

FROM THE AVANT-GARDE TO THE POPULAR: A HISTORY OF BLUE MAN GROUP,
1987-2001

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ABSTRACT

Jonathan Chambers, Advisor

Throughout the United States toward the end of the twentieth century, popular theatre proliferated on the nation's stages and in other entertainment venues: concert halls, comedy clubs, Broadway stages, and more. One of the notable offerings was (and still remains) Blue Man Group, a vaudevillesque performance troupe that plays music, performs scenes, and creates a sense of community amongst the attendees. Though now enjoying enormous mainstream success, Blue Man Group was once a fringe, avant-garde theatre, creating politically charged performances on the streets of New York City for free to those in close proximity.

This study examines Blue Man Group's history, from its beginnings through 2001, by looking at how it transitioned from its avant-garde roots into a popular theatre appearing on national television and in front of thousands of spectators each night. Following Mike Sell's assertion that the thorny term "avant-garde" art is "premised on the notion that the modern world--its institutions, its social relations, its art, its cuisines, its economies--is terminally out of joint" (2011, 7), this study seeks to demonstrate that Blue Man Group's first public performances, in the experimental theatre spaces and on the streets of New York City, emerged from a frustration with American culture. I argue that after opening a long-running production in New York, the organization took steps away from its avant-garde roots through questionable business practices and widespread expansion. In turn, I consider the group's recording and releasing an album, which in effect turned its live event into an unchanging experience. I contend that by 2001, Blue Man Group had turned its back on its avant-garde outlook, as is evidenced by its opening of a production in Las Vegas and its appearing in nationally televised commercials

for a computer company. In so doing, Blue Man Group eschewed its avant-garde roots while expanding its brand, thereby becoming part of American popular culture. Though I argue throughout that popularity is not a transgression to avoid, I assert that in the case of Blue Man Group, the search for it led the troupe to abandon the avant-garde ideals from which it originally developed.

For my parents, Edward John Harrick and Karen Sue Harrick,
for their patience, support, guidance, and love

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INTRODUCTION

Created by nine collaborators, including principal co-founders Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, and Chris Wink, Blue Man Group grew out of the thriving experimental New York theatre scene in the late 1980s. Since its founding nearly thirty years ago, the group has gone from performing on the street; to staging works in small art houses, large commercial theatres, and sports arenas; to appearing on television and the Internet. Now in its third decade of existence, Blue Man Group seems to show no end in sight. Indeed, during the second decade of the twenty-first century, Blue Man Group not only continues to stage its shows in theatres in New York, Las Vegas, Chicago, Boston, and Orlando, but also consistently tours throughout the United States and internationally, has branched out into cruise line entertainment (appearing on Norwegian Cruise Line's Epic cruise ship), and has planned its first feature-length film in association with National Geographic.¹ Though Blue Man Group now enjoys massive mainstream success, during the late 1980s and early 1990s it was an avant-garde theatre group performing in New York's experimental theatre scene. As the following chapters make clear, how Blue Man Group's work evolved from avant-garde theatre to popular mass entertainment is not a simple tale. One of the central reasons why that tale is so complicated is the simple fact that Blue Man Group was from its beginning, and still continues to be, situated as avant-garde.²

¹ The website www.comingsoon.net reported that the film would be released in IMAX and 3 D in 2011, though that has not yet come to fruition ("Russo Helming Blue Man Group IMAX Movie").

² In his February 2011 article of a Blue Man Group production in Portland, Maine, journalist Bob Keyes describes the Group as "the original avant garde performance art and

The avant-garde is a slippery term and concept, which is not simply demarcated by a specific set of practices or aesthetics. The literal translation of avant-garde (from the French) means “before the guard” or “advanced guard” and has its roots in military culture, describing “(t)he foremost part of an army” (“Avant-garde”). The term was used exclusively in militaristic parlance for centuries until approximately 1910, when it took on a new meaning, as a signifier of edgy or alternative art work on the fringes of the mainstream. Even today, at its most basic level, the avant-garde is intrinsically tied to the notion of a fringe opposition to the establishment.

Whether or not Blue Man Group is avant-garde has been a point of debate for much of its career. In his 1994 review of *Blue Man Group: Tubes* in New York, William Hutchings argues that the production makes “aspects of the postmodern avant-garde accessible to an often-youthful audience” (175). Conversely, eight years later, Jaime Lee Rana Koran claimed that “Blue Man Group may not be totally avant-garde in concept anymore” (52). In her master’s thesis, “Lights, Audience, Profit: The Evolution of the Las Vegas Spectacle,” Koran interviews Hal Rothman, a scholar and historian who has written extensively about Las Vegas. Koran quotes Rothman as saying “(a)vant-garde doesn’t sell in Las Vegas. To sell avant-garde you have to clean it up to mainstream, and that’s what happened with Blue Man Group. The week before Blue Man Group opened in Las Vegas they were on an Intel commercial. That’s not avant-garde” (Rothman, qtd. in Koran 52). Koran’s point is useful because it highlights the slippery nature of the term, as well as its application to an entity like Blue Man Group. Neither Koran nor Rothman articulates what

percussion ensemble” (Keyes). Somewhat paradoxically, in an article from January 2011, journalist Stephanie Hardiman labels Blue Man Group as both popular and avant-garde. She anticipates the then upcoming Peoria, Illinois performance by calling the group “insanely popular avant-garde percussionists” (Hardiman).

they mean by avant-garde; nor do they offer specific examples as to how Blue Man Group fails to meet its definition other than offering a criticism of the group's relationship with Intel. They do, however, both seem certain that Blue Man Group does not model an avant-gardist ideal.

In light of such arguments, it is necessary to articulate my use of the term "avant-garde." Some scholars believe that the avant-garde is no longer a part of the American theatre landscape. Three such scholars, Richard Schechner, David Savran, and Arnold Aronson, have argued that avant-garde theatre is disappearing from the United States' theatre scene or has already vanished. In his *Performing Arts Journal* article, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde: Why It Happened and What We Can Do about It," Schechner posits that the end of the avant-garde theatre movement in the United States happened around the time of the decline of Schechner's very own The Performance Group in 1980. Schechner offers several thoughtful reasons as to why the avant-garde theatre scene dissipated at the time. They include "(t)he end of the activism in society-at-large," "(a) shrinking economy when inflation is factored in," "(s)tupid journalism," "(d)issolution of the groups" and "(f)ailure to pass on what was learned to a new generation of artists" (1981, 54, emphasis in original). Schechner's specific moment of the end of the avant-garde in American theatre occurs in 1979 with "the closing of Richard Foreman's theatre on lower Broadway" (1981, 50). Though he marks that the end of the avant-garde theatre movement came with the relocation of Foreman's theatre, it coincidentally was followed by Schechner's departure from The Performance Group the next year. He writes "(w)hen *The Balcony* closed in January 1980, I stopped working at the (Performing) Garage with the Group" (1981, 55, emphasis in original). Since Schechner took an active role in the perpetuation of an avant-garde theatre scene in the United States, his pronouncement that the avant-garde ended around the same time as when he ceased to create theatre with The Performance Group is

suspect. Further, some of his claims do not hold up under scrutiny. For example, many avant-garde theatre artists since the early 1980s, including Blue Man Group, engage or have engaged in fostering younger artists and their talents. Since so many of the avant-garde theatres involve a company of artists who work toward developing the next generation of artists, such as the SITI Company, Schechner's claim is simply erroneous. I locate Blue Man Group's early work as comparable to this and other contemporary, avant-garde companies.

Savran's view of the death of the avant-garde in theatre differs slightly from Schechner's. For Savran, The Wooster Group—which developed after the end of The Performance Group—represents “the last wave of the avantgarde” (12). Savran agrees with Schechner's points regarding the reasons for the decline of the avant-garde, and adds to it “the hegemony of deconstruction and poststructuralism (both in and out of the academy) and the increasing exploitation of nonprofit theatres for their artists and product by commercial producer's intent on replenishing their stores of cultural and symbolic capital” (12). Savran, however, lays most of the blame on the consumer-driven culture of the United States than solely with the artists creating work at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. He writes that the issue is less with “the long decline of the avantgarde in the U.S.” and more “the conditions that once allowed an avantgarde to thrive” (12). Savran's somewhat gloomy opinion of an inability to maintain an avant-gardist approach or style suggests that, until artists as a group extract themselves from the polluting effects that capitalism seems to have upon culture, they will persist in failing to achieve the avant-garde. Artists, then, must situate themselves in opposition to hegemony, which aligns with capitalism. Savran goes on to state that theatre artists are complicit in this process:

Virtually all emergent or small-scale American theatre artists style themselves insurgents, all the while hoping to tread the narrow path that leads (in New York, at least) from the Fringe Festival, Dixon Place, or P.S. 122 to the Public Theater, BAM, Lincoln Center, or even Broadway. (35)

In many respects, Blue Man Group embodies Savran's model. It gave early performances at both Dixon Place and P.S. 122, two smaller New York performance venues that cater to more alternative or underground theatres and artists, before achieving mainstream, commercial success.

Likewise, Arnold Aronson argues that the avant-garde is marked by its peripheral relationship to the mainstream and that it is no longer possible. Aronson considers the history of avant-garde theatre in the United States throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. More specifically, he charts the emergence of American avant-garde art and theatre scenes following World War II, which sought to challenge and subvert mainstream American culture. To that end, he notes that the avant-garde was "intentionally shocking and provocative, and [thus]—by definition—it constitutes an attack upon the established practices of mainstream culture and society (2000a, xi). Unlike Schechner but similar to Savran, Aronson allows for The Performance Group's heir – The Wooster Group – inclusion in his narrative on avant-garde theatre. However, also like Savran, he merely delays its inevitable death by a few years, arguing that avant-garde theatre was on the decline in the 1980s and ended in the 1990s. Aronson concludes that "in a sense, the goal of the avant-garde has been achieved. Structures of thinking and modes of perception have been—or are in the process of being—fundamentally altered" (2000a, 211). While Aronson does well by locating the avant-garde on the fringes and in response to the mainstream, his conclusion that the goals of the avant-garde have been achieved

is narrow. To be sure, I contend that the avant-garde will always exist to question and challenge popular works, behaviors, and ideas. In terms of the study that follows, perhaps Aronson's most significant observation is that the avant-garde's attacking of certain norms in the mainstream. My understanding of the avant-garde—as a reaction to a particular norm or practice in mainstream culture—aligns with Aronson's ideas about its position and role in society.

This idea of opposition is further explored by Mike Sell. In his article “The Avant-garde and the Challenges of Resisting Parochialism,” Sell defines the avant-garde as “minoritarian/elite, nonparliamentary movements that instrumentalize culture for social and political ends” (2006, 280). Since, for Sell, those residing in the avant-garde necessarily comprise a minority, the actions that they make are an attempt to change some belief, idea, or practice that holds prominence in the popular consciousness. Perhaps the biggest difference between Sell's conception of the avant-garde and that of other theatre scholars is that he allows for the avant-garde to still exist. Unlike Schechner, Savran, and Aronson, who all claim that the avant-garde was once an ideal that was subsumed by the hegemonic or middlebrow pap, Sell believe it is still a viable way of creating art. In the end, then, my understanding of the avant-garde also closely aligns with Sell's: I see it as still possible, that a fringe artist, can be critical of the popular or norm.

