing the many facets of his personality support how this alluring character fluctuates between the role of performer and spectator in order to fuel and sustain the audience's trust, understanding, and participation. Due to the Blue Man's limited abilities to employ natural human behavior and conversation, the audience assists with what he lacks, consequently utilizing fundamental methods of human communication: eye contact, hand gestures, body language, laughter, and applause. Their efforts form a meaningful connection with the character and one another. The specificity of three performers enacts tribal implications and a comedic composition that support the production's overarching goal to connect performer and spectator through the sharing and respecting of roles. Having procured a relationship of familiarity and a desire to interact with his audience, the authentic Blue Man character can carefully take the spectators by the hand and lead them into a bright world of exploration, artistic experimentation, and ultimate communitas.

Chapter Two:

The Adaptable Narrative

“It’s a remarkable show;
a combination of mind-bending feats,
heart-stomping rhythms
and side-splitting comedy.
Blue Man Group is what every
live performance aspires to be.
I love those guys! SEE THIS SHOW!”
(*E! Entertainment News*)

An insightful tactic for researching Blue Man Group’s effect on the audience is studying how people critique and describe the show after seeing it live. Since its pieces vary across venues, is often updated, and mixes various entertainment styles together, it is difficult to clearly define the show or compare it with other types of performance. Blue Man Group’s ambiguity is mostly due to its adaptable narrative. While it could be argued that the variety show platform does not have a plot, it still contains a narrative of sorts, under the loose description that a narrative is an event, story, or account that can be witnessed, experienced, and/or recounted. The performance itself and the experience had therein is different each time partially due to the changing audience members at each venue. This keeps the show fresh and exciting each time, ready to be created and even innovated by those who attend the show. Blue Man Group’s variety show platform, the improvisational methods of training and performance, and the multiple types of invitation used to ignite audience participation establish an adaptable narrative that fuels the communal energy of live performance. These elements make the process of fusing performer and spectator together much more effortless, innate, and even desired, as form and function work in tandem to develop this constantly altering and thrilling production.

Examining the Blue Man Group production processes from inception to execution reveals just how much the spectator's overall enjoyment with the show is at the core of every production decision. The vitality of viewing and taking part in a Blue Man Group performance is ignited by the audience's willingness to participate in the creation of the pieces, and the cast and crew's ability to adapt their performance to the participation. It is important that both performer and spectator gain an understanding and appreciation for their individual and collective roles throughout the experience, so that everyone is more willing and capable of doing their part. In short, it must be clear that both parties want the best for each other. Performers should make it apparent that they will carefully guide and protect the spectators throughout the various forms of interactivity. Meanwhile, spectators must feel that their contribution to the show is simple and comprehensible, and that their willful interaction will better the show experience for both parties. When Blue Man and human invest in one another to create this show, the unsystematic storyline gains a resonating theme regarding the power of connectivity and collaboration, which is only possible due to the show's adaptable narrative structure.

In this chapter, adaptability is being utilized to describe and explore the much flexibility inherent to Blue Man Group. Section one will explore its unique variety show platform and content. The show's multipurpose components blend an assortment of art forms, technological elements, and scientific materials into a performance style the co-founders call "Neo-Vaudeville" (Wink). By mixing various performance pieces into a variety show, Blue Man Group does not completely correspond with any other existing entertainment platform, thus molding the production into its very own art form, and allowing it to forever redefine itself. It does not ever need to be one thing; it can envision, encompass, and execute scenes and songs about anything it sees fit. The selected pieces are formed through a team effort of spectator and performer.

Thus adaptability also refers to the production's continuously modifiable script. A Blue Man Group show is never entirely set in stone; it is constantly altered through trial and error to maximize the entertainment of the current audience. If people are not—or are no longer—responding positively to a particular piece in the show, Blue Man Productions in New York City concocts a new one and tests it out. There is no exact formula for testing and evaluating the likability of the pieces; rather cast and crew simply observe the audience to see if the majority appears too bored or confused with that section of the performance (Bergeron)⁵. In this way, the entire production is set up to share roles and adapt to one another: performers become spectators as they use the audience's viewing 'performance' of response as a readable and measurable scale that ultimately determine the future of the show's set list. It is as if the performer and spectator seemingly co-author the show together, both during the actual show and the (re)making thereof.

Section two will account the Blue Man Group audition, training, rehearsal, and performance processes, highlighting the communal instruction and the necessity of improvisation. Adaptability accounts for the required flexibility of the performers as they adjust cues and responses to provide a real-time reaction to the unpredictable spectators as they participate. To prepare both the band members and Blue Man performers for the adaptable nature of their roles and the rapid alterability of the show's playlist, all performers are trained through "tribal" methods of communal call and response. This process echoes the spectator's procedure of accepting an invitation to participate. Since some pieces rely on the audience's input and involvement, it is impossible to rehearse or preplan a Blue Man Group performance fully without the presence of an audience. Moreover, every spectator is unique, so every performer must adapt their performance to the situation created by those attending that show, utilizing characterized

⁵ Kerri Bergeron is a Blue Man Group stage manager at the Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino venue. The information she provided for this thesis was received during an informal interview at the "Behind the Blue Experience" on June 20, 2015.

improvisation as events arise. Everyone becomes connected when there is flexibility in authority and authorship, teaching performers, spectators, and crew to follow one another in order to piece the show together in real time.

However, flexibility does not equate to granting an audience free reign over the entire production. Adaptable narratives in live entertainment must have strong structures and limitations, perhaps even more than shows that do not involve participation. Since they allow the audience access into such an adaptable, experimental, and undefined narrative, it behooves them to study and perfect the types of invitation they are offering at each participatory moment, and the potential reactions and interpretations they may receive from the audience. Section three will describe the various pieces in the show that require audience participation, categorizing them by the type of invitation—overt, implicit, covert, and accidental—extended to the audience at the start of each piece. In order to craft and control audience involvement, Blue Man Group mandates how spectators will be expected, encouraged, and allowed to make their presence known, both individually and as a unit.

1) The Neo-Vaudeville Art Form

Since Blue Man Group is a variety show, the production constantly creates new strategies and pieces to provide enjoyment for any potential spectator. If forced into labels, the eclectic narrative simultaneously fits into multiple categories of entertainment or otherwise: rock concert, play, film, science fair, art show, magic show, stunt show, and improvisational comedy. As mentioned in chapter one, the show often identifies itself as a “multisensory experience” (About the Show: Boston), hinting at the show’s ability to awaken the senses through spectacular visual and aural elements, usage of food, and a chance to get up close and personal by touching props or performers. The co-founders were “attracted to the liberating notion of ‘boundary

crossing' ...trying to create comedic pieces that naively combined media, styles, and moods whether they 'belonged' together or not" (Wink). They have secured lasting success by always changing up their act, yet consistently employing key traits and tricks that have remained impressive and engaging in American entertainment.

If the Blue Man Group narrative were not first and foremost enjoyable to watch, the production would not have become so successful. During the show's original trial performances, many critics viewed the co-founders as performance artists seeking to convey a deeper message about humanity, social norms, and its relation to artistic expression (Wink). Uninterested in the idea of being considered performance artists and the possibly pretentious appearance that would follow this label, they categorized their art form as "Neo-Vaudeville", meaning a new style of vaudeville. Vaudeville was the term used for popular variety show acts performed in America beginning around the nineteenth century. "For centuries beyond count, motley entertainment has been performed for all manner of celebrations" with acts such as "juggling, tumbling, conjuring, storytelling, singing and dancing" (Cullen xxix).

Likewise, the co-founders focused on incorporating many art forms and topics into their variety show, demonstrating their vast array of interests: "After a while we began to feel a little uncomfortable aligning the character (and ourselves) so completely with 'art.' This is partly because we have interests in so many other areas, but it's also because we have always felt ambivalent about the art world" (Wink). The narrative both celebrates and criticizes the creation and expression of art, yet always strikes a balance between entertainment and efficacy to connect with all types of audiences: "When we get too intellectual, we like to do something to bring ourselves down a notch" (*Inside the Tube*). Thus the self-labeled Neo-Vaudeville platform steers the show more in the direction of entertainment for the masses, making audience participation

more appealing and therefore attainable. Blending theory and criticism with vaudeville buffoonery provides something for everyone.

Vaudeville always strived to interact with its audiences and make them an integral part of the performance, mostly through their laughter. Theatre historian Rick DesRochers informs, “Vaudevillians were encouraged to develop an original and surprising relationship with their audiences. The comic’s natural inclination was to get laughs by direct communication with the audience. [...] The connection between audience and performer [...] was created through the shared experience of laughter.” (34). Much like Blue Man Group, vaudevillians often “seize you and do pretty nearly anything they want with you and while it is going on, you sit with your mouth open and laugh and laugh again”(35). Audiences laugh as they watch, interpret, and understand the references and jokes being made.

The comedic elements and live soundtrack of audience laughter is credited to the way the Neo-Vaudeville narrative secures their attention, interest, and investment in the show. This is partially due to the show’s adaptability: altering, removing, and inserting new pieces over time. The fluid structure of scenes and songs makes the show a bit unpredictable, and constantly engaging, even for returning spectators. Moreover, all venues identify by the uniform Blue Man Group title, even though the show is not necessarily the same in each location at any given moment. Thus if people have seen it at a different time or place, they are most likely not discussing and critiquing the exact same production from start to finish, rendering the show an even more adaptable narrative and personal experience for each viewer.

Although the set list varies, each show still contains a combination of signature pieces (performed in all venues) and specific pieces (only performed at select venues, perhaps due to venue size, budget, local competing entertainment, etc.). Through trial and error, the co-founders

concluded that their signature pieces needed certain components of successful Vaudeville acts: a musical element, a circus element, and at least one magic trick (Wink). These numbers have proven to draw in a crowd, impressing them and keeping their attention.

The musical element is contained in the “heart-stomping rhythms” of the Blue Man’s percussion skills and the live rock band that plays throughout the duration of the show. To make the show more unique and awe-inspiring to the senses of sight and sound, they made the instruments out of PVC pipes and have continued to update their show with experimental new age percussion contraptions such as drums that produce smoke rings, and enveloping drum kits shaped like robotic insects (fig. 13). The circus element exists in the Blue Man’s fascinating ability to catch food in his mouth from far distances—a very difficult, skillful and “mind-bending feat.” The show’s essence of magic and mystery pervades in various pieces, such as the Blue Man seemingly catching twenty to thirty marshmallows in his mouth at one time, ejecting paint and mashed Twinkie from his chest, using an audience member as a human paintbrush, and other extraordinary happenings.

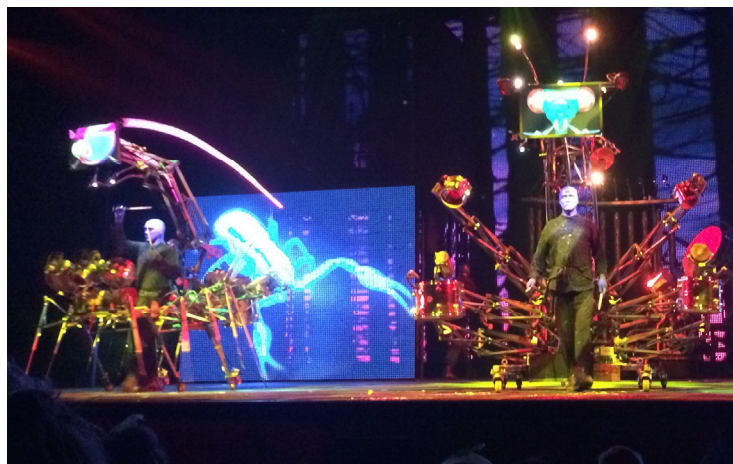


Fig. 13: “Creature Feature.” Las Vegas. Picture taken by Haley Flanders. 20 June 2015.

Overall, Blue Man Group utilizes these Vaudeville favorites in new ways to continuously amaze and engage viewers of today and pay tribute to the popular entertainers who marked the path for such experimental acts. Both historic and Neo-Vaudeville stars share the same major directive to “put it over” on the audience—a common term used by early vaudevillians, meaning “[t]o speak a line, to sing a line, to do a piece of action in such a way as to cause an audience to see, understand, comprehend and appreciate the intention and meaning” (Cressy in DeRochers 31). DesRochers adds, “Both performers and critics alike agreed that vaudevillians had a special quality that connected them with their audiences. This skill of putting it over was what made vaudeville uniquely accessible to all those who wished to try their luck on the popular stage. As long as they could ‘put it over,’ they had the potential for success” (32). Blue Man Group successfully puts it over on their audiences by including them in the performance, making a connection with them, and using the variety show platform to showcase new combinations and interpretations of popular routines that continue to awe and inspire a crowd.

Blue Man Group alters and updates their show through a motivation to continuously discover and rediscover new ways of telling similar stories, ultimately creating new art forms and imagery that no one, not even the co-founders, has seen anywhere before. Moreover, the show’s vaudeville narrative prompts spectators to attend the show numerous times, feeling that each performance will be slightly different than the last. Its seemingly random structure also challenges spectators to find potential meaning in the numerous non-sequiturs, and to consider more profoundly their own expectations and aesthetics regarding live performance and audience participation. As spectators age, they will most likely enjoy different parts of the show, now more capable of deciphering messages and implications placed in signature and specific pieces.

By inventing and reinventing their show, Blue Man Group motivates other artists to think outside the box of uniformity and labels, and adapt the way they tell stories and construct live theatre for future audiences. The Blue Man character instills confidence as he personifies the power of problem solving through consummate collaboration. He has no ego to get in his way, much like the brave and innovative vaudeville performers who tried new tricks in hopes of entertaining a crowd. When they stopped imagining and recreating, vaudevillians would lose their appeal: “In the quest to perfect their acts and win audience approval, they became imitative and their acts formulaic. They stuck with what worked until it no longer did. Sometimes, changing the gags, the songs and the costumes just was not enough [...] they were new about a week, then other acts stole them” (Cullen xxix). Just like nineteenth-century vaudevillians, Blue Man Group must constantly adapt their show to what audiences like, dislike, or have never seen before. The show is never over; the work is never done for those who work in variety show platforms. Yet the work pays off when audiences applaud and return to see what the performers have concocted next.

While people may view the Blue Man Group narrative as random pieces without a cohesive theme or plot, the co-founders believe that each piece is connected through its shared goal of uniting the audience through “Life Force.” In a promotional video, Wink narrates:

Our show is not a play. It’s not a circus. It’s not performance art. To us, it’s just our attempt at creating a heightened experience of being alive. That’s the through-line that connects all these things together, because we really believe in the value of getting people excited and giving them access to what we call “life force,” which is that feeling of excitement and energy boost that you get when you see

something really cool or really fun. We believe that every day that we're on this crazy planet is worth celebrating, so that's what we do every night.

(“Blue Man Group—What is Life Force?”)

His explanation demonstrates how each piece is designed and chosen to initiate an audience's investment in the experience, motivating them to capture the excitement of seeing and trying new things in an evocative and fun environment full of audience participation.

