Hollywood, Etc.: The Blue Man cometh

by Gary Panetta

He's earless and bald, with a bright blue head and a bright blue face, a color that stands out all the more in the stage light because of his utilitarian, nondescript clothing.

CURIOSITY EXPLOSION - The Blue Man Group performs its music on an array of instruments that includes plastic pipes, oil drums and other elements from the industrial world. CNS Photo by David Zentz. He never speaks. His face is expressionless, deadpan, inscrutable - except for the eyes. They flicker with wonder, curiosity, surprise. They speak of a soul within - a soul like ours. And, yet, not quite like ours.

For the Blue Man is human, and, yet, not really human. Alien, and, yet, oddly familiar. A visitor from the future, or a remote planet, perhaps; and yet, in some way, also a figure as familiar as planet Earth and its past, a past of tribes and tribalism, which partly explains why the Blue Man never appears alone. He is always part of a group of three, each a mirror image of the other.

"He looks pretty weird," said Zack Buell, 33, who plays one of the Blue Men in the Blue Man Group. "He's sort of not from our world in the sense that he doesn't know about normal, everyday things that are typical for us. But the character is insatiably curious, fascinated by things. He's open and innocent, in a way, like a 4-year-old child would be, to exploring and learning about stuff.

"At the same time, he's got this - I don't know - maybe it's sort of a mystical, tribal quality because he likes to drum, make rhythm and make music through drumming, and create this collective, shared experience with the audience."

Humor is a big part of that experience. The current Blue Man Group's show, "How to be a Megastar Tour 2.0," for instance, is both sendup and celebration of rock music.

"It takes the character and puts him in a rock show setting," Buell said. "He doesn't know what it means to be a rock star. He doesn't know what that is. So he downloads a 'how-to' manual and uses it to try to learn how to be a rock star. The manual tells him various things to do - rock star movements that you can do with your audience, like the one-armed fist pump, or your basic head bob. But then there are some other ones that we think are funny that the Blue Man just accepts as normal. Like maybe wearing a cod piece. Or putting a wedding veil on your head.

"In running the show, we want it to have a mix of comedy, really great rock music and pretty amazing lighting effects, and people having a good time."

The latest show is a variation on a theme that's been running since the 1980s, when the Blue Man Group was founded by Phil Stanton, Chris Wink and Matt Goldman. The group began as street theater and expanded from there. Currently, different shows by the Blue Man Group are running in Chicago, New York City and Las Vegas. Blue Man Group performances also have taken place in Berlin, London and Toronto.

The shows are famous for being messy - with paint splattering onto white canvas, and performers spitting marshmallows and colored gumballs, or squirting goo.

"We have some of that stuff," Buell said of the latest show. "A lot of that ... describes a (Blue Man) theater show, the 'Tubes,' which is a little bit different from this rock concert that we're bringing. We've always used paints on drums so when you hit the drum the paint flies up. We have some of that in this show. Some of the audience members are given ponchos. They don't really get too messy. It's just a precaution - just to make them feel, maybe, that they're going to get wet. One guy throws gumballs and the other guy catches it in his mouth. He's able to spit paint out of his mouth."

The show's key element remains the music, which is performed on an array of instruments, including plastic pipes, oil drums and other elements from the industrial world. The unusual combination - mediated through the bizarre character of a performing Blue Man - makes for a high-energy experience for the audience.

"That's sort of the goal of the character," Buell said. "He wants to connect with the audience through music. That's the goal of the show - to give everybody a shared experience that is in a way somewhat primitive, that has connections to older community experiences through music and drumming. There's something very tribal about it."

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