The “popular” is similarly fraught with challenges in definition and description. Many scholars have differing ideas about what involves it. In considering his own study of American culture throughout the Great Depression, Lawrence Levine asks, “(h)ow did one distinguish between ‘low,’ ‘high,’ ‘popular,’ and ‘mass’ culture? What were the definitions and demarcation points?” (6) Similarly, how does one determine what “popular” is, and what are the criteria that

one uses to make such determinations? Instead of attempting my own definition of popular, I draw on what others have written about the concept.

As Raymond Williams observes, the word “popular” comes from the Latin “popularis,” which means “belonging to the people” (236). Williams also points out that “the pre-dominant modern meaning [is] ‘widely favoured’ or ‘well-liked’” (236). While I am not focusing specifically on the audience members at Blue Man Group productions, Williams points out that the popular is for the people, suggesting that those things which are popular appeal to a wide variety of individuals.

The definition that Williams offers inevitably leads to more questions, and does not clarify how one may apply the term to theatre. What theatre does *not* belong to the people? While some theatre may be more commercially successful than other kinds of theatre, all of it is presumably created for an audience, for the people. Further, popular theatre does not always address certain themes, include similar characters, or employ a similar structure. Or, as playwright Dario Fo observes, “(p)opular theater has no rules or fixed models which are mechanically reproducible” (50). Popular theatre is as varied as the circus, musical theatre, stage magic, melodrama, and stand-up comedy, amongst many others. What are the unifying factors present in these varied live entertainments?

For American theatre historian Don Wilmeth, all of these share a common purpose: intent. Wilmeth ventures a description of popular entertainment: “live amusements created by professional showmen for profit and aimed at broad, relatively unsophisticated audiences” (xi).³

³ Wilmeth’s study tends to privilege popular entertainments that existed before the boom of the motion picture industry, even if those entertainments continued on after film became widespread across the globe. Since he focuses so much on theatrical entertainments existing

The intention of all of these popular theatrical entertainments is that the performances will, hopefully, make a profit for the performers and producers. Wilmeth's problematic comment about the audience aside, his description of popular theatre is useful and applies to Blue Man Group: live theatre created by professionals for a profit and aimed at a wide array of spectators and audiences. Though I will not focus a great deal on the economic factors of Blue Man Group's history (though economics will inevitably be a part of the study), I recognize that many forms of popular theatre are for profit and that a majority of Blue Man Group's performances have been for profit. As such, in many ways, Blue Man Group such as it exists today, epitomizes the popular. The group charges high prices for its tickets, it has created for pay advertisements for both Intel and the Los Angeles Dodgers, and on the group's website one can purchase key chains, clothing, shot glasses, magnets and other items with the Blue Man brand. Such practices tie Blue Man Group inextricably to commerce and the popular.

Before the group became a popular brand with national and international appeal, however, it was a small avant-garde troupe. In my study, I argue that Blue Man Group's early avant-garde work emerged from an anxiety revolving around their unease with and opposition to the culture and politics of late 1980s America. As Adam Morgan notes, the original participants' "early sense of what they wanted to do was inspired by an almost visceral *rejection* of everything they saw in the existing category of the 1980s New York art world" (63, emphasis in original). This rejection was manifest in the group's first performance, titled *Funeral for the Eighties*.

during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I believe that he describes the audiences as "relatively unsophisticated" because those entertainments were often created for such a large and diverse population, including the uneducated.

In this environmental performance piece, nine blue men and women staged an outdoor funeral for a decade that had not yet ended—the performance took place in 1988. In the process, Blue Man Group took several iconic objects, including an effigy of a yuppie, New Wave music, a bag of cocaine, and a Ronald Reagan doll, placed them in a coffin, carried the coffin to Central Park and set it on fire. In the early years, the group also placed great emphasis on a lack of connection between people, focusing considerable attention on the many new electronic devices of the era used to communicate. In an interview regarding performance in Central Park, co-founder Chris Wink noted that “as we speak, facsimile machines are in communication with each other around the world” (*MTV News: Blue Man Group Central Park*). While not directly related to the avant-garde, such comments demonstrate that the performers in these early years were directly disparaging mainstream culture. Blue Man Group’s marginal status, coupled with the group’s critique of the decadence associated with the 1980s mainstream culture, affirms the avant-garde qualities of *Funeral for the Eighties*.

As I will chart in the chapters that follow, beginning in the early 1990s, Blue Man Group slowly let go of its oppositional stance, subtly altered the content of the work, and took up a position in the mainstream. To be clear, the artists in charge of Blue Man Group are by no means the first avant-garde artists to shift from the margins to the mainstream without drastically changing their aesthetics or the content of their work. Filmmaker John Waters, punk rock singer Johnny Rotten, and street artist/painter Banksy (to name just a few) have all become popular after beginning their careers working on the fringes of their respective art forms. These artists have all, if on purpose or by accident or chance, become part of the mainstream, which makes the claim (often made by both critics and the artists themselves) that they are still avant-garde

uncertain. In his article on irony and British culture, James Brassett points to this uncertainty as he considers the evolution of Banksy, from street graffiti artist to seller of art in auctions:

There is a question of whether a graffiti artist can ever cross into the ‘mainstream’ and sell their work, or whether the act of graffiti is itself the subversive act *par excellence*. Somewhat analogous to the debate over whether a punk band can call itself punk if it gets a record deal there are those within the graffiti community who sneer at the way Banksy has started to sell work. (231, emphasis in original)

In the eyes of many, Waters, Rotten, and Banksy all have somewhat tainted their avant-garde credibility in large part because their work has become popular; thus their current positions as members of the avant-garde are dubious at best.

Blue Man Group resides in a similar category. While the group has maintained (and profited from) supposed avant-garde sensibilities, it now participates in creating art for a mainstream audience, willing to pay large amounts of money to experience the work.⁴ As part of my study, therefore, I ask and seek to answer the following question: what is Blue Man Group’s relationship to the avant-garde and how has it changed since becoming a popular entertainment in the United States? As I have suggested above, it is not possible for artists to uphold their avant-garde status while performing expressly for the mainstream, especially when those artists create television commercials for large corporations. At the same time, however, others continue to situate Blue Man Group as a part of the avant-garde. Steven Drukman’s interpretation of Blue Man Group’s relationship to the avant-garde is cynical, but nonetheless useful. “The Blue Men use a strategy of junk theatre...to comment on the historical dead end of the avant-garde. In true

⁴ Banksy, for example, has had his own artwork (spray-paintings of rats) for sale in the Lazarides Gallery in London for £140,000 (O’Keeffe 42).

postmodern style, they are both extremely complicit as well as critical” (201). Indeed, Blue Man Group is complicit in its complicated relationship to the avant-garde. As I trace the history of Blue Man Group, I seek to make clear some of the moves made by the artists involved that complicated its relationship to the avant-garde, including its choice to expand and to mount more productions, and its choice to create work in mediums other than theatre.

My approach to writing this history involves looking at both the events that occurred on stage, as well as significant events that occurred off. In reading the actual performances, I rely on primary sources, such as video and audio recordings, production stills, and theatre programs. Beyond what was put on the stage, examining how the organization made the move from avant-garde to mainstream is dependent on the relatively scant number of resources available. As none of the co-founders or principal participants of Blue Man Group’s early history were made available to me, and because the organization is interested in forwarding a very particular and positive version of its history, I was left to piece together its history by reading a smattering of legal documents, a handful of previously published interviews and articles, reviews, and a small body of existing scholarship. As I poured over these fragmentary materials, I sought to render a history of the group not heretofore told.

Significant to my thinking about and analyzing the small number of materials that were made available to me, are the approaches taken when writing histories of events with scant historical evidence. One noteworthy work that addresses this is theatre historian Odai Johnson’s study on building a history of a colonial American playhouse based on fragmentary evidence. In his article “Working Up From Postholes: (Im)material Witnesses, Evidence, and Narrativity in the Colonial American Theatre,” Johnson argues that he seeks to

[U]se the postholes of an absent playhouse to evoke the ghost of performance itself that has survived so incompletely, and to reassert that monumental and monumentally absent presence back into the civic, architectural, and cultural landscape of colonial America. (2005, 184)

While there is much more available to me regarding Blue Man Group and American culture during last fifteen years of the twentieth century than Johnson had to study the remains of a colonial playhouse, I nonetheless engaged in a similar process in writing this study: sifting through fragmentary evidence in my reconstruction of Blue Man Group's shift from the avant-garde to the popular. Not surprisingly, sometimes it became necessary to read between the documents available to determine what has been excluded from the historical record. To that end, another scholar whose work influenced my approach is performance historian and theorist Joseph Roach. In his article "Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic," Roach argues for the use of inscription and erasure when studying history. "Inscription foregrounds and reiterates favored representations; erasure occludes the undesirable ones" (159). As I consider pleasing or favored narratives of Blue Man Group's trajectory and uncover erased and occluded ones, I use Roach's concepts as a guide. Likewise, I also strive to draw from Roach's work by making manifest that which is lost.

In terms of organization, I divide the study into six chapters, each one detailing what I perceive are important shifts in the early- and mid- career of the group, both on stage and off. In the first chapter, I look at the development of Blue Man Group and the Blue Man character, how the group emerged from a 1980s New York culture, as well as the early salons and performances that the co-founders held. I identify one significant event in 1988, when Goldman, Stanton, Wink and six other men and women held the group's first public performance, the aforementioned

Funeral for the Eighties. This and other performances are significant in that they shed light on the group's formative years. I argue that these events established Blue Man Group as an avant-garde New York theatre group at the end of the 1980s. The years that I detail in this chapter span approximately 1987 to 1989.

In the second chapter, I focus on Blue Man Group's move indoors into theatres and how the work necessarily changed in light of that move. It will come as no surprise that Blue Man Group was engaged in numerous performances during this time; there are too many to consider in full in this study. As such, I have chosen to focus on a handful of pieces staged in the Performing Garage, P.S. 122, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, and Franklin Furnace, all New York theatre spaces noted for staging experimental or avant-garde work. In this chapter, I also consider the shift from performing short-term runs in various spaces to opening the resident production *Tubes* at the Astor Place Theatre off-Broadway in New York. This production opened in November 1991 and Blue Man Group continues to perform at the Astor Place Theatre today. The years covered in this chapter run from approximately 1988 to 1992.

The third chapter looks at some offstage milestones in Blue Man Group's history. The first involves a lawsuit between the producers of Blue Man Group and Marlene Swartz, a New York-based theatre director who directed *Tubes*. After working with two other directors unsuccessfully, Blue Man Group turned to Swartz, who, according to a report in *Variety*, "helped conceptualize 'Tubes' for a more mainstream venue and had helped them get back on track after their unproductive work with other directors" (Gerard). I examine the role that Swartz played in the production; explicate her dismissal and subsequent lawsuit and then offer a brief consideration of other legal issues that Blue Man Group has faced in the years since. The other important offstage event I consider is the principal co-founders' decision to pursue replacement

cast members to play the Blue Man. Due to an accident, co-founder Phil Stanton was unable to play the Blue Man for part of 1994. I look at how the co-founders pursued replacement cast members to give themselves a break and for other unexpected situations as the one that befell Stanton. I argue that, through expanding the group and struggling to claim the Blue Man aesthetic as its own, the organization furthered enhanced its success as an avant-garde production while increasing in size during this time period. This chapter covers the years 1991 through 1994

In the fourth chapter I investigate the ways in which Blue Man Group expanded in the latter half of the 1990s by opening resident productions in cities outside of New York. In brief, in 1995 Blue Man Group opened a permanent production in Boston. Then, in 1997, it did the same thing in Chicago. By opening new productions, the principal co-founders exposed Blue Man Group to new fans who may not have known about the theatre and/or may not have had the opportunity to see one of the live productions. Some of the materials that I consider in this chapter that are pertinent to these regional productions include interviews with individuals involved, advertisements, and reviews. Additionally, I consider the ways in which the double presence of avant-garde and popular was manifest in Boston and Chicago. In this chapter I focus on the years from 1995 to 1997.