The Neo-Vaudeville narrative and the spectators' role in it also convey the ongoing process of art creation, rather than a finished and polished product. Blue Man Group never intends for their set list to be locked or scored. As long as it remains in operation, the show will continue to adapt to what excites and unites audiences as they take part in the Blue Men's world. Driven by the notion that “letting your individuality out is what lets all this creativity out” (*Inside the Tube*), Blue Man Group will always design pieces that keep their identity unique from any other type of performance, showcasing the ongoing process of creating enjoyable entertainment for an ever-changing society of spectators. They desire their show to echo what Vaudeville has always been: “Vaudeville was theatrical, but it was not fake. It was corny, sophisticated, sarcastic, sentimental, melodramatic, subtle, sly, raucous, intimate, flamboyant, rude, exotic, hilarious, sad, lovely, and on occasion, boring. [...] [I]t was real, as real as the people who pulled something out of themselves—their spirit, their talent, their personality, their fear and courage—and put it onstage” (Cullen xxx).

2) Tribal Training the Cast and Crew

Blue Man Group's emphasis on the artistic process in interactive theatre relates to the show's unique procedures for auditioning, training and performing. The co-founders stress, “If

you really love what you are doing, then the process is the reward; it's not about the achievement markers" (*Inside the Tube*). With this mindset, they crafted what they consider a "tribal" process wherein the band, Blue Men, and crew members learn, practice, and perform the pieces together similar to the way spectators watch and learn how to interact with the show. Blue Man Group's employment of the word "tribe" when describing their show could be defined as a unified group of people such as a family or community that work together at all times for the bettering and support of one another. The tribal nature of this training style lends itself to adaptability, which is imperative to the show and its moments of audience participation.

From the ground up, every element of the Blue Man Group production process reveals the power and necessity of adaptability in live theatre, and the level of trust and investment required between performer and spectator at all times. Since the versatile narrative molds to accommodate the spontaneous responses of each audience, Blue Man performers are trained to improvise when acting with spectators and one another. To be a Blue Man is to know how to work in and adapt to the living and visceral atmosphere of theatre, staying tuned in to all the events occurring in the space, both stage and house. The three Blue Men play within a framework of characteristics, rules, and musical rhythms. Although the band members adapt their musical performance to fit the timing of the Blue Men performers, they never act or directly interact with the Blue Men or the audience. They remain upstage, usually in caged lofts, only visible by the "tribal" neon drawings on their face and black costumes (fig. 14).



Fig. 14: The Blue Man Group band with Haley Flanders at the Astor Place venue in New York City, New York. Photo taken by Haley Flanders. 5 July 2014.

The roles and responsibilities of Blue Man Group and audience, while different at times, are all founded on tribal unity. Everyone works together from start finish to bring this show to life. At an audition, Blue Man Group prospects take on the role of a spectator, showcasing their ability to observe and copy the rhythms and accents performed in front of them. A more traditional process for teaching music is through a score: the written representation of music composition, indicating all instrumental parts through notes, staves, and measures. However, Blue Man Productions trains all performers without written music. Instead, a veteran performer plays a section of music for the new cast member, and he or she learns by watching and repeating the set of movements.

Since no sheet music is used, people auditioning to play Blue Men do not experience a disadvantage if they do not read music. In fact, some have more experience with acting and/or dance. By removing music literacy and emphasizing the ability to follow a leader and memorize quickly, Blue Man Group is not discriminating or limiting anyone's chance at being a Blue Man. The best person for the role is someone who can learn to adapt and stretch their skill level, proving most importantly that they can follow commands and work with a team, or in this case, a

tribe. The Blue Man needs these qualities in his character if he is to teach audiences to follow him; thus he showcases a willingness to learn and try new things in the audition, possibly trying old things in new ways.

Blue Man Group finally wrote down some of the score when opening their first international venue in Berlin. Yet even then, Todd Perlmutter (music director at the Las Vegas venue in 2005) informs, “it was just page after page of 16th notes. That doesn’t really tell you much, does it?” (Campbell 76). For those auditioning to be in the band that accompanies the Blue Men, the website emphasizes that the process of communal music creation is more important than being able to read notes on a page and execute them correctly:

On a basic level, we are looking for great timekeeping skills, excellent ears/listening skills, proficiency on your instrument, sensitivity to tone and dynamics, and the ability to play well together with other musicians. Additionally, we’re looking for intangibles like enthusiasm, an open mind, and the ability to rock. We’re not necessarily interested in how many notes you can play or how fast. We’re more interested in how you use your skills to make music. If you play with drive, authority, and a sense of musicality that brings both the listener and your fellow players to a higher level, then we welcome you to audition.

(Joining the Band)

This emphasizes the importance of the tribal connection, which is at the essence of the show as a whole. Rather than being the best musician, it is more pertinent that instrumentalists showcase their readiness and capability of following one another as they perform. The necessary skills are not in the notes, but in the process of making the music in the moment, keeping “an open mind,” or an attitude that welcomes adaptability, especially as songs are cut and added. Although music

is a mathematical system with many forms of measurement, Blue Man Group considers it more of an art, asking performers to express themselves and watch, learn, and respond as a tribal unit of music makers.

Omitting a score also means the music in Blue Man Group has no materially formatted presence, other than audio recordings sold as merchandise. Other than this format, the music only exists when it is being performed, temporarily showing up on stage, entering the listeners' ears, and then fading away. This matches the ephemeral nature of live theatre and the commitment level required to work with the adaptable set list. It is not a matter of simply reading and performing new music; the process requires learning and memorizing new actions and trusting the rest of the tribe of musicians as they learn to play the piece together, prepared to improvise and adapt a part during the performance if needed. The lack of sheet music also exemplifies how Blue Man Group distinctly operates without a set authoritative feature. Instead, all elements—technical, musical, acting, etc.—work in tandem, sharing the lead throughout the production, adapting to one another. Referencing the 2005 Las Vegas venue, Campbell elaborates on the flexible process of operation:

Here, the connectivity is established between the major systems of the show—lighting, audio, video—whenever and however necessary, and on a more democratic basis [...] There is no constant master. Control is taken and given away as appropriate [...] Perhaps the most control comes from the Blue Men themselves, whose whims and improvs must be followed and embellished, circus band-style by the seven-member band. (76)

Thus no one sticks to a system or depends on one method of control too rigidly, especially since the Blue Men act with a fluctuating set of spectators. Thus the show remains fresh as everyone

stays alert to the altering atmosphere, adapting responses and timing ever so slightly to make it flow without obvious interruption.

The production team's tribal methods of teaching, learning, and executing the show support how performer and spectator share roles with one another through participation. On the topic of audience participation, Susan Kattwinkel notes, "while it is possible to prepare spectators for a nontraditional theatrical experience, it is difficult to explicitly teach rules of performance" (*Contemporary*, 145). In the same way that performers do not need to know how to read music prior to auditioning, spectators do not need any specific knowledge or level of intelligence to participate in Blue Man Group; it is designed to provide comprehensive moments of participation for all audiences. The conversation of call and response between the show and the spectator sets up the "rules of performance" as audiences quickly learn to follow commands. Likewise, the band and Blue Men are trained to watch and follow one another as they make the music, rather than independently learning it at home and following the notations on the paper. Instead, they look at each other, listen intently, and respond to movements and commands, just like the audience. Learning to follow the same methods and rules creates a stronger connection between performer and spectator, and prepares them to share roles.

Since certain pieces require audience participation, the show can only ever be partially written down or rehearsed. These pieces consequently adapt to a spectator's individual choices and responses. Kattwinkel advises, "Groups wishing to include their audience as a character cannot completely rehearse without an audience. The efficacy of their techniques can only be tested under the fire of actual performance" (*Audience*, xi). For this reason, a Blue Man audition mandates an acting audition, focusing mainly on characterized improvisational skills.

Since the scenes and music are not entirely scripted, neither is the Blue Man character. He is trained in routines, behavior, and makeup application, but can never fully prepare for what spectators or other Blue Men might do during a performance. Therefore acting as a Blue Man requires a large amount of improvisation, not only when interacting with the audience, but with one another. He is much like a *Commedia dell'Arte* stock character during the Italian Renaissance, wherein a standard set of character archetypes appeared in almost every play. Each stock character had a set personality, and each play had a rehearsed plot. Physical indicators such as half masks, costume pieces, and comedic gags that were tied to each stock character, helping audiences recognize each one through appearance and behavior. Yet the play was essentially improvised, often due to the involvement of the audience, who were occasionally featured or referenced in the production. Each performance could never be repeated or restaged in exactness, much like the Blue Man Group experience.

Allowing such flexibility in a play requires actors to be even more cautious at all times, truly doubling as spectator as they watch and finishing what the audience sets up. Thelma Niklaus remarks, “in performing *Commedia*, readiness is all: you must be constantly prepared not only to interrupt and be interrupted” (Rudlin 58). Blue Man Group heeds this mantra as well due to their extensive use of audience participation. Although referencing *Commedia dell'Arte*, the following quotation sums up the need for performer and spectator to share roles in all participatory theatre: “The perfect player is he who can give himself up to the excitement of his role without forgetting the least detail, and without ceasing to be aware of what the others are doing or saying, in order to provoke the cue that he needs. He must at one and the same time be the ecstatic character of the comedy and the tranquil actor who watches and guides him” (Rudlin

59). At Blue Man Group, everyone must watch everyone, as band, Blue Men, crew, and audience adapt to the participatory pieces.

Blue Man performers need flexibility and improvisation not only when acting with the audience, but with one another on stage. The nature of being Blue Man performers requires them to adapt to acting in different locations and with multiple other Blue Men without much ongoing rehearsal. There are three major parts to a Blue Man audition: a personal interview, drumming, and acting. About sixty performers are hired to play Blue Men at one given time, all having been trained in New York City for three months at Blue Man Productions. They all begin by performing in the show's founding 1991 Off-Broadway venue at Astor Place (Bergeron).

After this training and testing period, a performer may be sent to other locations that are in need of a Blue Man: Orlando, Chicago, Boston, Las Vegas, Berlin, national or international tours. Most performers can adapt their performance to portray any of the three Blue Man roles (left, center, right), but are usually hired to play one role at a venue. Since all Blue Man actors are contracted to perform in various venues throughout their career, and since the show cannot fully be rehearsed without a live audience, there is a possibility that three actors' first time performing together is an actual performance. This is also true for the band members. There is neither time nor ability to run through the entire show before bringing in the spectators. Here is where improvisational skills pay off, making the Blue Man character even more authentic as he observes and responds honestly to the actions of his fellow Blue Men he may have just met.

The Blue Man is an endless acting exercise, challenging the vulnerable, yet courageous performer to develop as a theatre actor and connect to each individual audience. Performing with someone new for the first time is an exciting part of being Blue Man actor. It keeps the show and character fresh, requiring them all to stay alert and tuned into the world of the play. While tricky

pieces such as “Marshmallows and Gumballs” are rehearsed as a warm-up and selected songs are practiced to check sound levels and the cohesive nature of the band and Blue Men, the rest of the show is tackled at the moment it arrives during the performance. This acting process makes every Blue Man performance truly organic, adapting to each moment rather than mindlessly repeating a rehearsed script of strict timing, designated response, and memorized blocking.

Furthermore, the Blue Man’s flexibility across venues adds more depth to his character analysis and relation to the spectator. It is apparent that the audience is not meant to perceive the Blue Man as an everyday human; the humanoid purposely seems strange and a bit unfamiliar. However, it is not apparent, nor is it meant to be, that the three performers may be strangers to one another. But if they are, that makes them all the more similar to the audience who are collectively strangers to each other, often being asked to participate as a tribe like the Blue Men. Although anything could happen, the show and character only end up needing a few dozen possible pre-determined options for responses since the show is highly structured and the team has been prepared to respond collectively. The Blue Man Group cast and crew stick to the instruction that no matter what happens, figure it out and make it work (Bergeron). The innate Blue Man character is slightly unfamiliar with his world anyway, so the actors’ potential reaction of confusion, surprise, and worry is always technically in character. The audience may never know that the actor is unsure of what to do because the Blue Man is always a bit unsure of what is happening at any given moment.

All in all, the Blue Man Group experience is about fostering people at the show into an ephemeral tribe, and using the Blue Man and his adaptable narrative to ignite the audience’s curiosity, comfort, and trust in his world. Tascha Van Auken, assistant director of casting and training, testifies, “For me, the show itself is about human connection – or more specifically –

our efforts at connection. The Blue Man is a sort of primal investigator in this arena – demonstrating by his own efforts, just how much we all need one another. It's encouraging to be reminded that we can each be so remarkably unique and yet so wholly a part of the same human mission” (Van Auken). While the Blue Man character is highly structured, spectators are still large controllers and factors regarding his reactions. Together, Blue Man and human use improvisation to react organically and instantaneously during interactions, and making an effort to connect and adapt to each other in order to get the most out of this theatrical adventure.

Live performance must always prepare to adapt; in the case of the Blue Man Group, everything and everyone is so sufficiently structured around this concept that the show teaches an audience to adapt willingly in order to become a part of the performance. The auditioning, training, and improvisation set everyone up for the possibility of adaptation. Adaptability of performers and spectators unifies them in function, purpose, and process as they interact and create this live experience together and establish *communitas* in the process. The flexible structure and changing pieces keep audiences attention and motivate them to return to the show in the future, excited to again take part in this unique form of live entertainment.

3) Pieces with Participation and the Types of Invitation

Participatory theatre venues prepare procedures to solidify how spectators will be invited to participate in the production. Once the invitation is accepted, the entire show takes on a new dynamic, where performer and spectator become fused into co-authors of the production. At Blue Man Group the spectator never fully transforms or becomes disguised as a performer, nor do the Blue Men ever cease to be the main performers. The audience can always tell which is which, even in moments of participation. Yet the show crafts its invitations and instructions so

flawlessly that the audiences understand and respond in ways that fit the show, as if they rehearsed with the performers. The seamlessness of co-authorship is also due to the Blue Man's ability to adapt to the spectators' responses. White identifies this relationship of give and take in interactive theatre as "procedural authorship," referencing Jan Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray defines this type of authorship as "writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions" (Murray in White 31).

White expounds upon Murray's term, discussing the process of providing moments wherein spectators will fill in the rest of the scene: "[T]he interactive work is prepared so that it has gaps to be filled with the actions of participating audience members (as well as, of course, gaps for the coded participations of applause, laughter and other 'normal' audience responses) and gaps that require the thought and felt response of the audience to make sense out of its various material" (30). Thus Blue Man and human both adapt to one another's responses through their procedural authorship of the production. The clever methods used to guide the spectator into these narrative gaps are what make the audience participation so appealing and the adaptable narrative so successful.

Utilizing vocabulary from Erving Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, White distinguishes four major types of invitation, ranging from most to least controlled: overt, implicit, covert, and accidental (White 40). The invitations for participation are carefully crafted to coax specific responses, yet still grant spectators a certain amount of freedom to interpret and express themselves. Blue Man Group utilizes and prepares for all four types in clever combinations to make the show unpredictable and exciting. All types work together to attract various types of viewers and engage them in different ways and solidify essentially that

the adaptable narrative contains something for all types of spectators ranging from the group follower to the one seeking the center of attention.