The fifth chapter consists of a consideration of Blue Man Group's first album, *Audio*, released in 1999. *Audio* served as a kind of stepping stone for Blue Man Group, as the organization worked to bring the visual elements of Blue Man Group's live performances to a solely auditory experience. *Audio* was a financial and critical success for the group, earning a Grammy nomination and selling enough copies to make it a gold record. I argue that *Audio* opened up the Blue Man Group experience to incalculable audience members, some of whom probably had never seen the live productions. The fifth chapter also serves a bridge to the sixth

chapter, which focuses on the opening of the Las Vegas production and the national television spots for Intel, both of which occurred in 2000. The opening of the Las Vegas production, coupled with the commercials, may be seen as a new phase for Blue Man Group. The Intel advertising campaign subsequently exposed Blue Man Group to potential audience members across the country. I argue that by 2001, Blue Man Group had abandoned its avant-garde roots and fully embraced mainstream culture.

In the Conclusion I briefly examine the moves that Blue Man Group has made since 2001 to connect to a widespread fan base. These moves include numerous national and international tours, working with the massive Clear Channel Entertainment, releasing more albums, and appearing on a reality television program. Here, I argue that such moves indicate that the organization is not likely planning to resume its previously held avant-garde approach.

Though offering my first-hand take on viewing Blue Man Group performances falls outside the purview of this study, it is nonetheless germane to note that I have attended several of its productions. Every performance has been delightful and energizing. Moreover, I have noticed that other attendees at these performances seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves; they respond loudly and appreciatively to the acts performed, and after the show many line up in the lobby for the opportunity to take photographs with the Blue Men. The sense of enjoyment the group creates is, at least in part, a product of the perception of community it generates during the performance; the Blue Men often draw audience members into the performance, and encourage them to work together and with the performers in some capacity. This sense of community is an important feature to the work, and enhances the audience's sense of enjoyment. I fully understand that the organization could not reasonably sustain its widespread popularity—there are currently five permanent productions running in the United States— without offering

pleasurable experiences to new and existing fans. I too have enjoyed their offerings as much as any other attendee.

I cannot pinpoint my own first exposure to Blue Man Group's work, though I recall enjoying the group's first album, *Audio*, in 2000. My first live encounter of the organization's theatrical productions was in Chicago at the Briar Street Theatre on June 16, 2001. It was exhilarating and unlike any live theatre event I had attended. I remember being impressed with the variety structure, and thinking that it perfectly suited the group's aesthetic. I was also struck with the sense of play: the Blue Men drummed, played with food, engaged with spectators, and splashed paint all over the stage (necessitating a "splash zone" with plastic covers for attendees in the first few rows of the audience). Perhaps most importantly, I found the work refreshing and unique, and left with the strong desire to see the group perform again. I subsequently saw Blue Man Group perform again in Chicago, as well as in Boston, Orlando, and on tour. Even though all of these performances do not relate directly to my argument regarding the groups move from the avant-garde to the popular, I nonetheless recognize that those experiences cannot help but inform my reading of both the organization and its live offerings. Moreover, it is important to note that even though my critique of the group frequently involves highlighting arguably negative aspects from its history, I am still drawn to the sheer sense of theatricality that their work involves and the enjoyment it provides.

In the end, while it may, on the surface, seem somewhat inconsequential to evaluate how an avant-garde performance troupe evolved into a popular entertainment organization, I argue that the ramifications of such a shift are significant. Blue Man Group was revered for its caustic commentary about art, theatre and American culture. Once it attained financial success and cultural currency, the principal co-founders dropped the overtly political content in favor of less

strident material. Though the group maintains some of its initial questioning of art and performance, it does so in an environment that favors reinforcing the norm over serving up the subversive. When considering this shift and positioning it in the discourse of American culture at the end of the twentieth century, Blue Man Group no longer comments on the greed and hypocrisy of society, but rather is an active participant in it.

CHAPTER ONE. THE BIRTH OF THE BLUE MAN AND THE GROUP'S EARLY ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCES

Blue Man Group developed in a place and during a time of great turbulence: the cultural capital of America—New York City—during the 1980s. There were many challenges for the inhabitants of the metropolitan New York area during this era. As political, cultural, and economic shifts confronted the City's inhabitants, Blue Man Group examined, celebrated, and critiqued some of these developments. In this sense, the group looked at the cultural shifts and developments of their specific time and place, creating art that spoke back to those conditions.

Blue Man Group's inception and its first experiments and public performances challenged the notion of theatre and art in a time when political disenfranchisement and postmodern anxiety were at the fore. By creating sociopolitical work on the fringes of New York culture, Blue Man Group exemplified an avant-garde ethos through critically examining social and artistic politics, and bridging the gap between actor and spectator. This follows the basic tenets of the avant-garde, as it is described by Mike Sell. By bringing theatre to unknowing attendees, Blue Man Group subverted expectations of traditional theatre spectators. This chapter offers an overview of how Blue Man Group formed, the early work those individuals created, and the social and political conditions under which they created such work, particularly in and around New York City. In so doing, the argument is advanced that Blue Man Group's early experiments and environmental performances situated the company squarely in the avant-garde.

The United States in the decade of the 1980s was a complex place. Ronald Reagan's tenure in the White House dominated the political landscape, as did wild fluctuations in the economy. Technology was affecting both the workplace and the home, with the increasing availability and affordability of computers, fax machines, video game consoles, and microwaves.

In spite of these technological advancements, unemployment, homelessness, and drug abuse became major problems. Add to this was a growing chasm between those with means and those without. In his study of the United States' economy during the twentieth century, Paul Krugman paints a grim picture of the vast differences between the real incomes of American families of varying economic backgrounds during the 1980s: "the real income before taxes of the average family in the top 10 percent of the population rose by 21 percent from 1979 to 1987, while that of the bottom 10 percent *fell* by 12 percent" (20, emphasis in original). Unemployment was another important part of the American landscape during the 1980s. During Reagan's administration, unemployment changed dramatically, skyrocketing up to 10.8% in late 1982 and dropping to a low of 5.3% in late 1988 ("Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject"). Both the disparities in income and changes in unemployment indicated that the economy in the United States during the 1980s experienced tremendous upheaval and uncertainty.

Similarly, and on a microcosmic level, New York was on shaky ground during this time period as well. Residents of the city in the 1980s experienced a decade of unparalleled change and complexity. Wall Street investments could prove lucrative but also quite risky, evidenced by the crash of the stock market in 1987. The rise of HIV and AIDS became a national nightmare but was most keenly felt in major metropolitan areas like New York. In his study *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, The New Modern*, Peter Brooker recalled the dismal environment that was New York at this time: "In New York City itself, unemployment stood in 1991 at between 9 and 10 per cent, and the number of homeless at 90,000. One million of the population was on public assistance. One-third of the homeless were HIV positive" (129). Such disparities in economic and health issues indicate a paradox of simultaneous promise and peril. As Brooker notes, the many facets of New York City living and culture during the 1980s were

grim, if not bleak. At the same time, New York reveled in its economic prosperity. Government deregulation of industries led to a boom on Wall Street. This aura of excess can be seen reflected in films that took place in New York during the 1980s, such as *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) and *Bright Lights, Big City* (James Bridges, 1988), both of which depict characters engaging in decadent and excessive behavior. One of the main characters in *Wall Street*, the antihero Gordon Gekko, promoted greed as a value, claiming that it would save the United States. In his study of the era, *American Culture in the 1980s*, Graham Thompson argued that Gekko “stood as the epitome of all that was wrong in the corporate and financial world that had developed so rapidly in the 1980s” (108). New York culture during the 1980s, to be sure, was at once associated with decadence and decay. This made for a complex, often times contradictory culture that was home to both misery and hopefulness.

For the co-founders of Blue Man Group, the national scenes for art and theatre was bleak, even if it comprised a wide variety of styles, tastes, and philosophies. The scene, like the city and country where it was produced, was simultaneously gloomy and invigorating. In the late 1980s, the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled an exhibit of photographs by the deceased Robert Mapplethorpe because of fear that the graphic content would negatively impact federal funding for the arts (Quigley). On the other hand, photographer Andres Serrano received federal funding for his *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph of a crucifix placed inside a tank filled with Serrano’s urine. However, the fallout from the exhibition of *Piss Christ* was profound and massive, leading to an assault on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for providing Serrano with funding. Senators Jesse Helms, Alphonse D’Amato, and evangelist Pat Robertson all condemned the NEA for its tacit approval of Serrano’s seemingly blasphemous work (Hobbs, 32). The Senate subsequently considered placing a five-year moratorium on funding the Southeastern Center for

Contemporary Art, which had given Serrano the prize and money for *Piss Christ* (33). The NEA received less money to fund artists and arts organizations, due in large part to the upheaval surrounding Serrano's photograph. Such politicizing of Serrano's work indicates bleakness in the art world during late 1980s; yet Serrano's ability to create the work in the first place suggests looking toward the future in the art world. The atmosphere under which *Piss Christ* developed suggested that the arts were valued as long as they reinforced a status quo that Serrano did not seem to accept: predominantly white people adhering to religious norms without allowing for alternate perspectives. Serrano's work illuminated the false binary between the sacred and the profane, celebrating the relative exquisiteness of the crucifix immersed in bodily waste while simultaneously critiquing ur-ideologies. The art world of the 1980s, then, was as much about political pressure as it was about using art to comment or critique on such institutionalized abuses of power.

The theatre scene was similarly vexed, both in the mainstream and on the fringes. In New York, finances had a large impact on a weakened avant-garde theatre scene. "(I)nflation and the gentrification of once inexpensive neighborhoods drove out struggling artists and precluded the rental of rehearsal and performing space" (Aronson 2000a, 198). Holly Hughes' satire, *The Well of Horniness*, received several productions during the early and mid-1980s, but it could not remain in the same space for an extended period, which made developing a regular audience base difficult (Carr 135). Solo theatre received a modicum of popularity in avant-garde and experimental theatre spaces, with performers such as Eric Bogosian, Karen Finley, and Annie Sprinkle all achieving some notoriety for their cutting-edge monologues and, in the case of the latter two, occasional nudity. Such successes resulted in more solo performances instead of theatre collectives working together to create alternative works. Spalding Gray, an actor known

for his stage and film roles, also worked as a solo performer in his own autobiographical plays. Such emphasis on the self was not in contradiction with the avant-garde, which values artistic freedom and expression, but it is a reflection of the 1980s “Me” generation. The avant-garde theatre scene faced challenges related to economics and content, making for an austere climate.