The choice to formulate a show around an adaptable narrative teaches spectators to learn how to interact in a theatrical space that emphasizes the process of creating the art itself. Participatory theatre works best when it thrives on “uncertainty, spontaneity, responsiveness and the chance for participants to express themselves and make choices” (White 30). A close examination of the show’s invitations reveals how Blue Man Group manipulates an audience’s willingness to participate as viewers become intrigued and invested in the show’s balanced structure of control and adaptability. The audience receives these different invitations and adapts their mindset and experience to make the show function through willful procedural authorship.

The following Blue Man Group pieces contain the most audience participation during a Blue Man Group performance, most of which are signature pieces. They have proven to be successful with audiences, not too demanding or risky for the individual or collective participants. When creating an interactive show experience, the co-founders kept in mind the actual experience of the spectators, making sure they felt appreciated and respected, never insulted or pushed too far out of their comfort zone: “Hopefully the whole show is respectful of the audience’s intelligence and to their dignity” (*Inside the Tube*).

While I attempt to distinguish certain pieces as one type of invitation, many contain elements of more than one. Thus I will first define them all (least to most controlled) using White’s descriptions, and then provide examples for each. Overt invitations are moments when “the performers make it clear to the audience what they want them to do” (40). Implicit invitations provide a convention for participation, so “nothing has to be described to the audience. [...] Ambiguous invitations like this are interesting cases that reveal risky situations

and changing power relationships” (40-1). A covert invitation “leads an audience into participation without letting them know what is happening” (41) even to the point where they do not know they are in the show at all. Lastly, accidental is unplanned and possibly unwanted moments of participation.

With overt invitations, manipulation and control remains in the hands of the production, and the audience is expected to watch, listen, and follow instructions. Ushers, stagehands, voiceovers, and an LED screen with scrolling digital text all provide the audience with overt invitations throughout the show, the last of these occurring only in the pre-show. This interactive warm-up will be analyzed in chapter three. Yet it is important to note in this chapter that the entire Blue Man Group experience begins with an extremely overt invitation, telling audience members exactly what to say and do. While it may be off-putting and confusing for some spectators, the instructional text ignites immediate audience involvement, preparing them to assist in future exchanges. The LED directions awaken the audience’s curiosity of the production’s voiceless and faceless authority while also conveying the message that participation is easy and encouraged. Most importantly, it demonstrates that Blue Man Group will constantly acknowledge and celebrate the audience throughout the show.

The only other invitation wherein the entire audience follows overt instructions is in “Time to Start”. This song satirizes traditional gestures performed by spectators at rock concerts, turning typically innate actions into commands. Since Blue Man Group is most famously recognized for their unconventional percussion instruments, most people attend the show to experience a concert atmosphere, not always aware of the show’s participatory elements. During this song, the monotonous male voiceover lists specific actions, and through a blatant command, “Ready, Go!” nudges both Blue Man and human into action as they perform each gesture

together. The majority of the commands were referenced in chapter one, except “the selfie”, a recently added gesture in which they choose a spectator near the front and gesture for him or her to stand up. Then a cameraman in the crew takes a picture of the spectator and the Blue Men. The image is then projected onto a screen onstage for all to see. The communal gestures such as “raise the roof” typically have a robotic feel because the audience is being told to perform them, and to follow a video instruction of the gesture. At concerts, these moves are often performed habitually and involuntarily as a way to capture the *communitas* and excitement of being at a live performance. By being told to perform these usually liberating actions, spectators may feel as if they are puppets being controlled by the show’s overt invitations.

While the audience still possesses their freedom and individuality, this moment seems to put everyone in a trance, feeling as if they must respond collectively and uniformly, taking away their ability to make their own choices regarding participation. Such overt explanation and demonstration limits the spectator’s creativity and helps them better appreciate the pieces that allow for freedom of expression, rather than collective compliance. On the other hand, some audiences may prefer being given specific instructions so that there is no confusion or chaos. They may also like feeling the instant connection between the rest of the viewers performing the same gesture, even if it was presented overtly to the crowd. All in all, the less overt invitations are usually much more appealing to the audience to both watch and perform. For example, the selfie moment allows the chosen spectator to make whatever expression he or she likes. The rest of the show also follows less overt invitations; with less direct commands, audiences can begin to feel ownership over, and responsibility for, their participatory moments.

Overt invitations are also extended to individual audience members, such as in the pseudo magic trick piece known as “Body Painting”. Before the show, an usher invites a man of a

particular height and build to participate in an onstage scene toward the end of the show. However, he is given no further information about the piece. If he agrees, then the usher heads backstage and informs the Blue Men of the chosen participant's location. During the show, the Blue Men select him from the house, escort him onstage, put him in a white body suit and take him backstage. The audience watches a video of him being splashed with a bucket of blue paint, hung him upside-down by a rope, and slapped onto a blank canvas. This artistic creation pays homage to painter Yves Klein. After this footage, the man returns to the stage with his head in a Jell-O mold. While he appears to exert an immense amount of participation, the footage is actually the same prerecorded clip used at every performance. During his participation, he is told precisely what to do at each instant—verbally by the ushers and nonverbally by the Blue Men.

Participation in Blue Man Group motivates audiences to celebrate one another as unscripted spectators transform into performers throughout the show. At the end of “Body Painting”, the Blue Men raise the man's arm (fig. 15), instigating an uproar as the crowd, whether they fell for the trick or not, cheers for the spectator. They consider it a victory and celebration of people and their ability to adapt and respond effectively in this live performance. Moments like this emphasize the power behind audience participation and its effect on their experience as they witness and procedurally author the performance, feeling validated for their efforts.



Fig. 15: “Body Painting” by The Official Website of the Anaheim Ducks; “Corey Perry at Blue Man Group”; The Official Website of the Anaheim Ducks; ducks.nhl.com, 22 June 2011; Web; 23 Oct. 2015.

Lastly, an overt invitation places a couple of spectators in a literal show-stopping number called “Late Arrivals”. While the man in “Body Painting” is asked to participate, these two receive a more covert invitation since they are unaware of their pending participation, even though they technically agreed to it. Right in the middle of a piece called “GiPads” (which will be analyzed in chapter three), the Blue Men’s onstage dance comes to a dramatic halt. As blinking red lights flash from the stage into the house, a cartoonish emergency horn bellows. The onstage screens read “Late Arrivals”, and a prerecorded voice mockingly sings, “You’re late, you should have been here twenty minutes ago, but now you’re late!” as an usher walks this couple to their orchestral level aisle seats (fig. 16). Since the humorous exchange occurs in the house, a cameraman records the couple’s every move and projects the footage onto the screen.



Fig. 16: Screenshot of “Late Arrivals” by Sir Chandler; “Blue Man Group – Late Arrivals”; *YouTube*; YouTube.com, 2 May 2015; Web; 24 Oct. 2015.

The couple’s miniature walk of shame results in laughter from the audience. This unsuspecting duo becomes the center of attention—instant performers in a show they have allegedly missed up to this point. Since this piece interrupts the Blue Men’s dance, it draws the audience’s attention to their own power over live performance, capable of stopping a scene and usurping focus. Also, since most people have been late at least one time or another, the entire audience can most likely relate to these latecomers, possibly empathizing and being embarrassed for the couple as this common faux-pas is publically displayed. Through empathy, the audience becomes more attentive, maybe wondering what it would be like to be the latecomers.

To heighten the authenticity of the late couple’s performance, the usher selects two people who were actually late to the show, asking them to stand in the house vaums and watch the show from there, so as to not disrupt the performers or be seen by spectators (Bergeron). The couple is motivated to do so because the selected seats are most likely better than the ones they originally purchased. If they have not seen the show before, they are unaware that they are about to grab the spotlight from the Blue Men, and are often shocked and a bit embarrassed when it happens. Overall, the spectators’ reactions—the couple and the onlookers—varies greatly depending on how this moment is interpreted by each; the interaction adapts to those at the show.

It does not have to follow a certain script, other than having the two enter and take their seats. Anything else accompanying this scene comes directly from the audience's organic responses, making them performers in this piece. Likewise, the Blue Men become spectators during this moment while the audience laughs, applauds, and/or waves at one another.

Implicit invitations set up the convention for participation, yet require the audience to figure out how they are meant to respond. It is as if the show extends a call and then waits for the spectators to give the response and complete the exchange. A piece called "Toblerone" invites one spectator to finish the Blue Man's famous trick of catching food in his mouth. Having been discreetly handed a boxed tube of Toblerone chocolates by an usher upon entrance into the house, this spectator receives no further instruction. After witnessing the Blue Man's quirky talent of catching the gumballs and marshmallows in his mouth, the spectator infers what to do with the chocolate when the Blue Man walks up to him with his mouth open. The spectator responds by breaking off a piece of the chocolate and throwing it into the Blue Man's mouth.

Conducting this trick with an audience member creates a shared language, which author Alan Kaprow states is necessary for audience interaction: "This may seem truistic, but participation presupposed share assumptions, interests, meanings, contexts, and uses. It cannot take place otherwise" (White 47). Inviting the spectator to participate in the Blue Man's trick further establishes it as a Blue Man characteristic, but more importantly indicates how much the Blue Man values and trusts the spectator. White refers to this shared understanding as "'resource continuity', the continuity with the cultural and personal resources that are available to them" (47). The spectator understands the purpose and importance of the Toblerone and then makes it available to the Blue Man, authoring that interaction collectively and procedurally.

Occasionally the Blue Man will take the chocolate from the spectator, and hand a piece to another spectator in a different section of the theater, who then throws it into his mouth. The Blue Man raises the arm of the spectator for having performed his or her role correctly, and the audience cheers. Sometimes the Blue Man spits the chocolate back into this spectator's hand. These adaptable endings require spectators to adapt their reaction as well, however they see fit.

Furthermore, while this piece is rather simplistic, the spectator could take things in many directions. An usher points out the spectator to the Blue Man before the show, so he knows where to go, but not always what to expect. Perhaps the spectator eats the chocolate, loses it, hands it to someone else, simply does not respond, throws the chocolate and misses, or throws the entire bar instead of breaking off a portion. Furthermore, this is the first time the Blue Men interact with the audience in the intimate space of the house. Being this close to a Blue Man may overwhelm the spectator, so the Blue Men must be ready for anything, adapting to fit whatever the spectators choose to do with this implicit invitation.

Following "Toblerone" is another piece involving one spectator called "Esophagus". This time the person is neither preselected nor handed any props. Instead, a Blue Man curiously examines the spectator's face, takes a miniature camera on a pole, and then puts the camera up to the spectator's mouth. It is not very clear as to how the spectator is supposed to respond, yet it requires the spectator to open his or her mouth wide so that the small video camera can appear to travel down the esophagus, grossing out most of the audience. So as to not alarm or actually harm the spectator, the footage of the inside the mouth is a prerecorded clip used at every performance regardless of venue, just like in "Body Painting." It is editorially fused to the live footage of the spectator's open mouth by a subtle cinematic crossfade at the beginning and the

end of the venture down the throat. All footage is projected onto the stage screen, so the entire crowd, including this spectator, can see it happen.

The Blue Man unapologetically and nonchalantly entering a spectator's personal space and expecting a certain response demonstrates how much the character trusts his communication with the audience, and their commitment to participate. It also reveals how close the character is willing to get to the spectator during an exchange. Furthermore, the absurdity of "Esophagus" forces audiences to think outside the box of conventional performance modes and adapt to Blue Man Group's bizarre fascinations and talents. An audience's ability to adapt and accept this interaction as entertainment will serve them well when they watch another piece about the human body called "Rods and Cones," which will be discussed in chapter three. Perhaps encouraging spectators to expand their individual signposts of entertainment fuses performer and spectator together through not only the sharing of roles, but of aesthetics and thought processes. The adaptable narrative insists that both adapt to their surroundings and the show's exploratory nature, unifying everyone through a co-authored experiment with art and science.

The piece entitled "The Feast" is one of the longest scenes and the most elaborate display of audience participation in the entire show. It employs mainly implicit invitations. A woman from the audience (known to the Blue Men as the "Feast guest") comes on stage and goes on a dinner date with all three Blue Men at a table facing the audience (fig. 17). Since the woman is not preselected, she is covertly invited to participate, not fully knowing what is happening. Picking the right woman with only a few moments to survey the house is key to making this scene flow smoothly. Even though the narrative is easily adaptable, the piece contains a story of sorts. In training, the Blue Men performers are instructed how to select a certain type of woman to bring onto the stage. Based on physical response to the Blue Man's stares and proximity, the

trio carefully search for someone who appears innocent and naïve (presumably having never seen the show before), shy enough that she will not steal the show, but playful enough to respond well to their advances. Ultimately, she must not seem afraid of the Blue Men, and must be someone for whom the audience will mutually cheer and show support (Bergeron).



Fig. 17: Screenshot from “The Feast” with the Feast Guest. *Blue Man Group: Inside the Tube*. Public Broadcasting System. 2006. DVD.

While all three performers scan different parts of the house simultaneously in search of the right participant, the Blue Man who sits directly right of the woman at the table (the left Blue Man) selects her by extending his hand in hopes that she will take it. If she does, she then follows him and the other two Blue Men onto the stage as the audience innately applauds to show their support. Bringing an audience member onto the stage heightens the risk for both performer and spectator. Yet the entire show is constructed with a narrative that flows so freely, it stays on track. One of the show’s major purposes and entertainment factors stem from spectators observing one another during the show. So no matter what the woman decides to do, it supports the exploratory and immersive nature of the entire event.

White informs that onstage participants should already possess the main performance qualities he or she will be asked to employ: “When the person is invited onstage, it is assumed

that he already has in his repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performance that will be required in the new setting” (39). To participate in this sequence, all the woman needs to do is observe the Blue Men sitting beside her, and translate their silent gestures. At the start, the Blue Men sway to the background music, often with the woman joining in. Each time she copies them, they stop and stare at her, implying that she should stop as well. Their frozen stance is often how they control the initiation and completion of each joke.

Then each Blue Man offers her different gifts in a progressively competitive and comedic manner: a painting, a vase with flowers, a candle, a desk lamp, and a Jell-O mold, the last which gets catapulted into the audience, resulting in screams of surprise and roars of laughter. When offered these gifts, no specific reaction is needed from the woman; she usually responds physically in the form of nodding, clapping, smiling, or shaking her body to mimic the Blue Men’s actions: they shake their gifts at her to indicate a request of approval. Then they each eat a Twinkie. Since the Blue Men do not speak, the woman rarely ever speaks. Instead, she copies the Blue Men’s actions such as opening up the Twinkie wrappers for the Blue Men along with her own, cutting out a portion with a fork and knife, holding it out, eating it, and then sharing with the Blue Men as they share with each other.

This piece evokes vocal responses that add an appropriate and exciting soundscape to this otherwise muted interaction (minus the background music). In her observation, Kattwinkel notes:

“[This piece] often inspires the audience to verbalize for the nonspeaking actors on stage, including the chosen audience member. As the Blue Men offer the woman gifts, the audience responds with what might be the woman's vocal reactions, were she to have any. They give sympathetic ‘aww’s in approval of the gifts, and laugh at those that are silly. [...] Perhaps because her feelings are being

expressed by a room full of people, she is able to keep her attention on the Blue Men (*Contemporary*, 149-50).

The audience's impulsive vocal responses are a form of collective participation and performance. Spectators add something to this scene as they react as if they were the one on stage.

To keep the narrative interesting and engaging, it is imperative that the show implicitly invites the audience to add their collective presence on occasion. In the "The Feast" one Blue Man presents a desk lamp as a gift to the woman. He claps twice to turn it on. His action usually instigates the audience's response of clapping and turning the lamp back off, upsetting the Blue Man as he stares disapprovingly into the house. This call and response often causes a chain reaction in the audience. Their energetic claps turn into miniature applause as the desk lamp flickers uncontrollably. Upset at the audience's interference, the Blue Man immediately tucks the lamp back under the table, initiating more laughter as the audience enjoys their power over the narrative. By illuminating the audience in these short exchanges, they become more alive and excited to search for more chances to interact, even if it is from their seats. In fact, many spectators typically prefer to remain in their seats throughout a production. Thus these simple forms of unified participation make them feel as if they are still a valid and necessary part of the performance. Without their participation, the moment would be lost. In these exchanges, audiences proudly and willingly fulfill their purpose by becoming part performer.

There are times, however, when audiences need a push to respond. By making the initial push appear to be coming from the audience, the Blue Man Group cast and crew cleverly disguise their invisible hands of motivation and leadership. If perchance the audience is a bit unresponsive and does not clap to turn the lamp off, the sound operator in the booth will clap to

complete the joke, informing the audience that they are free to carry the joke further by clapping to flicker the lamp. After this instigation, audiences quickly understand the joke and join in. This reaction exemplifies how Blue Man Group's participatory structure is so engaging and effectively implicit, that even the smallest direction can result in willful audience participation.

Covert invitations coax spectators into participation without much preparation or awareness. "Gumballs and Marshmallows" takes place near the beginning of the show and involves the Blue Men throwing and catching paint-filled gumballs and makeshift marshmallows into their mouths from far distances. At the start of the piece, a gumball machine stands alone onstage with the Blue Men. One Blue Man examines the gumballs, then pulls out a bag of marshmallows, and studies them as well. It would seem that these treats are foreign to the Blue Man. So he chucks a marshmallow into the first few rows of the house. This action serves a couple purposes: it springs the audience into physical response, as if at a sporting event, trying to catch a fly baseball or a free t-shirt from a cannon. Many spectators sitting in the orchestra seats instantly put their hands up or shout "Over here!" or "Me!" suggesting that they want a marshmallow. He responds in kind by flinging marshmallows in various directions.

This exchange also informs the audience of the absent fourth wall. The Blue Man cannot only see the audience; he can distinguish individual spectators and respond to their requests. Setting up this friendly environment and relationship with the audience is imperative for the remaining interactions. The gumballs in this scene are actually specially crafted paintballs, which a Blue Man catches in his mouth and spits the paint out onto a small square canvas three different times in three colors. He then gives the painting to a child seated near the front of the stage, singling out a spectator to showcase just how important each person is to the Blue Men. The other Blue Man repeats the gifting gesture on the opposite side of the stage as he slowly

spits the glob of marshmallows out of his mouth and slaps a sign underneath it, reading “\$4,000.00.” He then takes a purse from a woman in the front row and drops in the statue.

This piece must adapt to the woman holding the purse and the selection of the child, both possessing the freedom to add something to their interaction with the Blue Man. The woman is given the purse as a prop during the pre-show, suggesting an implicit invitation to participation, but the child is chosen covertly on the spot. This piece also must be prepared to adapt since catching the flying objects it is a difficult trick to perform. If a Blue Man misses the marshmallow or the other throws it poorly, the Blue Man pitching the marshmallows often improvises a comedic moment regarding one another’s failure to perform the act. The band must also adapt their vamping throughout this scene; the second the marshmallow enters the Blue Man’s mouth, a band member strikes an instrument that makes a sound similar to gulping. Band and Blue Man must be ready to adapt to the events of this piece, also adjusting to audience’s reactions based on the covert and implicit invitations.

After witnessing and taking part in these exchanges, spectators are more prepared for the show’s immersive nature and the supportive relationship between Blue Man and human. As he comes bearing gifts for his audience, the Blue Man gains appreciation and enthusiasm from his crowd. Also, audiences must quickly adapt to the absence of the fourth wall in order to participate and build a connection with the Blue Men and one another. This piece thus establishes the stage and house as equal parts of the playing space; it is consequently less surprising when the Blue Men enter the house or invite others onto the stage during the show. A piece known as “Teasers” or “Pvc4” creatively mixes implicit with covert invitations. It features the three Blue Men playing on a marimba made out of PVC Pipes of various sizes. On it, they play excerpts of recognizable songs such as the pop classic “Whip It” by Devo, and the

classical piece “Für Elise” by Ludwig von Beethoven. Yet the two songs that evoke vocal participation are when they play the chorus of “Tequila,” wherein the audience shouts out “Tequila!” at the correct pause in the song, causing the Blue Men to stop instantly and curiously examine the crowd. The audience laughs at the Blue Men’s confusion and their own instantaneous transformation into the role of performer. This form of interruption also happens when the trio plays the opening of “Crazy Train” by Ozzy Osbourne, signaling an emotive, “Ay Ay Ay!” If the audience yells anything else out, feeling free to do so, the Blue Men must adapt their reactions to what the audience decides to do. More reserved audiences may not feel the desire to sing any lines from the familiar songs. Others may not recognize them. Thus this piece only works when audiences notice the implied invitation, or consider it a covert invitation and begin singing without realizing they were coaxed by the song choice. Regardless, the joke must be adaptable since audiences vary at each performance. In the future, this piece may update its songs to more familiar melodies of the day.

Due to the show’s carefully concocted invitations and emphasis on audience participation, Blue Man Group does not run into many instances of accidental invitation. The entire event is designed to ignite interaction and fuse performer and spectator through the sharing of roles and procedure authorship. The narrative adapts to function in a framework of organized chaos. In “The Feast”, the unscripted narrative ultimately allows the woman to do what she wants. About nine out of ten performances occur without extreme reactions from the “Feast guest”. Yet every so often, the selected woman has thrown up, run off the stage, stabbed a Blue Man with the plastic fork, refused to eat her Twinkie, or thrown it at the audience (Bergeron). These responses could be considered accidental invitations since the spectator upstages the Blue Men and most likely causes the audience to retract their initial support of the chosen woman.

While “The Feast” and other pieces may not always go as planned, they still ignite an audience’s investment in the spectators and Blue Men as they showcase vulnerability and the ability to overcome obstacles with the power of improvisation and collaboration. When things go differently than expected, many Blue Man performers are thrilled since it challenges them to use their improvisation skills to create an organic live theatre experience for them and the audience. The show’s adaptability and various invitations keep it fresh and invigorating.

Granting the audience the chance to participate in a Blue Man Group narrative requires adaptable performers and spectators. The show is meant to feel like no one is planted, but to happen so seamlessly that people wonder if possibly someone might be planted. The audience becomes amazed and quizzical as to how the live performance is so flexible, yet still keeps everything and everyone in line. The unpredictability of the spectators makes the Blue Man character seem all the more unpredictable himself, acting in a partially codified theatrical piece, yet making his performance fit with audience response. The Blue Men welcome the crowd’s individual and collective responses because it fuels the entire experience and opens up possibilities for new interpretations of the material. Perhaps the audience will evoke ideas for future pieces.

Blue Man Group’s techniques and types of invitation have a way of gently coaxing and inspiring audiences to engage more willingly with the character and the rest of the audience. Any time the spectator is performing with the Blue Men, the spectator becomes the center of attention. Consequently the audience connects more to the narrative because they are watching one of their own delve into the world of the Blue Man. The overt, implicit, covert, and accidental invitations establish a narrative mandated by procedural authorship of performer and spectator,

and leave even more gaps regarding the meaning behind the various scenes in the variety show.

The co-founders explain:

The narrative is left partly to the person to ponder and put together in the days that follow. The experience itself goes bit to bit. What we hope for is that within the bit there's a discovery, a beginning, middle and end in the sense that we come to something, we discover it, something twists at the end - in that sense we're very classical. But we're not telling a literal language story. (Moss 18)

The Blue Men can only tell their story when acting in collaboration and adaptation with the audience. The pieces of participation establish the variety show with a unifying message regarding the power of connectivity and communal effort of performer and spectator to create a truly unique and rewarding experience at every performance.

Conclusion:

Blue Man Group's balance between structure and spontaneity is a major reason for their lasting success. Granting spectators responsibility within a framework of organized chaos perpetuates their willingness to pay attention, participate, and see the ever-changing show multiple times. These Neo-Vaudevillians continually reinvent popular ingredients of modern entertainment and ultimately mold a hodgepodge of sound and spectacle ranging from rock concert to science fair. The Blue Men reveal how the process of making art—painting on canvases, making food sculptures, crafting a joke, and playing percussion—builds intrigue, insight, and empowerment in performer and spectator alike. This adaptable and exploratory narrative within a variety show structure essentially categorizes Blue Man Group as its form of live entertainment. Its processes of auditioning, training, rehearsing, and performing showcase the relationship between performer and spectator and motivate the show's adaptable narrative

structure. The myriad of invitation types produces an adaptable, yet highly systematic narrative wherein Blue Man Group and spectators play and experiment together.

Blue Man and humans adapt to one another as they share experiences and responsibilities in this collectively authored show. Such detail and organization identifies a successful procedure for incorporating the audiences in live theatre, strengthening the performer-spectator relationship through the effective sharing of roles. As both adapt, they become invested in the experience and feel as if they have established a real connection. Moreover, participation in this show motivates spectators to adapt their original way of thinking, regarding personal expectations and aesthetics of live performance, and their initial comfort levels with participation.

Blue Man Group is constantly redeveloping because humanity redevelops its interests. The show can only make a visceral and literal connection with its audiences if it includes them and constantly relates to them. If Blue Man Group were to ever fully lock their show and unify them among venues, it could be concluded that Blue Man Group suddenly considers humanity's interests, imagination, and aesthetics to be universally locked as well. Instead, Blue Man Group will continue to adapt to what they perceive to be humanity's needs and interests, bravely challenging ways of thinking and expressing. They will still strive to validate the audience by making them absolutely necessary to each and every performance, resulting in a connection of *communitas* between performer and spectator alike. Regarding the goal and structure of the performance, Blue Man Group production manager Paul Ackerman explains, "We much prefer to keep the show loose and flowing. It's all about making connections between the Blue Men and the audience," to which Campbell adds, "without that final link from performer to audience, nothing is connected to anything at all" (77).

Chapter Three: The Accessible Space

“It’s extraordinary to think that an experience can awaken the sense so acutely that you leave the theater with a heightened awareness of everything surrounding you, feeling elated, as if given a jolt of vibrant air.” (Auerbach)

Since performer and spectator share roles throughout a Blue Man Group production, it is crucial that the space invites audiences in and ignites their desire to become performers with the Blue Men. They must feel welcomed and wanted, and that the show space is exciting, inviting, and safe. This also aids their willingness to accept the Blue Man into *their* space. The humans and Blue Men need one another to make the show function fully and reach its ultimate potential. Therefore all content in the variety show must also feel accessible to its viewers. Creating such an enticing and collaborative performance space guides spectators to reconsider how they label and define live performance, expanding the possibilities and experiences to be had therein.

The term “accessibility” is being utilized to define Blue Man Group’s noteworthy ability to welcome, teach, and affect its audiences through physical performance space and content. Accessibility refers to anything that can be used or obtained. Section one describes how visual and aural access helps people use and obtain messages in the production. Even though Blue Man Group’s pieces contain various themes, messages, and art forms, each one provides entertainment and efficacy. As the Blue Men learn how to use and understand the people and objects in their space, they motivate the audience to reciprocate by trying new things and allowing the show experience to enlighten how they view their world outside the theater. Some pieces push audiences to ponder on the consequences of modern communication, like how the

digital age of texting, video, and computers lessens face-to-face conversation. Other pieces are not as didactic, but still entertain and educate spectators by engaging the senses and stimulating the mind in innovative ways.

Accessibility also makes something reachable and approachable. Section two describes how performance space proximity and fluidity make the character reachable and the entire space more approachable—before, during, and after the show. Proximity also allows patrons to understand and appreciate the show process. Many patrons can attend Blue Man Group due to its various venues, which perform simultaneous productions throughout the world, mostly in North America. The Blue Man’s ventures into the house during the show, and the lobby after the show, make him reachable. His elements of authenticity (discussed in chapter one) make him approachable. Blue Man Group employs proximity to make the entire production more personable and memorable for each spectator.

Lastly, accessibility is the ability to appreciate and understand. Section three analyzes the show’s themes and utilization of modern technology; these are topics and devices which audiences tend to also understand and appreciate in their entertainment and everyday lives. In general, the show’s themes of communication and unity relate and refer to all humanity, regardless of age or region. Yet people understand, experience, and find access points into different parts of the show. By the end, they have perceived and translated the material in a manner that relates to their personal aesthetics and expectations of performance. Whether people liked certain pieces correlates to their evaluation and perception of the function and purpose of art, and their desired relationship with it. Luckily the entire production occurs in such a fun-loving, attractive environment, keeping it from feeling too absurd, conceptual, pretentious, or intellectual. Blue Man Group has something for everyone. Although everything may not be

understood or liked by all, the show's talent, creativity, professionalism, and originality leave much to be appreciated.

In this chapter, select pieces from the show will be described and quoted at length. It should be noted that not all pieces contain audience participation. Some are performed wholly by the Blue Men, often accompanied by voiceovers, videos, the onstage band, and the crew. Therefore the pieces are being analyzed not through their invitation or use of actual audience participation; instead, they are being scrutinized to showcase how all pieces, even the ones without audience involvement, still support the theme of human connection in a shared theatrical experience. Although spectators do not become performers in every piece, all scenes and songs support the goal to evoke willful audience acceptance, investment, and participation during the show.

1) Visual and Aural Perception: Access Through Eyes and Ears

As analyzed in chapter one, expressive eyes is the Blue Man's major method of communication. To expound upon the power of visual perception in all humans, the Blue Men perform a signature piece entitled "Rods and Cones". Through video, music, and a male voiceover, this piece informs how eyes provide humans with access into, and a better understanding of, their surrounding world. Part of the Blue Man Group's appeal resides in the pleasure of seeing three performers on stage. Studying the effect of spatial composition continues the analysis from chapter one regarding the quantitative elements of the Blue Man character. The magic behind the number three supports the group's lasting popularity and argues that visual perception influences artistic aesthetic and interpretation. The Blue Men perform "Grooming" in close proximity to one another in a serious moment wherein the three look intently at one another

and stroke each other's faces as a ritual in preparation to enter into the audience. Building up the courage first requires the performers to bond collectively through sight and touch before they extend those same gestures and forms of contact with its audiences. This piece teaches audiences about the power, sensitivity, and necessity of those senses when making a real connection with others. Lastly, the continuous rhythm of percussion creates a sense of aural comfort, familiarity, and assurance that labels the show and its space as more accessible than it would be without it.