Mainstream commercial theatre encountered its own hardships. Broadway experienced a sharp decline in productions during this time period. Even though the decade saw major musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon* succeed on the Great White Way in terms of finances, the annual number of Broadway offerings dropped considerably during Reagan’s administration. Alan Woods pointed out that “the total number of productions presented on the Broadway stage dropped from sixty-seven in 1980-81 to twenty-nine eight years later” (1993, 252). This led to a drop in attendance, from 10,822,324 in the 1980-81 season to 7,968,273 in 1988-89 (253). While Broadway grosses increased during this time period, they did so because of an increase in the cost of tickets. Woods observed that Broadway tickets “averaged \$17.97 in 1980-81; by 1988-89, the average had almost doubled to \$32.88” (253). He goes on to note that Broadway ticket sales mirrored the government’s simultaneous economic hardships: “an absolute increase in income was offset by sagging production figures, while enormous increases in ticket prices provided an illusion of economic health” (253). The premieres of high profile megamusicals gave the misconception that Broadway was blossoming, but the rising ticket prices indicated that the Great White Way was simply cashing in on such successes, leading to a waning theatre climate. Thus, both commercial and experimental theatres throughout New York experienced challenges with funding, inflated ticket prices, dwindling ticket sales, and fewer productions. Blue Man Group’s beginning was in many respects a revolt against these trends in

art and theatre, eschewing the self-importance of provocative visual art, the seeming narcissism of solo performance, and the spectacle of Broadway-style productions.

Setting out to create a unique brand of performance, Blue Man Group incorporated aspects of visual art, avant-garde performance, and spectacle. In an interview about how the group developed from the Reagan-era 1980s, one of the group's co-founders, Matt Goldman, remarked that he and his fellow Blue Men's perception of that culture's art scene was gloomy, even pessimistic, even if others saw hope in it. "It didn't feel like an artistically fertile time. It was quite a barren time. There was no music scene to speak of in New York. There was a downtown performance art scene and for the most part it was angry monologists" ("A Conversation"). Goldman may have been referring, if indirectly, to the work of artists such as Finley, Hughes, John Fleck, and Tim Miller, playwrights and solo performers whose work was targeted by the NEA in the early 1990s. Regardless, it is clear that Goldman and his collaborators were focused on trying something different with their work.

Blue Man Group participated in the avant-garde theatre scene without acquiescing to the more strident speechifying and soapboxing that some of its fellow artists enacted. Instead, it was a more measured political avant-garde group. In place of continuing the kind of work done by the "angry monologists" or pursuing the commercialism of more populist fare, Blue Man Group sought to create its own aesthetic that critiqued the decadence and condescension of the 1980s. In that respect, Blue Man Group was, and continues to be, simultaneously a participant in and creator of culture. Their work placed the group squarely in the avant-garde theatre scene in New York City.

Since Blue Man Group's origins were a direct response to the art and theatre scenes that the co-founders found lacking, their work was avant-garde. At its inception, Blue Man Group

was responding to an insufficiency in the then current theatre and art scenes throughout New York City. There were no avenues available in which to experiment in the way that the co-founders desired. At its root, the group was minoritarian because it was on the fringes of both theatre and art. Blue Man Group critiqued a wide range of topics, which became an important part of the organization's aesthetic and can be traced back to the group's principal co-founders.

Three men are credited, or rather who credit themselves, with creating Blue Man Group. Although several others participated in the early exploratory salons and collaborated to create Blue Man Group's first performance, in this study I refer to Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, and Chris Wink as the group's principal co-founders; they were the ones who continued Blue Man Group after the departure of the other six co-founders.

Goldman and Wink became friends while attending the private Fieldston School in New York. After finishing secondary school, Goldman attended Clark University and then went on to produce software at a computer company while Wink studied art history at Wesleyan (Hubbard 110). About the same time, Stanton was studying theater arts and religious studies at Evangel University in Missouri. Following his graduation, he moved to New York to pursue acting (Chakravorti and Spence 5) and found a job working at Glorious Food (a catering company in New York), where he met Wink and, through Wink, Goldman.

Vicki Goldberg offers a useful summary of the relationship among Goldman, Stanton, and Wink. She describes Goldman as "the group's 'facilitator and quality control.'" She characterized Stanton as "the group's hands-on man who figures out how to make antic impulses operative with simple tools." In contrast, Wink was "preparing to be an idea man, the kind who produces ideas in double but never makes anything happen" (1991, H6). Perhaps revealing his role in the group, Wink has often served as the public face of Blue Man Group, speaking in

interviews and press releases. Among the three of them, they found their respective strengths complemented each other's and sought to create, with the help of others participating in the group's early salons, a character who spoke to, and through, them. In order to examine Blue Man Group's earliest collaborations, it is important to understand who the character Blue Man is and how he originated.

- The Blue Man Exposed

Though he has largely remained the same over his more than twenty-year career, the Blue Man character has evolved to do such disparate things as unite spectators in performance, eat marshmallows, and proselytize on global warming. This is due, in part, to the elasticity of the character: by donning an all-black body suit, the Blue Man becomes something of a blank canvas. Although the Blue Man has no hair or ears and he does not speak, his exterior is essentially similar to that of most people: he has two arms and two legs connected to a torso, a head with two eyes, one nose, and a mouth. The Blue Man, however, is simultaneously similar to and yet inherently different from human beings.

The Blue Man Group organization has made its own claims about the character, often referring to what the Blue Man is not. Stanton has stated that the Blue Man “doesn’t really understand our customs or the way we do things but I think you find that he catches on pretty quickly” (“Inside the Tube”). In a similar vein, Goldman has declared that the Blue Man “doesn’t really have ego to get in the way. He’s not self-conscious, he’s not trying to make an impression. He just is” (“Inside the Tube”). Both statements about the character not understanding customs or not trying to make an impression, allude to the principal co-founders’ efforts to present the Blue Man as someone “other” than most people who encounter him. This

“other” character is decidedly on the fringes of society. He understands parts of his surroundings but not all—he knows to eat Twinkies but not how to unwrap the cellophane around the sugary substance. The character, then, may be seen as a counterpoint to the art and theatre of the 1980s: instead of delivering overtly political diatribes focused on class (like Eric Bogosian) or sexuality (like Split Britches), the Blue Man is silent and unassuming. He does, nonetheless, engage in social and political actions, even if unknowingly. The character is, in some ways, malleable for different situations. Sometimes his content focuses on political issues such as climate change, while other times he considers the disconnection between people in an increasingly digital society. In each instance, however, the character remains silent and unwavering in his physical communication. In order to examine the Blue Man and his role in the avant-garde, it is helpful to look at how the organization describes him.

In addition to information gleaned through interviews with the founders, clues regarding the figure can be found on the Blue Man Group’s website: he is an “other” when compared to the spectators. Film historian Robert Knopf asserts that the group’s live performance “presents the Blue Men as aliens attempting to find their way in a world they fail to understand” (152). When considering the Blue Man character, one may see that Knopf’s description is apt. Nonetheless, the organization debunks this interpretation, elaborating on who the character is by again addressing who he is not. “The Blue Man is not an alien. He looks different on the outside, that’s for sure, but the key to the Blue Man is his inner life. The people who really connect with the Blue Man see past his unusual appearance and see something fundamentally human” (“Character Statement”). The inconsistency (describing the Blue Man looking “different on the outside” yet seeming “fundamentally human”) is a deliberate choice by the organization and suggests that the character can be interpreted in contradictory ways.

While the Blue Man may be coded as “fundamentally human,” he does not appear as such. His slick blue skin, lack of ears and any hair, and seeming inability (or perhaps refusal) to communicate verbally is coded as “other.” Further, in a 1990 interview with Stanley Moss, the principal co-founders invoked aliens as a reference point for the character. One of three cast members—Moss honored their request by referring to the three men as “Blue Man Group” instead of attributing quotes to individuals—talked about the Blue Man character and his confusion about his surroundings. “That’s something a lot of films do, take someone out of their world. Aliens or mermaids can see through fresh eyes—innocent blue eyes—it’s a framing thing” (qtd. in Moss 19). The Blue Man, therefore, may be intended to stand in as “fundamentally human” but his clear coding suggests otherwise.

As the evidence reviewed thus far suggests, the co-founders appear to view the Blue Man as having multiple and complex aspects to his personality. Wink has developed this idea when talking at length about who the Blue Man is:

The attributes we saw in the Blue Man are sides we all have and use to get through the day. There is the **scientist**, the side of us looking for the how and the why, observing, analyzing and problem solving. There is the **hero**, working toward a goal; putting on a suit and bringing home the bacon qualifies. And sometimes we are a **group member**, part of a tribe with a mindset, sensitivities, mores, and rules for living and working together.

Diametric to these sides are the shaman, the innocent and the trickster. The **shaman** is the opposite of the scientist, visceral, instinctive, subjective, looking to synthesize rather than analyze. The **innocent** is the opposite of the hero, the Forrest Gump living entirely in the present. And the **trickster** is the side that

crosses the boundaries of the group, breaking the rules, deviating from the norm, telling the punch line to the joke. (qtd. in Chakravorti and Spence 6, emphasis in original)

The Blue Man, then, has multiple and contradictory sides to his personality: analytical yet instinctive, innocent yet roguish, individualistic yet communal. He is representative of the complexities that are a part of humans. These complexities, however, create one of the challenges in reading the Blue Man because, much like the culture that produced him, he has many contradictory personalities, similar to the political and social conditions under which the character was created. If he is read in these myriad ways, is he supposed to mean all things to all people? Such an issue arises when one considers the character's gender.

The principal co-founders have addressed how they settled on the gender-specific "man" in the name of the organization. As they pointed out, "It was actually one of the female members that suggested that calling a coed collective 'Blue Man Group' would be an interesting choice and change the meaning of the word 'man' to mean something else" ("Resonance"). That "female member" of the collective is never named, and thus it is impossible to verify that she made the gender-specific contribution. It remains clear that the use of "man" in the name was intended to signify neutrality (the "something else"). The Blue Man character, however, remains resolutely masculine, both in name and in appearance. For their part, the principal co-founders have explained how the gender of the Blue Man evolved. They claimed that when they started working together, "it was without the knowledge that many of the original members (including all the females) would be moving to other parts of the world within a year, leaving three male participants with a slightly politically incorrect name that overemphasized a particular gender" ("Resonance"). The name has remained from those early experiments, even if most of the

participants moved on. Since 1991, men have normally played the Blue Man. (At one point the Boston production featured a female as the Blue Man, though the character remained male.) The specifics of the Blue Man, however, are far more stringent. On the group's website, the casting requirements state that the organization seeks men and women between 5'10" and 6'1" who have an athletic build ("Requirements"). The character, then, is not simply a man but a particular kind of man who is of a certain height and weight. The Blue Man is said to represent what "we all have and use to get through the day," as long as he meets a specific exterior.

Moreover, the Blue Man's masculine appearance is coded as heterosexual. In one long-standing segment from the live performances, "The Feast," all three Blue Men invite a female audience member on stage to dine with them. The three Blue Men vie for the woman's affections, who is usually respectful to all three without preferring one to another. Lian Amarís described the effects of this moment as "stabilized once again within the heteronormative gender binary" (569). The three men on stage, all competing for the female's attention, are in control of the stage action. The female guest does behave independently on occasion—the Blue Men are unable to open the cellophane wrappers and she typically volunteers to open the Twinkies for the Blue Men. Moments like this, however, are expected, as the actors can tell that the woman will help out the Blue Men. The female guest, then, is little more than a prop. The men drive the show and essentially manipulate the woman into doing what they want her to do. Blue Man Group reinforces heteronormativity, with the (blue) men decisively in power.