Lian Amaris notes, "One of the major projects of BMG is to address urban isolation and the moment of eye contact with an audience member acts as a correction to isolation" (570). Eyes unite spectator and performer with one another by opening up authentic communication. "Rods and Cones" is a song accompanied by a male voiceover, which teaches audiences about the inner workings of the eyes. Similar to a science documentary, the voice narrates the following speech, which is also projected one word at a time onto the screens as he speaks it. The video also shows animations of rods and cones, and footage of a Blue Man's eyes, giving the illusion that the audience is being observed by the performance. The following voiceover narration is educational and efficacious, yet also holds humor to keep audience's attention and make the material seem more understandable, approachable, and entertaining:

Each of your eyes has over three million photoreceptors called rods and cones. These receptors convert light into electrochemical signals that travel through the optic nerve and into the brain. Here the signals trigger the neurological process scientists call the hellawhack shiznit that happens inside your brizzle. The rods in your eyes specialize in vision and can function at lower light levels than cones. But they do not respond to color. This is why we can only see in black and white when we are in the dark. The cones in the eyes on the other hand specialize in

color and come in three types: those that respond to the color red, those that respond to the color green, and those that respond to (naked people) the color blue. All of the colors that we experience are the result of these three types of cones, firing off in different combinations.

When you look at something, the rods and cones in your eyes fire in rapid succession. But between each firing is a brief resetting period during which your eyes are unable to take in any new information. Your brain covers up these microscopic moments of blindness with lingering after-images, which help make your vision appear to be fluid and uninterrupted even though it is not. This phenomenon known as persistence of vision is the unique physiological quirk that makes the illusion of animation possible. The dark spaces between each still frame of animation literally sneak by while your eyes are not looking.

(“Blue Man Group Rods”)

In the middle of this speech, the three Blue Men enter and stand in front of the screens, playing matching “backpacks”, musical contraptions (using material made to look like PVC pipes) that resemble the human brain, strapped onto their back and enveloping their upper body (fig. 18).



Fig.18: Backpack worn and played by the Blue Men during “Rods and Cones” from Anirudh Koul; “Blue Man Group—‘How to be a Megastar’ Concert”; *Flickr*; flickr.com, 18 August 2008; Web; 18 Oct. 2015.

This science behind visual perception conveys the eyes' ability to witness and interpret the surrounding world, making audiences more conscious of the process of vision and how information connects to the brain and makes combinations. Perhaps this lesson on rods and cones and the resulting world of color serves as a metaphor for the power of human connectivity and imagination. When colors are combined, humans can see a vast array more. And when people are brought together, much like at this performance, the possibilities are endless and the space they share becomes a colorful world of expression. Furthermore, just like the spectator, the Blue Man explores his space through his eyes, never verbally communicating with anyone to gain a better understanding of it. In the same way, audiences gain knowledge and experience during the show mainly by observing what happens. They witness and interpret the plethora of visuals and messages artistically portrayed in the space. "Rods and Cones" prepares audiences to observe their own world and its different spaces with more knowledge and familiarity of how their eyes are working alongside their brain to make connections and combinations.

This feeling of being watched during the show fuses the spectator with the role of a performer. In the Las Vegas pre-show, a Mama Eye and a Baby Eye exit from the stage and float around the house while spectators take their seats (fig. 19). The looming eyes cause people to stare back and follow these blimps wherever they travel in the house. As authors Michael Argyle and Janet Dean suggest, "without eye contact, people do not feel that they are fully in communication" (289). The ability for spectator and performer to share roles throughout the show is possible because of eye contact between the two, plus Blue Man Group's ability to keep spectators intrigued at all times. Using visuals and audio about the eyes draws home this objective.



Fig. 19: Mama and Baby Eye Pre-show spectacle; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders; 20 June 2015.

Eyes control what people see, and the brain controls how it is interpreted or perceived. The visual appeal behind numeric composition relates to how humans perceive space and associate personal aesthetics with spatial configurations and quantities. Numbers create structures and patterns, which are translated by the brain and evoke emotional responses. In a sense, math becomes art; quantity transforms into an issue of quality. Blue Man Group's use of three identical performers onstage at one time reveals the power of things in threes, and shows how staging affects how spectators interpret, and find access to the things they see. As mentioned in chapter one, the cofounders felt having three Blue Men in the group fit because "three is a great number for visual composition" (Wink). The science and aesthetic surrounding the number three supports the character appeal and the show's ability to create a welcoming, accessible environment through its triplet protagonist.

Balancing the stage with an equal spatial relationship between performers establishes a pleasant setting of symmetry, completion, and stability for the spectator. Three is a visually balanced quantity, since one performer can be on the left, one in the middle, and one on the right. This formation is used frequently throughout a Blue Man Group performance, making the stage more appealing to watch, and the Blue Men more equally visible to the spectators seated

throughout the house. It feels as if each section of the theatre has its own personal Blue Man with whom to interact. In addition, three is very commonplace and creates the feeling of a complete set. Peterson lists society's appeal of the number three:

Did you know that most people are more comfortable with odd numbers than with even ones? At the craps table in Las Vegas, lucky seven or even lucky elevens are the numbers of choice. And among odd numbers, the favorite is the number three. Think of the Three Musketeers, Three Blind Mice, the Three Stooges, and the Three Little Pigs [...] Lest we forget, the third time's a charm, and three strikes you're out. The eye also tends to prefer compositions influenced by three—a point proven by the continuing influence of the Rule of Thirds. (94)

Painter John Thomas Smith first theorized the Rule of Thirds in 1797 in his book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*⁶. As photography has developed as an art form, the rule is “favored by cinematographers in their effort to design balanced and unified images” (Krages 40). Blue Man Group utilizes this artistic guideline, making the group more attractive and satisfying to watch.

The number three forms an appealing visual pattern, which translates to the spectator's perception of the character: “pattern [has] this uncanny ability to evoke emotions of stability, consistency, and belonging. It also [feels] safe, secure, and reliable because it was predictable [...] Without patterns, our world would be chaos” (Peterson 68). One or two Blue Men is not enough to establish a visual pattern; three is the perfect number, and is considered a ‘magic’ number for this very reason. Having three Blue Men establishes a visual wholeness and conveys comfort in its audiences as they see the Blue Man receive support from his two counterparts. Had the show added any more Blue Men, perhaps the performance space would feel too crowded and

⁶ For more information, refer to the following citation: Smith, John Thomas. *Remarks On Rural Scenery*. London: London : June MDCCXCVII. Printed for, and sold by Nathaniel Smith, ancient Printseller at Rembrandt's Head, May's Buildings, St. Martin's Land, and I. T. Smith, at No. 40 Frith Street, Soho, 1797.

the audience would feel overwhelmed and invaded when the performers enter the house and seek audience participation. Thus the numeric balance and the ratio between performer and spectator supports Blue Man Group's lasting success and ability to get audiences invested and involved, believing that both character and space are welcoming and accessible. Visual perception labels the three Blue Men as appealing and complete, rather than too strange or incomplete.

As referenced previously, the Blue Men begin their show by drumming and catching food onstage, then travel into the audience to interact with individual spectators. They climb over seats and walk up and down the aisles of the orchestra, staring directly into spectators' eyes. They appear to effortlessly jump off the stage and commence an up-close-and-personal observation of the audience. However, this space is foreign and cautious territory to them, so they perform a ritual before entering. This slightly serious and jarring piece is called "Grooming," wherein the three Blue Men circle up and stare intently at one another. Then they touch one another's face while a cameraman tapes the interaction. The footage is projected onto a screen with a distorted, slow motion feature. At this moment, they are saying goodbye to one another and to their home onstage. A Las Vegas Blue Man described this piece in the following manner, revealing how performers are told to translate this moment, and how serious the show considers the relationship between performer and spectator:

The three Blue Men gather in a circle (or triangle) while the lights and music take a serious turn. The band plays a song called "Grooming" and a special down light appears above us while we prepare ourselves to enter the audience as a threesome for the first time. We "groom" each other in the same way a soldier would help his comrade prepare to head in to fates unknown. The Blue Man's relationship to the audience is equally dangerous and beneficial so this may be the last time we

ever lay eyes on each other, but it may be the greatest thing we ever do. Either way, we must prepare. (Roberts)

This simple yet highly symbolic piece demonstrates how space is viewed essentially as a character in the production, or an obstacle with which to conquer in order to develop a more meaningful connection with everyone at that performance.

When the Blue Men enter the audience for the first time it “establish[es] the convention of playing, making for both the actors and the audience the first ‘breaking of the ice’ of their closely knit relationship” (Way 11-2) that will only continue to grow through the remaining interactions. After all, when the Blue Men return to the stage, they bring an audience member—the “Feast guest”—with them. From that moment on, the performance space is altered; the performer and spectator fuse more than ever before. The grooming ritual conveys a clear connection and brotherhood among the Blue Men, lacking any fear of touch or closeness. This behavior is echoed in their choice to get directly in spectators’ personal space, establishing both stage and house as equal playing fields. Brian Way, author of the book, *Audience Participation: Theatre For Young People*, states that “as the actor’s *awareness* grows when in the midst of the audience, so does the fascination increase” (13). The closer the Blue Men are, the more intriguing and captivating they become to the audience, and vice versa.

Because the Blue Men and rock band play music as a major source of entertainment throughout the show, Blue Man Group could be considered a rock concert of sorts. Therefore it becomes crucial to analyze not only how the space looks, but also how it sounds. The repetition of music, particularly the consistency of rhythmic drumming, provides an essential layer of order to the otherwise unsystematic, slightly chaotic environment. Even when the Blue Men are not playing their instruments, there is always accompaniment by the band members onstage that

vamps and responds musically to all pieces and transitions. In a way, these practically hidden and ignored musicians are the backbone to the entire body of space, perpetuating attention, energy, and a sense of storyline. No matter what direction the characters or narrative take the variety show, the band will continuously provide musical security to all that happens both on and offstage. Thus the band acts as a trustworthy soundtrack that keeps the fear of lulls or unrehearsed mayhem at bay. As the band performs collectively, they remind the audience that although the show has an adaptable script and depends upon audience participation, the show is rehearsed and essentially scored through music, so it will not derail.

The constant presence of the music inherently creates stability and support to the spectator, who doubles as a listener, and finds the Blue Man's space more uniform and invigorating through the sonorous soundscape. Likewise, music is inherently structured, repetitive, and supported through a regular flow of rhythms, which make up a beat. Beats cause a natural response in the body when heard. Mowitt states, "In musical practice, rhythm is formed in relation to a pulse that is executed at a certain rate of speed that is organized by groupings that exhibit a conspicuous—one might also say measured—regularity. The events that order the pulse are beats, and the iterative pattern that they form is the beat. Thus, there is a crucial passage from the plural (beats) to the singular (the beat). The beaten pulse is precisely what the body responds to in dance, and for that matter, in marching" (25). Dancing is liberating and marching is uniform. Thus rhythm has the power to evoke both freedom and control. Consequently, so does Blue Man Group; this is evident in their use of music, namely percussion.

The security that percussion brings to Blue Man Group is manifested in the aforementioned pieces that bookend the entire performance: "Opening Paint Drumming" and "Drum Finale". While the notated rhythms and comedic bits vary in these two pieces, both

showcase the characters beating rapidly on large black barrels, pouring bright paint onto them, and causing it to fling in the air with great height and abundance. This action exemplifies how Blue Man Group celebrates the process of experimenting and creating art—especially music—and how various art forms can fuse together and awaken the senses. Regarding these pieces, Kattwinkel notes, “The desire to bombard the spectators with new sensations is common in contemporary variety theatre. [...] [T]he audience is able to ‘hear’ the colors as they rise off the drums, and ‘see’ the music through the splashing of the paint. A synaesthesia of sorts is achieved, providing the senses with unusual combinations. This is continued throughout the performance, as the drumming and music can be ‘felt’ at the loud volume” (*Contemporary* 158). Thus the show’s space becomes more accessible through the senses, and percussion greatly aids that agenda through aural fixation.

Playing on PVC Pipes, yet embracing and exploring within the genre of rock-and-roll effectively balances the Blue Man Group soundtrack between the mainstream and the distinct. Rock-and-roll drumset rhythms also match Blue Man Group’s process of achieving audience participation. Mowitt observes that “the notion of the snare answering to the bass drum derives not simply from the general catachrestic character of the instrument, but more important, from the African tradition of ‘call-and-response’ drumming patterns that, I will argue, have come to assert themselves in this fundamental rhythmic signature of rock-and-roll” (26). At a Blue Man Group show, the performers invite the audience in and the spectators follow through to complete the piece, much like the bass drum and snare drum.

Lastly, theorist Gilles Deleuze describes how music’s natural consistency, accompanied with its complex layers, opens up a world of possibility for the creator and the listener:

The organization of qualified marks into motifs and counterpoints necessarily entails a taking on of consistency, or a capture of the marks of another quality, a mutual branching of sounds-colors-gestures [...] The intervals, intercalations, and articulations constitutive of motifs and counterpoints in the order of an expressive quality also envelop other qualities of a different order. [...] A color will “answer to” a sound. If a quality has motifs and counterpoints, if there are rhythmic characters and melodic landscapes in a given order, then there is the constitution of a veritable *machinic opera* tying together orders, species, and heterogeneous qualities. (330)

By the same token, the music in Blue Man Group helps to tie all other elements together and provide a soundtrack that captivates and engages the ears in a journey toward further discovery and meaning. Without the music simultaneously at the forefront and in the background, the visual, scientific, and comedic elements would have less uniformity or function. They flow from one to another and successfully welcome spectators into the Blue Man’s world through the solid framework and soundscape of an innovative, interactive rock concert.

2) Performance Space: Proximity and Fluidity

With a show so heavily invested in audience participation, it is imperative that Blue Man Group examines and utilizes physical space in a creative and captivating way that welcomes everyone in and fuels a desire to interact. Referring to space in participatory theatre, Way states:

Where does the action take place? The answer is – *everywhere*. [...] As soon as we think of the “stage area” and the “auditorium” as one – as a space in which anything can happen – and as soon as the actors begin freely to use all of that

space, then a whole new relationship is fostered between actor and audience as they share together the same psychological space, arising from a mutual sharing of the same physical space. It is this relationship between actor and audience that is a vital necessity for genuine audience participation to take place. (10)

When employing participation in theatre, Way supports the need for an honest and natural connection between spectator and performer. Moreover, when the performance space stays open and accessible, it unifies the psyche; everyone feels included and alert, realizing and accepting that almost anything can occur. This matches the intended environment and mindset of Blue Man Group spectators and performers alike.

In order for Blue Man and human to confidently share roles one with another in a shared space, the show must ignite an essential want and need to be close. Blue Man Group provides access to audiences through proximity and fluidity of the performance space, making them the central focus before, during, and after the show. The “Behind the Blue Experience” grants people access backstage, onstage, and a chance to play various instruments and watch the sound check. Likewise, the “VIP Experience All-Inclusive” gives the spectator special treatment, enhancing their overall experience. Both features can be purchased at additional cost with a ticket to the event. Lastly, the pre-show warms up audiences through moments of collective and individual participation, and the “Ready Go Finale” guarantees everyone spatial access to the interactive fun of a massive dance party.

Spectators are the most crucial element of the Blue Man Group show. In order to demonstrate just how much they are valued and trusted, the Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino venue provides a backstage look at the making of the show. Beginning in summer 2014,

the venue presented patrons with the option to purchase a “VIP Experience All-Inclusive” to the performance. To describe this package, the Blue Man Group website reads:

All people are important. Except when you're very important. Get up close and personal with Blue Man Group as you never have before - enjoy premium seats to the show, private meet and greet with cast members backstage, complimentary drink, and luminescent merchandise item. (VIP Experience All-Inclusive)

The audience receives special access to certain spaces: the gift shop, the concession stand, the house, and most importantly, backstage by the makeup station, only accessible to cast and crew.