Like the character's masculinity and heterosexuality, his color has also remained constant over the years. In her 1991 interview with the group, Judy Richheimer asked the co-founders why they chose the color blue. "Blue just felt right from the start. But after we started performing, people began pointing things out. We learned about Celtic and African tribes who

painted themselves blue and that Yves Klein [an early practitioner of the Happening and precursor of performance art] actually invented his own shade of blue” (qtd. in Richheimer 23). In fact, the particular shade of blue that the Blue Men wear is a variation on IKB (International Klein Blue) created by Klein. Michael Quinn, who has held the titles of Artistic Director and Creative Director for Blue Man Productions, revealed that “Klein has had a major influence on our work and the color seemed a natural choice both because of its satisfying hue but also because the reference to Klein himself seemed appropriate” (qtd. in “The Blue Man Group: Promoting the Color Blue”). Aligning the group and the character to Klein, who participated in both Happenings and performance art, was no coincidence. It was a deliberate choice to directly connect Blue Man Group to the lineage of two movements that Blue Man Group valued as significant. In an effort to borrow from Klein’s cache while marking the group as unique, Quinn observed that the make-up the performers wear “is created for us custom. In the end while it’s very close to IKB it sometimes tends a bit more towards cobalt blue” (qtd. in “The Blue Man Group: Promoting the Color Blue”). The blue that the performers wear, then, is unique to Blue Man Group, while nonetheless evoking a tradition with which they wish to be associated.

Several people, including the principal co-founders of Blue Man Group, have interrogated the symbolic implications of the color of the character. In her 1991 *New York Times* article “High Tech Meets Goo With Blue Man Group,” Vicki Goldberg asked the co-founders how the Blue Man character developed. She noted that “Mr. Wink went blue first, others soon followed. Mr. Stanton insists that blue has no symbolic meaning but transcends race and sex and could be any religion, putting Blue Man beyond the reach of styles and categories” (1991, H6). While the color may not have an expressed meaning for Stanton—which is unlikely, because Stanton trained as an actor, which typically requires making deliberate choices—blue has

multiple interpretations that the co-founders may not have intended. In her article on a (now former) cast member of Blue Man Group, Lynn Bolt Rosendale considered the color and queried art professor Frank Speyers for his interpretation. In addition to the three Blue Men seen on stage in most Blue Man Group productions (which, for Speyers, evoked the Holy Trinity), Speyers observed that the Blue Man character's color is "the exact (Goethe) blue, representing the highest spiritual truth" (Rosendale).

One other particularly important interpretation of the color blue in the work of Blue Man Group is the color's purported evocations of blackface minstrelsy and blackface performance. In her 2000 essay, Judith Kegan Gardiner claims that Blue Man Group enacts a "liberal racism with its apparent indifference to skin tone" (263). To support her assertion, Gardiner notes that the performers' "(m)asks of blue paint occlude the race of the performers...so that they are colored Muppets, Smurfs, or fantasies of multiethnic tolerance, not like any known group of humans" (263). Gardiner continues: "Yet, blueface resembles blackface and operates similarly: the blue men are like clowns or children with rhythm; they represent primitive instincts; they are ostentatiously colored; they are not white" (263). While her point about Blue Man Group's fabricated world being a fantasy of multiethnic tolerance is valid (especially since the particular shade of blue that the Blue Men wear is vibrant yet reads as somewhat dark on stage), her reduction of the Blue Men to a minority based solely on the color of their skin seems overdetermined. I argue that instead the Blue Men were a minority in many social situations, not solely because of their race. The co-founders sought to present the Blue Men as separate from human beings in both appearance and reaction to society. In order to enact a racist ideology (Gardiner claimed that the cast members conceal their own races in performance, which erases their own individualities), one must first have delineated a difference in races. Instead of staging

blackface that implied a superiority/inferiority, Blue Man Group presented a space in which all spectators were “equal,” at least those able to attend performances.⁵ Because the makeup and skull cap turn every actor playing the Blue Man into an “other,” race has a different function in Blue Man Group’s work than many other plays and musicals.

Though interpretations vary, it nonetheless seems clear that Blue Man Group is to be perceived as an “other,” capable of commenting (though not verbally) on the world his spectators inhabit. In the early years, he was also capable of critiquing issues of excess and political posturing. More recently he has become more of a blank slate on which the principal co-founders and other artists may use to shape however they prefer. To be sure, through the figure of the Blue Man, the artists involved with the group commented on social issues and norms of the period in inventive and compelling ways. It also sought to respond to insufficiencies of political processes available to the co-founders and other artists. As such, the group would seek out opportunities that allowed its members to explore ideas in a safe environment. The members of what would become Blue Man Group needed a laboratory in which to conduct its theatrical experiments with the beginnings of this new character. They proceeded to formulate an environment conducive to exploration and investigation to find the character’s motivations. They concluded that the best way to make these experimentations was in a traditional salon-style situation.

⁵ Complicating the “equality” issue is not only the location of the spectators in the playing space and their own individual abilities/limitations but also the issue of economics. While the group’s first public performances were free, subsequent performances have required hefty entrance fees. As the group has grown in popularity, so too have ticket prices to its productions.

- The First Experiments: The Blue Man Group Salons

Blue Man Group's beginnings emerged from a place of frustration. Unable to find a creative outlet suitable to their liking, the co-founders formed a salon in which to experiment with art and ideas. Historically, salons were forums for artists to develop their work, and were probably most closely associated with artists and writers living in France during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. According to Steven Kale, the salons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "encouraged socializing between the sexes, brought nobles and bourgeois together, and afforded opportunities for intellectual speculation" (2). Up until 1880, the French government controlled the salon system, which began in 1699 (Mainardi 9). In 1881, the government no longer managed the salons, and the artists subsequently had authority in determining the role and function of the salon with regards to the creation of art.

Taking a cue from these nineteenth century French artists, the principal co-founders of Blue Man Group exercised complete control over how their salons operated. Chakravorti and Spence noted that Goldman, Stanton, and Wink "began hosting weekly Sunday morning salons for friends and friends of friends. The only requirement was that they bring something exciting to the table" (5). Wink asserted that he, Goldman, and Stanton, "were looking for 'this wonderful bistro salon scene, where all the beat poets would have congregated...the heir to Warhol's Factor, the heir to the Algonquin Round Table, the Left Bank, all would fuse together. Scientists would surely be meeting regularly with people interested in New Wave, and the John Cages and Joseph Beuyses would be lecturing weekly'" (qtd. in Goldberg, H6). It is worth noting that several of the individuals and groups that Wink invokes have been associated with the avant-garde, either of their own accord or so designated by others. It seems, then, that Blue Man Group deliberately aligned itself with other avant-garde practices. When the three friends could not find

such a community, they opted to create their own, which evolved into a space to explore the group's aesthetic.

Though the salons were instrumental in giving the co-founders an opportunity to experiment with art and ideas, it was far from the large performance spaces that Blue Man Group eventually occupied. Kim Hubbard described the makeshift home theatre/laboratory inhabited by Wink and Goldman as an “almost furnitureless uptown apartment” (109). This open space in which to explore ideas and build items for performance offered the co-founders ample room to play. Vicki Goldberg's account of the apartment, however, was more vivid:

The living room is heaped with boxes, files, a broken mirror, an exercise machine, a washtub overflowing with wires, canvases, paint rollers, electrical gizmos and a bathroom scale. Half a window is obscured by something that looks like Styrofoam with the D.T.'s but turns out to be a leftover experiment with shaving cream. (1991, H6)

This salon space, which apparently doubled as Goldman and Wink's home, served as a sort of experimentation lab where the co-founders could explore. The early process of playing and exploring, therefore, was integral to forming what would become Blue Man Group. As one principal co-founder explained, “we talk about process all the time. In fact, Blue Man Group began as a discussion” (qtd. in Sonenberg 49-50). All three principal co-founders have consistently talked about the importance of process to the forming of Blue Man Group.

The process and structure of Blue Man Group's salons is unclear—no known photos or videos exist of any of the group's salons. It would appear that these events were by invitation only and involved a great deal of using common, everyday objects in ways they were not intended to be used. The Blue Man used these tools and objects differently than most people—he

used breakfast cereal to create music and an electric saw to open a wrapped Twinkie. Buoyed by the energy of such experiments, the members eventually decided to venture outside the safe confines of the salon and into the streets of New York City. Encountering spectators gave the participants ideas for how the Blue Man would and should interact with his surroundings and other people. Salons had allowed the performers to explore those issues, but only public performances gave them the feedback they sought.

- Blue Man Group's First Public Performances

Blue Man Group's first performances in public spaces foretold and had an impact on the group's future: exploring space in unique ways, tackling political topics, and engaging with spectators. The following descriptions of the group's first performances—as well as descriptions in later chapters—are incomplete. This is due not only to the ephemeral nature of performance and theatre but also the scant written accounts of the early performances and the imperfect nature of the footage that has survived. While the archival record is incomplete, it nonetheless seems clear that Blue Man Group's initial performances outside of the salon were invested with the ethos of the avant-garde; in particular, they had much in common with the Happenings and street theatre of the 1960s. As Richard Schechner contends, Happenings involve, on the part of the artists, “a playing with modes of perception” (1973, 230). The early performers in Blue Man Group embodied this element of Happenings. As Chakravorti and Spence asserted, Blue Man Group “would stroll the East Village streets, observing and experimenting” (6). By performing for and with unsuspecting participants, Blue Man Group effectively subverted accepted notions of theatre, challenged the actor-spectator relationship, and pondered art in society.

When it staged its first piece, *Funeral for the Eighties*, the group was critiquing what theatre could be.⁶ In Happenings, street theatre, and environmental theatre, the performers eschew traditional spaces and actor-audience relationships in favor of a more complex connection to both the space and the attendees. Schechner observed that “in a negotiated environment a more fluid situation leads sometimes to the performance being controlled by the spectators” (1968, 50). Artists who create theatre in these modes seek more fluidity with and participation from the attendees. With *Funeral for the Eighties*, Blue Man Group actively pursued inclusivity through performance. This harkened back to the Happenings of Kaprow and John Cage, the street theatre of San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the Environmental Theatre of the Performance Group. With *Funeral for the Eighties*, Blue Man Group borrowed from all three traditions and created its own form of avant-garde, audience-inclusive performance.

Funeral for the Eighties involved several cast members wearing elaborate costumes and carrying props, and it required both the performers and any spectators who wished to attend a substantial portion of the performance to travel through New York City as part of the experience. The piece was performed over Memorial Day weekend in 1988 by “a group of nine young men and women [. . .] wearing Blue face” (Richheimer 22). The performance began in one part of New York—the location was not specified—and the cast members travelled through the city,

⁶ Michael Kirby explained environmental theatre: “We may say that any theatre is environmental if it presents material from the sides and rear of the viewer as well as from the front” (134). Taking this definition further, avant-garde performers such as Bread and Puppet Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe have taken their work to the streets. Blue Man Group and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping have both continued this tradition.

ending in Central Park, where they set a coffin ablaze to symbolically end the decade.⁷ As Irene Lacher noted, the group sent out a press release and “MTV’s Kurt Loder showed up with a cameraman in tow, and through the miracles of fast cutting and a slow news day [. . .], the Blue Man Group’s first public engagement was seen nationwide the following day” (2006a, 23).⁸

In holding a funeral for a decade that had not yet ended, the co-founders of Blue Man Group signaled a rejection of a mainstream ideology—eulogizing something that, temporally, had not yet concluded indicated an atypical kind of thinking. Adam Morgan observed that the participants “filled a wood coffin with what they perceived as all the rubbish of that decade, from effigies of yuppies to Rambo dolls, and carried it on their shoulders through the streets of Manhattan before setting fire to it and burning it in Central Park” (63). By placing the funeral in

⁷ *Funeral for the Eighties* was not the first noteworthy theatrical experiment in Central Park. In 1957, Joseph Papp began offering free productions of Shakespeare’s plays in Central Park, beginning the annual tradition of the New York Shakespeare Festival. Robert Moses, the director of the Parks Commission in New York City at the time, sought to prevent Papp from offering free plays in the park, though Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar observed that in reality it was Moses’ aide Stuart Constable who had “developed a deep dislike for Papp, in large part because of the producer’s radical political associations and his combative testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities” (488). Although the experiments were different politically and artistically, both Papp and Blue Man Group used Central Park as a site of resistance to forward their respective goals.