At the end of the show, an usher guides the VIP spectators backstage, and a picture is taken with the spectator and a Blue Man as he enters, after having greeted guests in the lobby. Then for a brief moment, these VIPs talk with the performer. And although he is still in full makeup and costume, the Blue Man responds through speech. While he has broken character, it is more accurate to identify this exchange as a rare moment of access for the spectator into the world of the production. The performer officially stops acting in order to address the spectator’s inquiries, not as Blue Man and human, but as two humans—man and fan.

Additionally that summer, the Las Vegas venue created a backstage tour option called the “Behind the Blue Experience”:

Go behind the velvet rope with our most exclusive experience to date, Behind the Blue. The 90 minute behind-the-scenes tour is available on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays prior to the first performance of the night. Guests get an inside perspective of what it takes to put on an award-winning Las Vegas production, a backstage journey through the colorful world of Blue Man Group with a tour of the show’s wildly inventive instruments and props and exclusive access and

viewing of our nightly sound check with the cast and crew from that evening's performance. (Behind the Blue)

The tour begins two hours before the performance. A stage manager leads the tour and invites spectators to hold the drum mallets, play the large concert bass drum (fig. 20), the PVC marimba, a mobile drum kit, plus the tubes and mallets used for "Drumbone". Photos can be taken as guests play the instruments, yet only during these interactions with permission granted by the stage manager. The guests then sit in the house to watch the Blue Men and band perform the sound check. At this time, no one is in costume or makeup. Then the Blue Men performers practice the marshmallow throwing sequence and whatever other tricks of numbers they want to try. This is an important time because as mentioned, Blue Men actors or band members are sometimes new to a venue and must learn new numbers and how to play with and respond to their counterparts.



Fig. 20: Posing with the Blue Man Group bass drum at the "Behind the Blue Experience"; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders; 20 June 2015.

Occasionally a Blue Man performer joins the guests after sound check and invites them to ask questions. At the end of the tour, the house opens to the public, the pre-show begins, and the show starts thirty minutes later. For “Behind the Blue Experience” guests, the entire show is much more rewarding since they saw backstage, played the instruments, witnessed a brief rehearsal, and spoke with one of the performers. Some guests are even given Twinkies when they ask for it; this gesture demonstrates how Blue Man Group values their audiences more than anything and is willing to sacrifice time and even props to give spectators a memorable experience with photos and other pieces of the performance they can take home.

Many people are fascinated with Blue Man Group and desire to know how everything works. Thus the show fulfills fans’ yearning for information, truly educating while entertaining. While the performance has a few secrets and tricks that cannot be revealed (so as to not ruin the magic and mystery in the vaudeville narrative), nothing is so secretive or private that audiences cannot experience the show through this level of exposure and accessibility. After all, playing the instruments may even inspire a spectator learn to play an instrument, or possibly even audition for the show in the future. These two features also exemplify how everything and *everywhere* is part of the Blue Man Group experience. From the makeup station to the back row balcony seats, all can access the inner and outer operation of this unique entertainment operation.

The Blue Man Group pre-show establishes the entire space, both house and stage, as a shared, interactive environment wherein the audience will be the focus and fuel of the entertainment. During the pre-show in selective locations such as the Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino, ushers hand out long streams of glow-in-the-dark crepe paper to the audience as they sit and wait for the show to start. The ushers instruct the audience to rip off a portion of the paper and make it into a headband. Soon everyone in the house looks a lot more visible and

unified; they can now be seen in the dimmed house (fig. 21), yet it is harder to distinguish one person from another. Headbands are typically tied and fastened in the same manner by wrapping it once around the head and tying a knot in the back at the base of the neck. Perhaps this can be expected due to the simple process and its resemblance of hachimakis worn in martial arts such as karate.



Fig. 21: Adorning the pre-show headbands made of crepe paper; Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders; 20 June 2015.

Hachimakis also share a thematic function as this makeshift neon headband. In Japan, hachimakis are worn to prepare a martial artist for a fight, transitioning them from one state of being into another, and connecting them to the task they are about to complete. It symbolizes that the performer is ready, willing, focused, and fully committed to the upcoming fight. It symbolically removes any distraction or sense of self-doubt:

The act of putting one on is generally used as an expression of willpower and a change in mood [...] Though somewhat more direct and symbolic, as a gesture, its use mostly mirrors rolling up one's sleeves [...] It projects a daring 'I got this, bring it on' attitude of emotional readiness and determination to tackle a challenge head-on. (TV Tropes)

Blue Man Group also demands this type of attitude from its spectators, and readies them for action, commitment, and *communitas* through this basic costume piece.

Making the headband also requires audiences to work together as they rip off their section and hand the remaining strand to others in their row. This type of interaction will return in the “Ready Go Finale” when the audience will once again be enveloped in the same type of crepe paper, but in much more abundance. Before the paper is torn to make the individual headbands, rows of spectators are literally connected by the long roll draping over their laps and being passed over their heads. To receive the paper, spectators must interact with one another, instantly becoming acquainted with the patrons next to them. Lastly, since designing and fastening the headband comes with no further instructions, spectators can show their individuality and personality by the way in which they twist, rip, shape and adorn the headband onto their body. The invitation and gesture of securing a headband grants the audience access into the interactive world of Blue Man Group. It also informs that the house will encourage and support interactivity between audience members. Once silent strangers, they are now a more talkative and bonded crepe papered community.

At this time, patrons who have selected tickets in the first three to four rows of the theatre adorn clear rain ponchos that are placed on their seats before the house opens. Since they are sitting in such close proximity to the stage, they must wear this protective gear, much like a splash zone at a sea animal amusement park. These ponchos hint to everyone that parts of the show may leave the stage (projectile Jell-O, paint, marshmallows, and smashed banana).

Spectators in these orchestra level seats at a Blue Man Group show paid significantly more for their tickets than everyone seated further from the stage. Thus those who spend more money get a more interactive experience with the Blue Men simply based on proximity. The

orchestra is also the section where the pieces “Esophagus” and “Toblerone,” take place, along with picking the “Feast guest”, gift exchanges, and projectile props during “Paintballs and Marshmallows”. Proximity relates to ticket price, level of interaction, and possibly the quality of the experience.

Nicholas Garnham, regarding political and cultural studies, expands on the relationship between quality and quantity: “A delimited social group, pursuing economic political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom” (65). Money controls the experience and accessibility at many forms of live entertainment, such as sporting events, rock concerts, and participatory theatre such as Blue Man Group. The “VIP Experience All-Inclusive” and “Behind the Blue Experience” are more examples of this principle. While Blue Man Group encourages all spectators to bond with one another through participation, not everyone receives the same experience. The show can be enjoyed from every seat in the house, but the more intimate interaction typically goes to those in the more expensive seats. Proximal exposure and access to certain features requires a certain price of ticket. The ponchos may cause others to look on with envy, wishing they had bought a more expensive ticket to obtain a more intimate experience, perhaps planning to do so next time.

As patrons file in, the house props and soundtrack form an atmosphere that quickly awakens their visual and aural senses, and labels the house as part of the performance space. The house lights remain up, but slightly dimmed, still allowing the audience to observe how the walls and ceiling adorn colorful plastic tubes (in some venues) and enormous inflated balls. Rolls of crepe paper are attached near the back rows of seat sections. This might suggest to the spectator that the space will become interactive during the show proper, with the release of the props. The

house also plays soft percussive tribal music, akin to the music performed by the Blue Man Group. The Vegas venue features music with elongated chords that capture the feel of exploring outer space, and occasional squawks that appear to voice the floating Mama and Baby Eye.

Other than these components, nothing about the house is extremely immersive or obtrusive; it is not an intimidating or off-putting space to the spectator. In fact, the ambient drumming could be expected, since the Blue Man Group is advertised as percussionists who play nonconventional instruments. The show's marketing does not mention the show's participatory elements, however. Therefore the house follows suit; it is mysterious, yet intriguing and welcoming as it establishes a musical and visual environment distinct to Blue Man Group.

On the stage (excluding Las Vegas), a quote is projected onto a large screen, preparing the audience to ponder more deeply on the effects and purposes of their forthcoming interaction:

If you would like to establish a connection with people from another culture, it's always good to offer a few gifts as a gesture of friendship. But, an even better way to forge a lasting bond is by creating something together. Whether it's a meal, an art project, or just a spontaneous dance party, when you create with others, you build a connection that lasts a lifetime. (fig. 22)

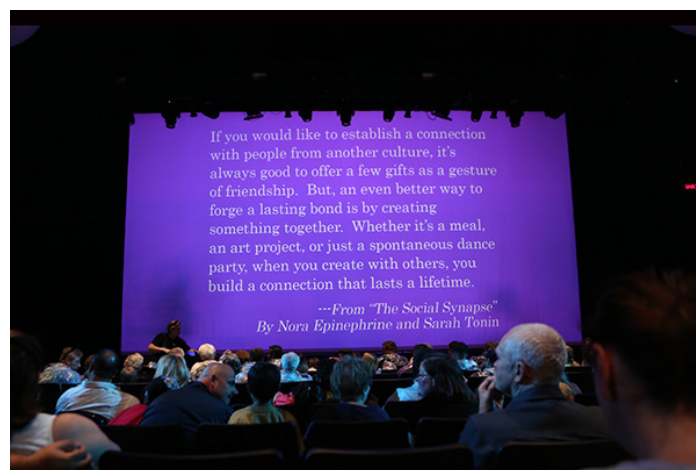


Fig. 22: “The Social Synapse” quotation projected onto the stage during the pre-show; “Blue Man Group Speeds Up Heart, Creates Lasting Memories”; *Best of Orlando*; bestoforlando.com; 2 Oct. 2013; Web; 18 Oct. 2015.

This projection provides the whole production with a strong sense of efficacy. After reading this quote, the audience is more informed about Blue Man Group's goal, even before the show begins. Moreover, it subtly places responsibility on the spectators: if they are going to form a connection with the characters and the rest of the audience, they must be willing to take part in the show's creation process through participation.

The fictional text citation underneath the quote reveals more about the goal of the production. The citation is entitled: "The Social Synapse." While this title is never again referenced or defined in the show, it could be defined as the systematic result of gathering a society together into a shared theatrical space, and uniting the performers and spectators through communication and participation. This title symbolizes an instinctual, impulsive sense of pleasure and satisfaction passed from one person to another, as a result of creating something together in shared space. It cleverly demonstrates the production's goal to fuel a progressive and meaningful connection between everyone at a show, wherein the creation of the live event is the root of the entertainment and the rewarding satisfaction of the experience every time.

Furthermore, the fanciful authors of the "Social Synapse" are "Nora Epinephrine and Sarah Tonin," the personifications of norepinephrine and serotonin. These particular biological compounds and hormones authorize certain reactions in the brain—concentration, memory, and learning—and the blood and oxygen flow to the heart, creating the feeling of heart-pumping excitement. "Norepinephrine actually speeds up your heart rate rushing more blood flow, which eventually reaches the muscles and increases the brains oxygen levels and literally contracts your heart. This brings a whole new meaning to the term, 'a show that touched my heart'" (Best of Orlando)! Thus from the very beginning, Blue Man Group subtly and smartly informs audiences

that the show will awaken their senses and excite their mind and heart through the power of *communitas* through their willful participation of creating this experience.

Silently reading this quote also sets the spectator up to read and respond to more texts throughout the show. Since an invitation to participate in theatre is often feared, White theorizes that building a connection through small, progressive interactions can stimulate participation: “In order to make the audience active, it might be necessary to make [...] a sequence of increasingly participatory frames that draw them closer to the *communitas* that might be experienced by performers, to give them a situation where they feel that extraordinary behavior is not only allowed but expected and easy” (147). Blue Man Group’s pre-show exemplifies this ideology by helping observers become accustomed and committed to the immersive performance platform, so they are not too surprised or unresponsive during the show. This demonstrates how much Blue Man Group understands and respects the audience’s natural process toward accepting an invitation to engage with live entertainment. Furthermore, White categorizes *communitas* as a feeling often shared by performers. Therefore, making spectators participate during the pre-show fuses them with the role and dedication of a performer, and provides them with a necessary feeling of importance and value to the production.

Blue Man Group warms up their audiences and teaches them to consider themselves as part of the entertainment by omitting the Blue Men entirely from the pre-show, and making a show out of the audience instead. In these few moments, everyone practices responding individually, collectively, mentally, vocally, and sometimes even physically. Through simple, low-risk activities, the audience becomes unified and invested in the participatory nature of the show. A few minutes before Blue Man Group takes the stage, red LED text scrolls swiftly across thin screens on the upper corners of the stage, much like supertitles. Slowly, the audience ceases

their side conversations, and glances up at the moving horizontal text. At first, everyone reads silently. Then the text gives commands for the audience to follow collectively. This moving text personifies the space as it seemingly gains the ability to see and speak to the audience directly. Moreover, reading this text trains the audience to pay attention, read fast, and interpret the space as not only living, but also possessing authority. Additionally, since the Blue Men are mute, reading and responding to text readies spectators to lend their own voices to the production.

First, the text tells the audience to yell if they are paying attention. It also informs that the shouting calibrates the sound frequency in the space, so that the performance volume matches that of the audience. This vocal warm-up informs that the Blue Man Group space considers each spectator's boisterous cheers and applause as part of the show's soundscape. Vocal response is imperative since only a monotone male voiceover speaks to the audience during the show proper, presenting information and giving commands for both Blue Man and spectator to follow. Thus for the show to function as planned, the audience must be involved from the very beginning, adding their colorful and emotive voices to a show that lacks this quality of expressive vocalization. Analyzing this moment, Amaris states, "this strategy of 'direct address' acts as a switch to draw the audience out of its passive reception and give it the opportunity to react" (569). The invitation to cheer teaches first-time spectators about the decorum and behavior expected at this venue: the louder and more enthusiastic the audience, the more meaningful and enjoyable the experience.

Much like the soundtrack in the house, the scrolling text presents some expected material for a pre-show, yet does so in an intriguing manner that prepares the audience for what the show proper will require of them. It tells the audience to recite certain sentences aloud, such as pledging to turn their cell phones off. This instruction is familiar to the audience, since many

theaters echo this plea. Yet the communal recitation forms a pact between spectators, wherein they feel more responsible to follow the action. By starting the audience out with a common practice and pledge of turning off their cell phones, the pre-show text carefully nudges them to respond swiftly and collectively, through both word and deed.

After this communal pledge, the text singles out spectators by listing their name and asking them to stand up. Spectators learn to examine the other people in the house, and view them as part of the entertainment. Additionally, they learn to identify the house as a live performance space, equivalent to the role of the stage. Throughout the show, much of the thrill and intrigue comes from watching other people react to, and interact with, the Blue Man Group on the stage and in the house. Thus this action of having audience members stand during the pre-show prepares the audience for this type of spectatorship and level of interactivity.