⁸ The descriptions of the actions are based upon my review of MTV’s video recording of the performance.

a public space such as Central Park, the co-founders were able to thrust the problems of their generation in front of the spectators.

The recorded footage was shot on May 21, 1988. While clearly dressed up as the Blue Man, the nine men and women performing in blue looked markedly different than the now familiar and polished image of the Blue Man who wears black clothing and a skull-cap covering his ears and the top of his head. In *Funeral for the Eighties*, the Blue Men were not dressed uniformly—the Blue Men donned sport coats or dress shirts with pants. These clothes were of varying colors: the pants were blue, black, or grey, while the sport coats were plaid, yellow, tan, or black. The shoes they wore ranged from dress shoes to sneakers. (Some sneakers were painted blue.) One Blue Man wore sunglasses, and a couple of them smoked. All of them wore skull-caps on their heads, but many of the caps were peeling up during the performance—one Blue Man's hair was peeking out of her skull-cap. They also wore blue paint on their necks, faces, legs, arms, and hands, which resulted in blue paint being smeared all over their clothing and the props.

The footage of the performance begins with Blue Men talking to each other and to audience members. One Blue Man, Wink, discusses the 1980s as an experiment: "It wasn't a bad idea. It was an experiment, it just didn't work." Wink adds that Blue Man Group would "give them [the 1980s] an honorable burial," suggesting that it is forcing the 1980s into early retirement. The participants refer to the performance as a Happening and offer commentary on some of the items that were included in the coffin, all of which symbolize the 1980s. The funeral itself—the performers actually set fire to the coffin and its contents—ends up revolving around the most excessive and decadent aspects of 1980s culture in the United States. Some items included dolls of Rambo and Ronald Reagan. Of Rambo, Wink notes, "Rambo, I don't know. Need I say

more?” He does say more, however, claiming that “patriotism and nationalist ‘us-versus-them’ stuff is a little dangerous at this point.” Even early in the group’s history, the overt political critique embedded in the performance was readily visible. One cast member points out the Ronald Reagan doll, stating, “We don’t know if Ronald Reagan will ever be buried, but we’re going to try today.” Wink replies that the performers “don’t know if he’s gonna burn.” At one point the camera pan across the coffin, revealing a television set and a male mannequin wearing a wig and a man’s white dress shirt and tie—perhaps the effigy of a yuppie, although the cast members do not explain who the figure represented. If, indeed, the effigy was a yuppie, which seems likely, then burning it would make a strong political commentary. That the yuppie and all of the other contents in the coffin would soon be ablaze indicated that Blue Man Group was critiquing not only 1980s culture in the United States but also the function of art and the role of art that is created specifically to be destroyed. While all theatre is temporary and fleeting, *Funeral for the Eighties* included a separate component of ephemerality by having it revolve around burning a coffin filled with remnants of the then-current decade. In her study on Burning Man, Rachel Bowditch deftly argues that it “required a critical rethinking of methodological approaches towards the archive and how we document the ephemeral, especially art predicated on disappearance—art that is constructed to be destroyed” (Bowditch xxi). Blue Man Group’s first public performance was similar. Blue Man Group did not intend to leave behind remains of *Funeral for the Eighties*.

Before the processional part of the performance started, the cast members addressed the people gathered. Cast members discussed the relationship between the performers and the spectators. Goldman talked of how the performance hinged on participation from spectators: “One of the main things about this for me is the participatory aspect of it. You know, we’re into

not having us as the show and having an audience, but the whole thing is the audience and the show, together.” While spectators and performers have intersected in countless ways in the course of theatre history, the most significant instance of it happening in the United States prior to this came from the environmental theatre movement of the late 1960s. As Schechner noted, “one convention that has endured from Greek times to the present is that a ‘special place’ is marked off within the theatre for the performance” (1968, 48). In *Funeral for the Eighties*, however, there was no demarcation of space for actor or spectator. Such a task would have been impossible since the performance was in motion through the streets of, and a park in, New York City. The participatory nature of the event may reasonably describe countless kinds of performances, both popular and avant-garde, but it certainly applied to Blue Man Group’s aesthetic.

In the video record, Stanton proceeds to point out that the group is incorporating a particular work of art into the performance. This work of art is a spherical sculpture, slightly larger than the size of a basketball and made of long pieces of fabric connected to each other. As the group moves closer to its final destination, they begin to unravel the sculpture. Once they reach that destination and the Blue Men held the coffin while standing next to a garbage can, one non-blue participant rolls the fabric from the sculpture around the performers, creating a quasi-magic circle. Stanton describes its purpose: “It unravels and it intertwines people together. It’s [a] kind of symbolic thing to bring us all together and connect everybody.” Such statements demonstrated that the performance was not simply a tongue-in-cheek funeral for a decade not yet over. *Funeral for the Eighties* was a sincere effort to destabilize the greed-is-good culture of New York City during that decade. Wink then addresses the disconnection between people in

general, stating, “As we speak, facsimile machines are in communication with each other around the world.”⁹

Wink’s point addressed a larger concern about people engaging each other in impersonal ways. *Funeral for the Eighties* was a response to not only the decadence that the co-founders saw in society but also the lack of connection between people. A truly avant-garde approach to society, *Funeral for the Eighties* formed a kind of bridge between the spectators and the participants. The performance garnered much attention from individuals not involved. Many spectators stopped what they were doing and focused on the performers passing by, suggesting that the inclusive aspect of the performance was successful. (A fair number of people sitting on the stairs outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art watched intently as the processional worked its way along the sidewalk.)

The pilgrimage to Central Park was as integral to the performance as the act of burning the items inside the coffin. As several Blue Men carried the coffin, one Blue Man led the way, presumably to ensure that the pallbearers had a clear walkway. Also walking with the Blue Men was a woman dressed in black, crying and mourning the death of the decade, effectively making the event simultaneously celebratory and mournful. Funerals in the United States are traditionally held as sacred events, and though the funeral was presented as rather serious with

⁹ If the quick yet impersonal form of communicating via fax machine was a harbinger of the demise of modern society, then the principal co-founders of Blue Man Group have been as complicit in that demise as anyone else who uses e-mail as a form of communication. As the group expanded and created work in mediums other than theatre, it relied (and continues to rely) on mass e-mails and digital press releases to communicate.

the inclusion of the mourner, Blue Man Group's ludic funeral for the 1980s inverted that notion.¹⁰

Once the processional reached Central Park, the participants seemed to enjoy unraveling the sculpture. Several members got tangled up in tossing it up in the air, resulting in more fabric falling down around them. In a second video chronicling some of *Funeral for the Eighties*, MTV News' Loder interviews Wink about the group's first public performance. Loder referred to Blue Man Group as a collective of artists and Wink as "their leader" (Matas). Wink joked that the color of the collective's skin came from "a rock 'n' roll engineering accident" and that the group was inclusive of all kinds of music, including Japanese and Turkish (Matas). As Wink proceeded to tell Loder how the 1980s burned out, video from the performance showed Goldman setting a bag of cocaine into a trash barrel, with a large puff of fire instantly billowing up. A silent video clip had some of the Blue Men addressing a large group of attendees. As the brief segment concluded, Loder signed off with the prescient "Think blue."

Blue Man Group took up the task of sending the 1980s off in what Wink dubbed an "honorable burial" in the presence of people who experienced the decade. Given the nature of the performance, along with the sending off of the decade in an honorable way (a playful funeral may be the most appropriate way to release a time period associated with greed and hypocrisy), one might see that the performance inverted societal expectations not only of mourning but also of theatre. Blue Man Group presumably could have performed *Funeral for the Eighties* in a theatre or art gallery, but by locating it in and around Central Park, the group was rejecting the notion that important art and theatre typically occurred in indoor theatre spaces and art galleries.

¹⁰ By burning the coffin and its contents, Blue Man Group was, to borrow a phrase from Joseph Roach, effectively cutting the body of the 1980s loose.

Placing the performance outside allowed anyone passing by to see the performance. It was this concept of inclusion in outdoor spaces that also propelled Blue Man Group's next performance, *Club Nowhere*.

Club Nowhere was a makeshift nightclub "on the sidewalk opposite the Copacabana on East 60th Street" (Holden C5). Stephen Holden described *Club Nowhere*: "With a velveteen rope supplied by Glorious Foods as their only prop, they set up a club on the street and offered free memberships to the people waiting in line at the Copa. People liked the idea and began dancing on the sidewalk" (C5). Chakravorti and Spence built on Holden's description, stating that Blue Man Group "set up their own red velvet cordon across the street" (6). By taking over the sidewalk and placing ropes around it, Blue Man Group made this common space into a nightclub that anybody could enter. In this respect, Blue Man Group took the recognizable sidewalk and manipulated it to become a place to socialize.

Blue Man Group's use of a public sidewalk as the location for a spontaneous nightclub (such as it was) suggested that its philosophy was inflected, at least in part, by a desire to include anyone who wanted to experience the group's performances. Anybody could enter *Club Nowhere* for free, which was an alternative to the nightclub that people really wanted to enter. The Copacabana not only had lines of people waiting outside it, but it had long been a club to which celebrities flocked.¹¹ *Club Nowhere* temporarily became an alternative venue for those

¹¹ In their book on the Copacabana, Mickey Podell-Raber and Charles Pignone assert that the club featured "a virtual who's who of the greatest names in the entertainment business: Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Peggy Lee, Tony Bennett, Bobby Darin, Buddy Hackett, Jerry Lewis" (ix-x). Although many of these celebrities were at their most popular during a

seeking admittance into the famed Copacabana. For a brief period of time, Blue Man Group transformed the public sidewalk into a theatre space. Not only was *Club Nowhere* open to all who wanted to enter—instead of having to wait for admittance into the Copacabana—but admission was free, making the space an all-inclusive environment.

The location of *Club Nowhere* suggested that Blue Man Group had achieved an avant-garde ethos; while performing on a sidewalk in a busy metropolis brought the theatre to the people, this kind of theatre was marginal during the late 1980s in New York City. Not only was the performance free, but it required active participation from the spectators in order for the performance to be successful. As Chakravorti and Spence observed, anybody was welcome to enter the space: “The admission fee was dancing as hard as you could for one minute” (6). While the “admission fee” excluded those who could not or refused to dance, the performance nevertheless sought to involve as many people as were willing to participate in it by refusing to charge spectators money for tickets. Such an approach to producing theatre did not begin with these projects, but Blue Man Group’s efforts to present theatre in a public space to all who would like to experience it aligned the group with a long lineage of performers offering free theatre, such as The Public Theatre’s Free Shakespeare in the Park, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

The birth of the Blue Man character and the subsequent first experiments, both private and public, intimated that future performances and projects would continue the traditions that Blue Man Group was seemingly influenced by: critically examining social and artistic politics, different era, the larger implication was that the Copacabana had traditionally been an establishment for people of means and, oftentimes, with a celebrity status.

bridging the gap between actor and spectator, and questioning the role of art in society. For a time, the group did continue to address these topics in performances. It also continued the process of meeting to work in a salon setting. In following years, however, the Blue Man Group evolved by pursuing work in traditional theatre spaces, signaling its first steps away from its seeming mission of presenting theatre in public spaces to spectators at no charge. Additionally, while *Funeral for the Eighties* and *Club Nowhere* established its subversion of mainstream society's values, later years saw the group transition into a slightly more conventional production company. Prior to that, though, Blue Man Group's next step in the American theatre landscape led the organization to show its work in some of the leading avant-garde houses in New York City, which led, in turn, to appearances all over the country, before eventually landing it back in New York as a permanent fixture in that city's theatre scene.

CHAPTER TWO. CREATING COMMUNITY, CRITIQUING ART AND EMBRACING CHAOS: BLUE MAN GROUP'S EARLY INDOOR PERFORMANCES AND *TUBES*¹²

Blue Man Group's first public performance may have occurred in an environmental setting, but the group's early prominence was achieved, in large part, because of its subsequent performances in traditional theatre spaces. Staging productions in theatres allowed Blue Man Group to pursue several presumed goals: to earn money from ticket sales, to increase its visibility, and to strengthen its perception as an avant-garde group. While the third goal may seem in direct opposition with the first two, the avant-garde is not necessarily philosophically opposed to increasing visibility or making money. The Wooster Group, probably the highest profile theatre in the United States that continues to be associated with the avant-garde, has been able to continue its work in large part by successfully selling tickets to its productions, both in New York and on tours in the United States and abroad, for more than three decades. In the early 1990s, Blue Man Group pursued a similar tack, performing in theatres and eventually opening a long-running production at the Astor Place Theater in November 1991. In this chapter, I chart a genealogy of indoor performances by the group, and then examine recordings of some of these performances to find how that content changed over time. In so doing, I argue that the performances Blue Man Group gave in theatres during these early years solidified its place as key participant in the avant-garde, New York theatre scene, despite the group's rising commercial success. As entry into this critical review, I work to show that Blue Man Group embraced ideas from chaos theory, which helped it continue to position itself within the avant-

¹² Media reports refer to the Blue Man Group production at the Astor Place Theatre as *Tubes* and *Blue Man Group: Tubes*. Unless citing a particular source, I will opt for clarity and refer to this production as *Tubes*.

garde theatre community in New York and, in keeping with its postmodern ethos, valued process and spontaneity as much as a polished and finished product. By examining these threads throughout and studying their place within Blue Man Group's early indoor performances, I hope to show that the group's commercial success did not—at least in the early years—threaten Blue Man Group's avant-garde aesthetic but rather added to it.

- “Impossible to Predict or Control”: Chaos and the Avant-garde

The primary way in which Blue Man Group's theatre performances maintained an avant-garde aesthetic was in the group's use of chaos theory, which was an area of interest in academic, art, and mainstream circles during last decades of the twentieth century. In brief, chaos theory attempts to rationally explain that which is (or appears) unpredictable and random. The Fractal Foundation, a nonprofit organization devoted to “inspiring interest in science, math & art,” states that

While most traditional science deals with supposedly predictable phenomena like gravity, electricity, or chemical reactions, Chaos Theory deals with nonlinear things that are effectively impossible to predict or control, like turbulence, weather, the stock market, our brain states, and so on. (“What is Chaos Theory?”)

Chaos theory, then, is more than simply a scientific approach or method. It may be seen as an ideology about the world and its makeup. Science historian James Gleick asserts that some scholars of chaos view it as constantly evolving. He writes, “To some physicists chaos is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being” (5). Concurrent with this view, many avant-garde artists of the era (and today) emphasized the process of creation as much as, or more than, the state or final product. In this respect, Blue Man Group was part of a larger

postmodern approach. In their article on fractal art (a subspecies of chaos) and postmodern society, Mehrdad Garousi and Masoud Kowsari argue that “fractal art seems to be an effective expression of the inner/outer world from a postmodernist point of view” (227). Fractal art, and by extension chaos theory, then, play a significant part in both the arts and sciences in postmodern society.

During the early days of Blue Man Group, the performers were interested in experimentation and process, as is evidenced by the group’s implementation of salons as a site and approach to its work. As noted in chapter one, the salon emphasized the process of creation more than presenting a finished product ready to send off into the world. Likewise, the seeming randomness of chaos likely appealed to Blue Man Group, which revels in making theatre out of the spontaneous acts of drumming in pools of wet paint and unraveling long rolls of paper. As I will argue below, the ideas of chaos theory were imprinted on Blue Man Group’s aesthetic.

Blue Man Group’s principal co-founders have directly addressed the influence of chaos theory in their work, particularly fractals. Fractals are geometric images that expand to infinity. Stephen H. Kellert uses a coastline as an example to describe them: “Observed from afar, the coastline reveals some peninsulas and bays; on closer examination, smaller juts and coves are seen, and these again reveal jagged borders when surveyed more closely. If we imagine the coastline so jagged that with each new level of magnification new details of the terrain appear, so that the line describing the coast began to ‘take up space,’ this is a fractal” (15-16). In an interview with Janet Sonenberg, one principal co-founder said that “(t)he fractal geometry stuff in *Tubes* is so good for us because there’s so much complexity, no black and white” (qtd. in Sonenberg, 52). The “fractal geometry stuff” to which one of the Blue Men refers is the video footage that plays throughout one of the performances I examine below. The chaos that the co-

founders embraced was manifested in the group's first performances, particularly its theatre productions. These offerings had little or no segue between segments; the entire productions were a kind of staged chaos without explanation of connections (the lack of transitions from one segment to another, the spilled and smeared paint, no clear thematic through line). Lisa Diamond has written about the group's use of chaos. In her review of *Tubes* at Astor Place Theatre she connects the work to chaos theory, and quotes the principal co-founders regarding that connection: "Blue Man Group's explanation of chaos science could be a description of their own show: 'You can't really predict something, and you recognize that. Certain patterns are all you can hope for, the beauty of uncertainty, of ambiguity'" (qtd. in Diamond, 118). The comment from Blue Man Group suggests that the nonlinearity of the show is itself a kind of contained chaos. Clearly the emphasis on chaos theory is not incidental or accidental, but rather sought out. Such an approach is ironic, as chaos is not usually planned, due to its impossibility to predict or control. This attention to chaos theory may be seen to this day on the group's website. Addressing those who are interested in auditioning for their company, the founders suggest reading James Gleick's work on chaos theory. Other publications include works by John Cage and Jerzy Grotowski, both of whom continue to be aligned with an historical avant-garde ("Books").

Blue Man Group embraced chaos theory by employing specific aspects of chaos (fractals) and as a larger philosophy. On its surface, it would seem that the science of chaos theory would have little in common with avant-garde theatre. Upon closer review, however, a connection reveals itself. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, who has written extensively about science and its connections to theatre, unpacks the link between performance and chaos theory. "The theatrical experience is like a chaotic system. Chaos, of course, is a misleading term...it does not imply

disorder at all, but an ordered, plottable system, albeit one whose course is affected by minute changes and disturbances” (Shepherd-Barr 134). Blue Man Group exemplified this relationship due to the minute changes and disturbances within the performances, particularly when considering the inclusion of spectators. For Shepherd-Barr, more recent theatre artists have an eye on examining and incorporating science in performance. “Postmodern artists, however, have more and more embraced science and technology as not only compatible with artistic aims but effective in helping to communicate them” (52). Blue Man Group has incorporated technology into its work since its first public performances—in *Funeral for the Eighties*, the group used pre-recorded music. When the group moved indoors, it relied more on technologies, as well as made commentaries on technology in culture.

Blue Man Group also maintained its avant-garde aesthetic by positioning itself within New York’s avant-garde theatre scene. This is clearly evident through an analysis of the group’s choice of venues. Blue Man Group’s take on chaos occurred in multiple theatre spaces throughout New York City from 1988 to 1991. A brief contextualization of other theatre productions in New York during this time period may be useful here, as it offers a glimpse into the variety of both popular and experimental works on display when Blue Man Group was developing its first indoor performances.

While both popular and avant-garde productions occurred in New York during this time period, it is clear that nothing was quite like what Blue Man Group took the stage at the time. Some popular productions in New York during this period include the Broadway revival of *Anything Goes*, which opened in 1987 and closed in 1989, new plays such as *Lend Me a Tenor* and *Six Degrees of Separation*, which both played the Great White Way in 1989 and 1990 respectively, and *Miss Saigon*, which opened in 1991. David Mamet’s excoriating comedy about

Hollywood, *Speed-the-Plow*, opened on Broadway in 1988 with pop star Madonna playing the female lead role. Nesta Jones and Steven Dykes recall that the casting of the pop star “brought an advanced box office of nearly \$750,000—a record for a ‘straight’ play” (66-67). In the world of variety theatre, Cirque du Soleil enjoyed a six-week run in Manhattan during 1988 and, after embarking on a successful tour, returned in April 1991 for another extended run (Collins C3). This small sampling of popular and mainstream theatre offerings is representative of the wide gamut on New York City stages, from traditionally scripted plays and musicals to new-wave circus and star vehicles. Apart from the obvious spontaneity of live theatre, however, none of it allowed for the chaotic in performance the way that Blue Man Group’s performances did.

On the other end of the spectrum, the avant-garde theatre in New York was also plentiful and varied. In 1990, New York’s established experimental troupe, The Mabou Mines, produced the gender-bending *Lear*, a retelling of Shakespeare’s tragedy in which the major male characters were played by women and vice versa. The Mabou Mines version, adapted and directed by Lee Breuer, was updated to resemble “a pseudo-Faulkneresque South, supposedly in the 1950s” (Diamond 481). The 1990 production of Reza Abdoh and Mira-Lani Oglesby’s *Father Was a Peculiar Man*, directed by Abdoh and produced by the site-specific group En Garde Arts, performed in the meat-packing district of Manhattan (Holden C13). In 1991, the London-based Bloodlips and the New York theatre Split Britches co-produced *Belle Reprieve*, a deconstruction of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*. According to Gail Leondar, the staging, at La MaMa E.T.C., involved “a myriad of theatrical devices (drag, tap dancing, torch singing, stock vaudeville routines)” (386). Thus, New York avant-garde theatre around the turn of the decade was preoccupied with deconstructing the classics and exploring themes of gender and American history. Conversely, Blue Man Group’s response to much of the work in the avant-

garde theatre scene was to explore the relationship between actor and audience and how chaos theory inflects contemporary culture.