Once the chosen spectator stands up, the text tells the audience to congratulate them on different accomplishments, such as receiving the bronze medal in synchronized swimming during the summer Olympics. They are instructed to applaud these accomplishments, which the audience vigorously obeys. Many seem to buy into the illusion that this person actually achieved this honor. Yet after the applause, the audience recites the next sentence aloud, wherein they vocalize their disappointment in the alleged Olympian for not winning the gold medal. Usually by now, the audience determines the whole routine as a joke, and responds with laughter to everything they just repeated.

This clever scene foreshadows that the Blue Man Group show proper contains instances of both collective and individual participation. In addition, it sets the audience up for the show's comedic elements that often incorporate spectators, but never in an unrehearsed or truly offensive manner. By making the spectator the source of the joke, and the audience the deliverer

of the joke, everyone is therefore part of the joke; no one feels too exposed or ridiculed. Also, using audience member's real names in the text demonstrates how Blue Man Group caters their show to each audience at every performance. This emphasizes the production's goal to acknowledge and celebrate the spectators, making the entertainment mainly for and about them.

Right before the show begins, the text announces that an audience member will now sing the national anthem. The background music cuts off, the lights fade, and a single spotlight shines downward on an unsuspecting audience member near the front. Laughter fills the space once again, and the selected spectator typically waves, looks up at the light, or looks around in surprise. Then the text reads, "Just kidding." This sequence satirizes the traditional commencement of sporting events, further complicating the identification of the show's mysterious genre for first-time spectators. But more importantly, it portrays the level and limit to which audience members are asked to participate throughout the show proper; the Blue Man Group's routines may set someone up for public humiliation, but never actually puts them in a situation with actual risk or unreasonable expectations. From start to finish, Blue Man Group is clearly and carefully controlling the show, especially regarding audience participation.

For example, unbeknownst to the rest of the audience, ushers utilize the pre-show time to select certain spectators and inform them of their upcoming moments of participation, along with the cues and props they need to carry it out. Yet the full explanation of the interaction is not always given to these unofficial volunteers. For instance, one spectator is simply handed a tube of Toblerone chocolates. A lady seated on the front row stage left side is handed a purse. The late couple is told to wait at the sides of the house with the usher.⁷ The man for the "Body Painting" piece is asked to come onstage when directly invited by the Blue Men. The performers know

⁷ The late couple is actually late to the show, so this exchange happens after the pre-show is over and performance has already begun.

with whom to interact at these moments because the ushers have pointed out the selected spectators to them during this time as well.

Even though these individual moments of participation are planned in compliance and collaboration with specific participants during the pre-show, the rest of the audience is ignorant of this behind-the-scenes preparation. Thus part of the wonder and lasting appeal of the Blue Man Group show is credited to the ways the spectator and performer fuse their roles, and harmoniously work together to create the entire show from beginning to end. As puzzled audiences observe, they ponder on how this amount of audience interaction is occurring so flawlessly. This production becomes even more baffling since a few participatory instances take place without the spectator being warned. This mixture of preparation and spontaneous immersion forms a theatrical space that keeps the audience intrigued and speculative of how the show operates. Furthermore, it establishes an environment wherein everyone must be prepared to interact at all times, if perchance they are selected to be in a scene.

Since only a few spectators are chosen for these intimate interactions during the performance, the “Ready Go Finale” piece near the end creates an environment wherein everyone in the audience can equally participate and celebrate through dance and playing with props. This piece is an exciting dance number featuring the heart-pounding techno song called “Shake Your Euphemism,” although the song may be different depending on the venue. The dance party that follows features striking visuals such as videos, strobe lights, tall stick figure puppets, and massive inflated balls, which fall from the ceiling (fig. 23). It is the audience’s job to keep these balls afloat and bounce them in various directions as they come down on their heads. With the assistance of ushers and Blue Me, the entire audience becomes absorbed in streams of neon crepe paper unrolled from and tossed into the audience, and covered with

fluttering confetti. Since show begins with a rigid structure of instructions for the audience to recite, the dance party finale is the reward for following direction and participating, and a last chance for everyone to take part in the performance as a unified collective.



Fig. 23: “Ready Go Finale” piece, featuring the song, “Shake Your Euphemism” from Zarah Cabañas; “Blue Man Group: Zygote Finale”; *Firefly Lab*; fireflylab.com; 15 Aug. 2010; Web; 18 Oct. 2015.

Together, the Blue Men and audience become unmasked from societal pressures and structures of decorum; they are now free to move and enjoy being an avid part of a collective theatre experience. This is only possible due to the spectator’s comfort and trust level with the Blue Man, which has been carefully and consciously cultivated throughout the entire production up to this point. The audience also has the responsibility and expectation to move the crepe paper along so as to not be consumed by it entirely. They must share it with the rest of the audience, much like the pre-show when they are asked to pass along this same crepe paper in order to make the headbands. Even if a spectator does not want to dance, he or she most likely will still need to participate in the simple fashion of moving the crepe paper along or shoving the balls back into the air so as to not be struck on the head. If the spectator still does not perform these tasks, the props still find their way in the right direction since other audience members naturally assist with the process and even find great joy in being able to propel one of the balls back into the air. In fact, to launch it far enough in one direction or another, it takes more than one person performing

that gesture, which is greatly enjoyable and satisfying; people strive at the chance to touch the ball or cover themselves in streamers and confetti.

The “Ready Go Finale” launches performers into active participation as they dance, touch, watch, and reach a sense of communitas. One of the most vital reasons for Blue Man Group’s lasting success in show business comes from the effort to create a show that attracts all ages of audiences. This piece particularly excites children and invites adults to feel as if they are young again, having fun at a rave, dance party or concert. Blue Man Group is truly accessible to all ages and unleashes the child in everyone that still wants to play and explore, no matter how old they are now. Since the show is family friendly, appropriate, and stimulates the senses and active participation, it is the perfect show for most children to attend. In some locations, Blue Man Group may be the only entertainment option for a family or group with a wide age range; this is one popular reason for attending the show. While the material gets young people and their parents and grandparents in the seats of a Blue Man Group venue, the accessible and enjoyable space and close proximity to the performance during the finale makes the whole experience rewarding and worthwhile.

The variety show structure also keeps children’s attention since scenes and songs are constantly changing. Regarding audience participation in theatre for children Brian Way notes:

When they attend a play that is well done, in the right environment, not only do they, like adults, participate with their mind, their heart and their spirit, but also give vent to the inner reactions of those experiences through additional vocal and physical participation. They do so directly and with vocal simplicity – providing circumstances permit. And when they are young, i.e. pre-puberty, they are in no way governed by the natural growth factors of self-consciousness and

inhibition. (2)

This description favors the mindset and behavior of the Blue Man character, and matches the type of atmosphere Blue Man Group strives to form with their celebratory finale, making spectators of every age into party participants.

Blue Man Group makes every second and spatial quadrant count. From behind the scenes tours to post-show meet and greets, the production effectively utilizes space and time as a valuable part of the overall experience. While the pre-show and show proper take the liberty of singling out spectators, the overall narrative requires all people to participate and to be invested and attentive. As a whole, all participatory moments before, during and after the event, whether purchased as extra passes or already part of the show, demonstrate how much time and effort Blue Man Group spends on discovering ways to incorporate their valued spectators. By creating such an accessible and enticing venue, people feel special and therefore accept the challenge to take part in ways other events may not allow or encourage. Audiences admire and appreciate the amount of detail and attention given to make the show personable to each audience, and captivating due to the spectator's proximity to the Blue Man and the performance space.

3) Technology: A Metaphor for Communication

In the twenty-first century, technology has become a major source of obtaining knowledge, access, communication and entertainment. Blue Man Group has therefore made a conscious effort to utilize technology both as a way to capture audience's interest and create a commentary about humanity's obsession with and dependence on it. In her analysis of Blue Man Group, Amy Petersen Jensen observes: "Interactivity and connection are hallmarks of the Blue Man Group performance, but it is their use of media that solidifies these themes for the audience.

Technology aids in establishing and sustaining these themes in every aspect of the production. From lobby displays to the performance inside the theatre, digital media is central to conveying the messages intended by the group” (82). Blue Man Group thus reveals the relationship between mankind and its many devices, keeping the content relevant and thought provoking.

The show attempts to use technology as a medium to connect audiences together in a live theatrical experience, while also showing the dangers of “urban isolation” brought about by too much dependence upon devices for communication and excitement. Amaris lists some technological elements utilized in the show:

[C]omputer-generated images projected onstage; computer-generated, or synthesized, music in conjunction with computer-modified or amplified voices [...] live DJ-ing or mixing; both complex 3-D animations and simple 2-D animations, and scrolling text videos or LED (light-emitting diodes) signs [...] a collection of television screens, used both as formal screens and as proxies for human heads; cellular telephones used by performers; and the abundance of screens, signs, and projections that are used to produce information overload.

(563)

These elements make the entire experience an engaging spectacle, presented in a space that effortlessly mixes the live with the recorded—the physically present with the virtually projected. More importantly, Amaris points out how today’s world is flooded with electronics and computers, and the show attempts to reveal potential dangers of “information overload.” By so doing, it makes the show’s moments of real-time communal bonding more appealing.

The technology in Blue Man Group provides audiences access to the performance content and space because the devices are generally recognizable, appreciated, and understood. People

are familiar with technology and might expect it to be a major player at live events of this caliber. The cameras and projections make the venue more cinematic, securing the audience's attention even when the Blue Men are offstage. When spectators are recorded, they become instant performers without having to leave their seats. The Blue Men's exposure to three gigantic iPads called "GiPads" conveys humanity's obsession with modern technology as a source for both fun and knowledge.⁸ Yet "Icon Texting" is much more didactic, revealing how humans often prefer using their devices to face-to-face communication. Through the depiction of animated stick figures texting back and forth, this creative piece causes humans to reflect on what electronics they own, how they use them, and how often they may choose to attend to them rather than the real people around them.

As previously mentioned, the pre-show begins with a technological narrator: the LED scrolling text that silently yet efficiently calls the audience to action. Although the text never returns in the show proper, technology and projections remain a major component in the show's methods of storytelling and audience participation. Whenever the Blue Men explore the house, a cameraman records their journey and projects the live footage onto a screen on the stage. This focuses everyone on the current action, regardless of where they are sitting. The cameras give them access to the interactions being made between performer and spectator, particularly during pieces like "Toblerone," "Esophagus," "Body Painting," and choosing the "Feast guest".

Jensen observes that as the cameraman records the actions of both performers and spectators, "The video camera works as an amplifier of the staged action. Each theatrical gesture performed for the audience becomes exaggerated by the proximity of the camera and the close-ups of the projected image" (84). It keeps the stage as an easily accessible focal point for the

⁸ iPads are an Apple, Inc. trademarked product. The GiPads in the production are designed to resemble them.

performance, which is crucial since it is the most visible location in the space. The show also contains many prerecorded videos throughout the production, particularly as a transitional interlude when the Blue Men exit the stage to strap on a new instrument or costume piece before returning to the stage. Whether live or prerecorded, video helps to keep everyone's attention.

Jensen also reveals how this multimedia platform grants the audience more direct access to the space by making everyone part of the performance: "The use of cameras and video projections extends the theme of connectivity by allowing the audience to access the theatre space beyond the actual stage. The images produced by the live feeds from the cameras explore the audience space and the backstage space. The audience is aware of their whole environment, and the whole environment becomes a part of the performing space" (83). Her observation supports Way's theory that in participatory theatre, the show happens everywhere. Mixing a live performance with video projections form a fascinating environment that holds focus and turns spectators into performers when they see themselves and others on the screen. Knowing that everyone else can see them as well, some spectators react by waving to themselves and others while they stare at their image; this reaction is akin to the excited reflex performed by fans at sporting events when they are featured on a jumbo screen.

What is even more interesting are the moments when the Blue Men are in the house and nearby spectators still watch the action on the screen. Some choose to watch the scene unfold in real time and be present in that exchange, yet many stare at the screen and watch it unfold like a film (fig. 24). This split reaction exemplifies the powerful influence of cameras and media in general. In witnessing the same scene, some eyes are instantaneously drawn to the live action while others settle for the massive size and alluring presence of the jumbo screen, perhaps entertained by watching themselves on the screen as well. This reveals how Blue Man Group

encourages various interpretations of accessibility in hopes of somehow connecting all spectators to the captivating experience of live entertainment. For some, accessibility refers to the size of the image, while others prefer real-time action and proximity to the performers and others.



Fig. 24: A Blue Man climbing over the seats of the orchestra, while being video taped. Some chose to watch him directly while others watch the live footage being projected onto a screen onstage. Las Vegas Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino; Photo by Haley Flanders; 20 June 2015.

In the piece known as “GiPads,” Blue Man Groups explores humanity’s dependent relationship upon technology to receive information, be entertained, and communicate with one another. “GiPads” depicts games and apps used on three gigantic iPads operated and explored by the three Blue Men, one device for each (fig. 25). The GiPads float onto the stage from above, interrupting the previous piece through their large presence and the sound of a ringtone. The Blue Men seem confused, yet they accept the incoming call from GiPad Customer Service. Then a female voiceover says, “Hello! Thank you for purchasing the new GiPad, the all new tablet with ginormous benefits.” She finishes her instructions with this sales pitch about the book reading app: “Gipad: We want to do for reading what texting has done for driving, and that is help you cram more gigantic value into each and every moment of your life. Take your GiPads out for a spin and enjoy the ride” (“Blue Man Group: Experience the Phenomenon”).



Fig. 25: “Gipads” from PPACRI; “Blue Man Group is coming to Providence March 6-8, 2014!”; *YouTube*; youtube.com; 22 Jan. 2013, Web; 18 Oct. 2015.

A Blue Man hangs up the phone and all three click on the GiBooks application, more commonly known as ‘apps’. They each open up a different book in the app. One is entitled “Synopsize Me: The World’s Most Popular Books in 25 Words or Less.” Another is entitled, “The Joys of Media Multitasking,” and the third is entitled, “Factoids and Facturds for Fact Nerds.” As the Blue Men swipe the pages by running their hand across the GiPad, the audience is exposed with three reading options, a paragraph on each GiPad. The material discusses facts in a post-modern, self-reflexive manner, relating to what spectators are actually doing in that moment. The “Factoids” book mentions “the average American between the ages of 8 and 18 sends over 120 text messages per day and spends 7.5 hours media multitasking.” “Synopsize Me” summarizes famous plays and books in modern vernacular with no helpful or intellectual detail. And “The Joys of Media Multitasking” encourages the Blue Man to post photos, watch a video of a singing goat, and break out other devices simultaneously.

Since the Blue Men scroll through the different screens very quickly, the audience experiences information overload. They try to read and react to everything in front of them, yet most likely miss a few lines of text. This interaction creates a commentary on how much time and energy humans spend on electronic devices, and how multitasking keeps them from gaining

or retaining a useful amount of information on any particular thing. Moreover, the apps may feed people incorrect facts or waste their time entirely.

After closing the Gibook app—possibly due to boredom or mental exhaustion—the Blue Men play a slot machine game on the GiPad, which wins them each a box of Captain Crunch Cereal. They each pull out a box from behind the screen. They then open an app that animates sound waves. They crunch their cereal in a rhythm, which has been prerecorded and amplified. The sound waves appear on the screen as they chew. One Blue Man’s GiPad volume is turned up higher than the other two (his box is also much larger), making him the odd one out. The audience’s laughter demonstrates how spectators, just like the Blue Men, can find humor and entertainment through nearly pointless apps; particularly ones that make people look or sound ridiculous.

They then experiment with various apps, accompanied by music and carefully blocked movements. While much of the show allows the Blue Men flexibility and improvisation in their staging and reactions, “GiPads” is the most choreographed movement piece in the show, requiring the timing and accuracy of playing percussion. The videos and music must be timed perfectly to the performers’ actions and vice versa. This demonstrates the relationship between live theatre and technology: the live elements become subject to the technology and must adapt their performance to it. Audiences find the piece accessible because they understand and appreciate the effort being made to make this marriage between technology and live performance work so flawlessly. Furthermore, in this exchange, the Blue Men are like spectators, carefully watching and following the commands of the performing technological devices. Thus the Blue Men employ the role of spectator by watching and interacting with unfamiliar objects in their space.

When they click on an app, the female voiceover recites the app name and the instructions for its use: “Back Beat. Click start to create a rhythmic back track for your life. Digi-Mirror: Pass in front of the screen to see your virtual reflection. Digi-tizer: Pass behind the iPad screen to digitize yourself. Digi-enhancer: Pass behind the screen to enhance yourself.” (“Blue Man Group: Experience the Phenomenon”). As the Blue Men walk behind and in front of the three iPads in a manner that synchronizes with the images on the three screens, their blocking creates the illusion that the Blue Men have actually stepped inside the iPad, can see their reflection in it (like a mirror), or have been redressed to look like a ballerina, rapper, and Latina dancer with maracas. Since the Blue Men adorn some of these actual costume pieces while they hide behind the iPads, it makes this illusion more believable.

At the start of this piece, the spectator most likely recognizes the iPad and understands its function and purpose device more than the Blue Man can. Thus the audience’s familiarity with the iPad reference makes the piece more accessible, causing them to seem more experienced and intelligent than the Blue Man in his own world. Yet his willingness to try different apps and his ability to catch on quickly communicates the message that if the Blue Men can accept human devices into his world, than the spectator can accept everything from his world into theirs. Thus technology creates a conversation between performer and spectator, and unites them in common interests and objects. Kattwinkel observes that in Blue Man Group, technology can “decrease the distance between performer and spectator through a mutual cognizance of the modern world” (*Contemporary*, 157). While technology can be isolating, it can also act as a familiar resource and establish common ground between Blue Man and human. It is enlightening to observe the Blue Men experiment and discover access to this human device, perhaps even teaching the audience fun new ways to utilize them for entertainment.

“Icon Texting” is the most conceptual piece regarding technology’s relationship to humanity. By labeling 2-Dimensional space as texting and 3-Dimensional space as face-to-face communication, Blue Man Group theorizes on the possibility of 2.5-Dimensional space, wherein the real and virtual spaces intersect. At the end of “Rods and Cones,” the three Blue Men exit the stage while a male voiceover explains the technical process of animation. The accompanying videos depict a neon human stick figure with a bubbled outline that moves frame by frame to show how human eyes perceive still images as moving objects. Then this animated human pulls out a phone and text messages another animated human that appears onstage. The typed text is projected onstage next to them. This animation is performed on the three digital screens initially used for the GiPads (fig. 26).



Fig. 26: “Icon Texting” from Haraszi Tibor; “Blue Man Group NYC II”; YouTube; youtube.com; 15 Apr. 2012; Web; 18 Oct. 2015.

With the two (eventually three) figures labeled by their color outline, the text conversation reads:

Blue: Dude, where R U? [...] Do you ever feel limited by 2-dimensional space?

Orange: What’s wrong with 2-D space?

Blue: Well, sometimes I wonder about what 3-D space would B like...

Orange: Why don’t you just get some 3-D glasses?

Blue: I'm not talking about cinematic 3-D; I'm talking about the 3-D of the real world.

Orange: Who needs the 3rd dimension when U can text?

Blue: But don't U ever want 2 have a real conversation?

Orange: What do you mean by "real"?

Blue: U know...actually talking 2 each other, maybe even looking into each other's eyes...

Orange: Dude, U R creeping me out. I'm gonna have to de-friend you.

Blue: Good one! ROTFL

Orange: I'm not joking. L8R (Blue is replaced by Purple. To Purple.) Hey.

Purple: Hey.

Orange: You won't believe it; someone just tried to have a "real" conversation with me.

Purple: Creepy. Hey, speaking of real, have U noticed there R real people here?

Orange: U mean like the people in "Second Life"?

Purple: No, I mean there R actually real people in this space, not avatars of people.

Orange: How'd they get past my firewall?

Purple: You can't put up a firewall in the real world!

Orange: That's one of the many reasons I avoid it. Let's face it. 2-D and 3-D culture just don't mix.

Purple: Maybe we'd get along better if we could meet in a hybrid dimension.

Orange: What do you mean?

Purple: U know, a dimension in between 2-D and 3-D, so there would B more common ground.

Orange: You mean like 2.5 dimensional space?

Purple: Exactly. C'mon! Let's just try it...

Orange: Try what?

Purple: Walking forward! If we can do that we might B able 2 trigger a 2.5D outbreak! Just follow my lead...

Orange: K.

(Tibor)

Then Orange and Purple put away their phones and appear to step out of their screens, now able to walk toward the audience as they bounce with each step. Then the Blue Men, now in light-up costumes, join the figures onstage and perform the piece "Lights Suits" with large sticks that have digital amplifiers to make the whipping sounds audible and percussive. Only the digital neon lights from the costumes and the outlined characters illuminate the space. The entire spectacle is a musical mash-up of the digital world and the real world, accompanied by Blue Man Group's experimental rhythms and love of theatrical illusion. Once 2-D stick figures, the animations now appears to be attached to other performers wearing all black, so the characters seem to have entered into the 3-D space of the real world. The transformation is an eye-tripping magic trick and captivating spectacle layered with intentional metaphor.

Returning to the texting conversation, Blue feels as if communicating through electronic devices is a 2-Dimensional space, lacking depth and a sense of realness to it. A "real" conversation would not be a video game like "Second Life" but would include proximity, speaking to another person, and looking into that person's eyes. Blue Man Group's initiative for

making the show interactive is to coax them into a real connection with one another, breaking down the barrier between performance and silently seated spectator. Kattwinkel observes about the group: "Their purpose in drawing attention to the information overload and technical isolation of the modern age is to present an opportunity to break through that isolation and participate in a tribal ritual or a community, however briefly formed that community may be" (*Contemporary*, 140). Modern audiences understand and possibly appreciate this message, motivating them to want more direct contact rather than technologically driven communication.

Orange's immediate response to "de-friend" Blue and text Purple reveals how quickly and carelessly conversations end in the 2-D digital world. Furthermore, Orange ending the technological friendship reveals just how much authority the Internet gives to human connection. For example, many social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest require a person to be labeled a friend or a follower in order for them to access the page of another person. To de-friend is to no longer allow that person access to your online persona and information. Today, this offense can equate to saying that someone no longer wants the other person in his or her life. As dramatic as it seems, clearing a person from contacts in the digital world is a step to removing that person and no longer allowing them access or communication. Handled as such a flippant gesture by Orange, it symbolizes how humans often treat one another in technological platforms of communication.

When Purple considers Blue's request for real conversation as "creepy", it denotes that this entire animated world only ever communicates through digital platforms. More importantly, it personifies what the real world may become if everyone only uses technology to communicate. Purple's obliviousness to the seated spectators exemplifies how becoming consumed with technology can distract people from their surroundings, and therefore be mentally absent from

their own environment and the people in it. Blue Man Group focuses so intently on keeping spectator's attention throughout the show and making them conscious of the other audience members through participation. Thus the show's entire framework demonstrates their goal to unite people together, ready and willing to interact in real time in a shared space.

While these animated characters bifurcate the 2-D world of technology and the 3-D world of reality, so much of the digital world carries into reality and has therefore become part of humanity's definition of reality. Jensen states: "[T]he audience's vocabulary for reality has been expanded through intimate interaction and experience with technology [...] Technology can truly aid the theatre in its quest 'to make it real' by engaging audiences in a dialogue rooted in a cultural reality" (85). The reality of the twenty-first century culture is that communication and relationships are heavily contained in and sustained through digital media and technology. Thus Blue Man Group embraces that truth and designs pieces around mediums that already interest and excite modern audiences, as if to combat technological distractions with even larger and more artistic interpretations of these same devices. In Blue Man Group, technology is the problem and the solution, the focus and the way to achieve focus.

Orange and Purple define the digital and real world as separate cultures that do not mix, yet ultimately find a place in between the two dimensions. Perhaps this middle ground known as the 2.5-D space symbolizes the way in which performer and spectator come together during the production through sharing roles and participating in the show. Digital media can be considered a 2-D world because it is often faceless and constitutes a less personable or emotive method of conversation. It does not always suggest that the person is actually present, or that immediate call-and-response communication is occurring. Texts can be sent and received while doing other things, and can happen with massive amounts of time and space in between. In a similar way,

being a spectator at a live entertainment venue may feel like 2-D space when the audience members sit in silence, never interacting with the performers or one another. On the surface, there is no way to tell that any messages were received or any human connection was made. The performers are isolated in one dimension while the spectators are in another.

On the other hand, a 3-D space is completely immersive and interactive. Everyone and everything at the show is deemed accessible and important. People see each other, talk with one another, respond in an unrehearsed and timely fashion, create relationships and have face-to-face conversations in a shared space. The Blue Man Group show resides in the middle of these two worlds, thus forming an accessible 2.5-D theatrical space. The production respects the separate roles of spectator and performer, yet coaxes the audience into the performance through participation. Likewise, the Blue Man's awareness, wonder, and occasional aloofness give him the appearance of a spectator, causing him to meet up with the spectator on their journey toward becoming the performer. Since they meet in the middle, no one ever fully switches roles; the Blue Man always remains the performer and the viewers remain the audience. Yet through their interaction, they access and understand one another's worlds more fully. By so doing, the show's space and content can be reached, approached, used, obtained, understood, and most certainly appreciated.

Conclusion:

In participatory theatre, the spectator and the performer must share roles throughout the production. Performers must share the performance and viewing space with spectators in order to will them into activity. Interaction is key to Blue Man Group achieving its desired effect of *communitas* and investment in the creation of the event. This can only happen if the space is

accessible and inviting. In turn, the spectators will allow the Blue Men to access *their* space, understanding that connecting the human and Blue Man is a vital part of the interactive experience. Without accessible space, the show's character and narrative cannot achieve such positive reinforcement surrounding audience participation. A connection with the character would seem unwanted or unattainable. The narrative would be uninteresting and isolating. Thus Blue Man Group carefully and creatively molds a performance space to make audiences feel both wanted and needed. No matter the piece or the level of participation, Blue Man Group provides patrons with a space that grants them the chance to experience the wonder and excitement of seeing and being part of live theatre unlike any other.

Accessible performance spaces change how spectators see themselves and their function in a production. Blue Man Group accentuates the spectators' presence and role as participant and performer, which encourages audiences to observe one another during the show. The space awakens the spectators' senses and causes them to examine more closely their own aesthetics and relationship to everyone and everything around them, possibly seeking for such proximity, exposure, and involvement in future theatrical attractions. The power of visual and aural perception, the proximity and fluidity of performance space, plus the utilization of and references to modern technology can completely alter the way spectators perceive, categorize, and translate art and performance. The show successfully creates a space and content that balance efficacy with entertainment, making the entire production satisfying and smart. Together Blue Man Group's authentic character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space act as a blueprint for ways to utilize audience participation that educates, enlightens, elates, and encourages new ideas.

Conclusion

Discussing the newest show slogan, “Dare to Live in Full Color”, Stanton sums up the function and intent of Blue Man Group, lead by its captivating trio of blue-skinned percussionists: “We created the Blue Man to embody and explore what it means to be fully human, to live in full spectrum, which is to explore your creativity, remain curious and playful, AND to feel like you belong to a community” (Entertainment News). Blue Man Group helps audiences see and experience the many colors, contours, and contents of their own world through the mediums of theatre, music, science, technology, and art. The show’s efficacy and entertainment connects humans together by giving them the power and responsibility to create and take part in a live theatre experience full of participation and interaction with performers and spectators. Through the sharing of roles, Blue Man Group wills its audiences into participation as they bond with, and become invested in, the show’s authentic Blue Man character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space.

In Blue Man Group, both performer and spectator need one another not only to complete the various pieces in the show, but also to make the entire experience more memorable and worthwhile. In “Drumbone”, Playing on the PVC pipes to develop a melody out of the makeshift instrument “fits into the pattern of the Blue Man taking something that we take for granted, something mundane, something that we don’t even pay attention to, and the Blue Man turning it into something the Blue Man can express his emotions through” (*Inside the Tube*). Likewise, live shows can often take their audience for granted, possibly never acknowledging or considering them when forming, rehearsing, and performing their show. However, Blue Man Group fully notices, appreciates, and utilizes all spectators as a catalyst—their personal PVC pipe—through

which they can artistically express themselves and leave a lasting impression.

By the same token, the participation elements in the show make audiences feel important and validated during their viewing experience, and keep them coming back for more. The show adapts to its audiences, so its pieces will continue morphing to keep spectators interested and involved. As the show moves forward, the success of its audience participation will still be firmly rooted in its authentic character, adaptable narrative and accessible space. More than anything else, these three elements grant spectators the unique opportunity to author collectively and interact personally with the performers and one another in this ephemeral, exploratory, and truly enjoyable variety show. The intriguing and admirable qualities of the Blue Man, the flexibility and topical nature of the narrative, the close proximity and accessible content fuse the performer and spectator together in a world unlike any other. While the Blue Man's atmosphere is ultimately foreign to the human spectator, the show balances the bizarre with the familiar to guarantee their sense of security and lasting intrigue in this environment. Most importantly, the show never leaves the audience alone to fend for themselves; they are constantly supported on their journey as they receive and accept invitations of audience participation alongside the Blue Men and work as a community to create this show.

All in all, none of Blue Man Group's lasting success resulted by accident or luck. Based on my studies of audience participation and its effect on both spectators and performers during a live event, the show developed their character, narrative, and space to feed an audience's desires and aesthetics, educating and entertaining them in every piece. If a spectator pays close enough attention, the group's knowledge, awareness, and cleverness regarding the audience can be seen, artistically splattered—like the neon paint from the barrel drums—all over the various elements of performance. Thus Blue Man Group can guarantee a unique and unforgettable performance at

each show due to the many ways in which they create an interactive experience that involves and requires the attention, imagination, and investment of the audience at all times.

Spectators may self identify as individually insignificant members of a live event, watching as the performers send the entertainment away from the stage and into the crowd, just like a standard journey through modern plumbing. However, Blue Man Group audiences become interactive due to the show's experimentations and the various combinations made by developing a shared relationship between performer and spectator, wherein the spectators occasionally perform and the Blue Men always spectate. Thus Blue Man Group centers their show on, and ultimately finds success from, the captivating manner in which they combine the roles of performer and spectator between Blue Man and human, and develop an honest and memorable connection with everyone at every performance through an authentic character, adaptable narrative, and accessible space.

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