As I charted in chapter one, Blue Man Group became a part of this avant-garde scene in 1988 when it presented its first public performances. The same year that the group performed *Funeral for the Eighties*, it also performed in a variety show at P.S. 122. It seems plausible, if not probable, that the principal co-founders consciously chose to perform in venues such as P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace because these spaces had and continue to have credibility for nurturing the avant-garde. These theatres have traditionally been viewed as “arty,” “hip,” or non-mainstream and, therefore, lend a degree to avant-garde credibility to those who perform in them. Since the venues have been favorable to theatres and artists who question and critique mainstream values and ideologies, Blue Man Group sought to fit into that world. The choice to work in spaces such as P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace may then be seen as a conscious decision on the parts of the principal co-founders to cultivate a relationship with other participants in the avant-garde theatre scene.

Since Blue Man Group staged productions in avant-garde venues P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace—and then later at other spaces where avant-garde work flourished such as La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, the Performing Garage, Soho Rep, and Dixon Place—the group was making a strategic decision to pursue an avant-garde spirit. Even a cursory review of the work produced in these spaces provides a sense of the avant-garde tradition to which Blue Man Group was seeking to connect. The Performing Garage houses The Wooster Group, arguably the most important avant-garde theatre company in the United States in the last 30 years (which gave rise to notables Elizabeth LeCompte, Willem Dafoe, and Spalding Gray), while La MaMa E.T.C., founded by Ellen Stewart, a maven of experimental theatre, is a place where many young avant-

garde artists, such as Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk, and Philip Glass, were first encouraged to explore new art forms. Likewise, Dixon Place has been host to performers Holly Hughes and John Fleck, two of the NEA Four, while P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace both presented (and continue to present) New York audiences with alternative theatre performance by groups and artists such as Mabou Mines, Tim Miller, Annie Sprinkle, and Elevator Repair Service. The decision for avant-garde artists to continue working in spaces such contributes to a larger avant-garde environment: the artists are avant-garde for working at such spaces and the spaces, in turn, are avant-garde havens. To illustrate, I offer two examples.

In her article on longtime P.S. 122 Artistic Director Mark Russell, Beth Kurkjian notes that his departure from that position in 2004 “did not mark the end of Russell’s career of creating opportunities for emerging avantgarde performers” (47). Kurkjian is deliberately associating Russell, and, by extension, P.S. 122, with the avant-garde theatre scene in New York. Further, P.S. 122’s website claims that the space “is synonymous with ground-breaking, adventurous performance” (“Mission and History”). P.S. 122, then, is situated directly in the New York avant-garde theatre milieu. Franklin Furnace makes a similar rhetorical move. The website for that space notes that, “Franklin Furnace’s mission is to present, preserve, interpret, proselytize and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art” (“Franklin Furnace Archive Inc. Home”). Both of these theatres, as well as the others noted above, were part of the avant-garde New York theatre scene during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, Blue Man Group’s involvement in these spaces demonstrates that the group was directly involved in that community.

In the following section, I will argue that the group’s early performances in theatre spaces earned Blue Man Group avant-garde credibility. I will look at the group’s performance history in some of the aforementioned avant-garde spaces. In some respects, the work I do here serves as a

genealogy of the group's indoor performances leading up to the opening *Tubes* in 1991. It is important to note that the history I provide is not exhaustive; rather, I have identified what I believe are key representative moments in the group's history. My goal is to chart how Blue Man Group evolved over time and how the content did or did not change. These descriptions do not suggest the only way to interpret these archival record. What I hope to achieve is a thorough description of both the avant-garde and chaotic qualities embedded in Blue Man Group's early indoor performances while simultaneously offering detailed analyses of the group's specific performances at P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace.

- Creating a Contained Chaos: Blue Man Group's Early Indoor Performances

The earliest recorded performance by Blue Man Group that took place in a theatre space that I have been able to locate was performed at P.S. 122 on December 9, 1988. This performance was part of "Avant-Garde-Arama takes a Hike," an evening of pieces by various artists.¹³ As former Artistic/Executive Director of P.S. 122 Mark Russell describes it, "Avant-Garde-Arama is a multimedia minifestival, mixing a lot of different art in one evening and making it fun and short and quick and trying new things out" (qtd. in Kurkjian, 51). Choreographer/performer and P.S. 122 co-founder Charles Dennis was the "guide" for the evening. In the video recording, Dennis is dressed as if for an actual hike, wearing a backpack

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, I viewed all video recordings of Blue Man Group at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in New York City.

and carrying a walking stick. “Blue Man,” as the group is presented in the titles on the video, was the last program on the bill.¹⁴

Beginning its performance, three of the Blue Men approach spectators while a fourth Blue Man sets up a sheet on the floor—looking at the group’s piece in hindsight, the sheet must be there in order to protect the floor from some anticipated mess. Three of the Blue Men invite audience participants up to the stage to throw balls of paint into one Blue Man’s mouth. The Blue Men show the audience participants how to throw by example: one Blue Man throws balls of paint and another catches them in his mouth (and, at one point during this demonstration, the Blue Man catching the paint actually slips on the sheet and his black shirt pulls up, exposing his non-blue back). The selected audience member participants proceed to throw the paint balls to a Blue Man, who is catching them in his mouth; at a few points in this exercise, the Blue Men must jump up to catch them, which reveals that at least two of the cast members are wearing white socks with their black clothes.¹⁵ Though I cannot claim to know the intentions of the performers, seeing the fully black clothes and the brief glimpse of white socks suggests that an element of chance and chaos was a welcome part of this performance. The effects of chance and

¹⁴ Blue Man Group followed several acts in the evening. The act that performed immediately before Blue Man Group was a band called The Over-X-Ited.

¹⁵ This segment has continued to be a mainstay in Blue Man Group performances, though in a slightly altered version: one Blue Man throws paint balls to a second Blue Man and marshmallows to a third one, both of whom catch them in their mouths and then proceed to spit out the paint on a blank canvas and the marshmallows on a podium, after which the Blue Man places a sign reading “\$4,000” on the front of the podium.

chaos such as this yielded both benefits and drawbacks to the group's early performances. By being forced to jump and catch the marshmallows, and seeing the white skin of the Blue Man, the results of chaos are prominent though likely unwanted. Even in its early indoor performances, the group clearly fostered a chaotic ethos.

Another segment involves three audience volunteers who come on stage, where the Blue Men attach strings to the volunteers' ears. Connected to the strings are sticks, which three Blue Men manipulate. When a Blue Man pulls on a string, a recorded sound effect plays, suggesting pain or discomfort, even though the audience members do not register any visible pain or discomfort. As the Blue Men discover that different motions elicit different sounds, they begin to pull the strings in unison, creating a symphony of discomfort. As the three Blue Men pull the strings, the fourth one dances upstage of them. The excessive sound effect, coupled with the obvious lack of pain or discomfort on the parts of the volunteers, indicates an unorthodox cause and effect in the world of the Blue Man. The scene helped to establish that the Blue Man is markedly different from the people who watch his exploits. After the segment with the ear pulling ends, the performance draws to a close as the four Blue Men take a bow and then jog off the stage.¹⁶

¹⁶ While Blue Man Group later became popular with three Blue Men, the inclusion of a fourth Blue Man in this performance is, to be sure, intriguing. The principal co-founders have not publicly addressed the inclusion of a fourth Blue Man. While it is unclear why there were four Blue Men in "Avant-Garde-Arama Takes a Hike," it seems likely that this performance occurred before all of the co-founders left the group for various unknown reasons that I addressed in chapter one.

As I noted in chapter one, the principal co-founders view the Blue Man as having multiple sides to his character. This early performance highlights both the scientist and trickster parts of the character. The scientist aspect of the Blue Man emphasizes experimentation in life, trying something new, and then watching the results. Instead of working in a laboratory with chemicals, however, the Blue Man uses performance and spectators for his experiments, blurring the lines between passive viewer and active participant. In similar fashion, the trickster part of the Blue Man revels in creating a chaotic world that does not resemble the everyday worlds of many, if not most, of the group's spectators; throwing paint across the room for another Blue Man to catch in his mouth is likely not an everyday occurrence for most of Blue Man Group's audience members. As the group continued to give performances, the principal co-founders explored the limits of the character and how he responds to, and revels in, the chaotic.

Another early performance, also staged at P.S. 122 nine months later, on September 23, 1989, further engaged with this idea of controlled chaos. In the recording that I examined, the title sequence refers to the group simply as "Blue Man," and the performance consists solely of work from Blue Man Group. This performance was much longer than the performance the group gave in *Avant-Garde-Arama takes a Hike*, which included several artists on the same bill. The recording of this performance, begins with no Blue Men visible, but instead the spectators see a screen (or sheet) and some sort of liquid (perhaps water) swirling around in encased glass, creating a whirlpool.¹⁷ Then cast members' silhouettes become visible behind the screen as they play percussive instruments. They play the instruments for a short while, after which paint

¹⁷ This moment may be seen as a harbinger of Blue Man Group's relationship with chaos theory: a self-contained example of chaos that is never the same twice but nonetheless has repetitive patterns.

dribbles out through a hole in the screen, then different paint out of a second hole, then a third. One Blue Man proceeds to make a hole in the sheet and sticks his head out, followed by the other two Blue Men making holes and sticking their heads out. The Blue Men spit paint out of their mouths onto the sheet or screen. The quasi-Pollock-esque drip painting they create is a chaotic mess.

This messy chaos continues as all three Blue Men enter from the sheet, making bigger holes through which their entire bodies fit. The audience now sees that they are wearing long white coats with canvases attached. The Blue Men unscrew caps that are in their coats and paint proceeds to ooze onto their canvasses. Then they remove the canvases from their coats and hang the canvases on wires, where the canvases swing around. All three Blue Men then cross to their drums, where they don welders' masks, and one drums while the other two grab paint. Light comes up from within the drums, and the two Blue Men pour red and yellow paint on the drums while the third Blue Man continues to drum, causing the paint to fly up during the drumming. Throughout the performance, some of the performers' makeup has worn off, so the Blue Men "blue up" by reapplying more blue paint to their own and each others' faces. They then sit down and one Blue Man grabs a boom box and hits play. "Anarchy in the U.K." by the Sex Pistols emanates from the speakers: an ideal song, to be sure, for a group aligning itself with chaos. All three Blue Men bob their heads slightly to the song.

After this bit, the Blue Men grab *Cap'n Crunch* cereal and make loud music by chewing it; the sound of their chewing is amplified. Once they finish making music out of the sugary cereal, the Blue Men move on to consume another food. They grab plates, forks, knives and napkins and eat at a table while music plays. All three men eat in unison, although it is unclear which food the Blue Men eat (in more recent productions the food is Twinkies, but the food item

in this recording is unidentifiable – it may have been a banana or a Twinkie). As they eat, ooze begins to emerge from one Blue Man’s chest. The Blue Men then eat the ooze, after which the same ooze emerges from a second Blue Man’s chest, then the third Blue Man’s. After the ooze emerges from all three chests, their chests actually projectile-spew the substance. Once again, the chaos clearly establishes that Blue Man Group views itself as eschewing the conventions of mainstream theatre and performance: the projectile-spew covering the stage, resulting in a large mess on the stage, abruptly jumping into new segments with no smooth transitions, and actively avoiding a clear narrative. In his study of chaos theory and art, Dean Wilcox articulates that, “chaos theory focuses on the elements that don’t quite fit within a system in an orderly, logical way” (699). Even though he does not examine Blue Man Group, Wilcox’s statement succinctly describes the structure of Blue Man Group’s performances: theatre that eschews conventions by performing in a seemingly random pattern.

The playing with food segment continues as one Blue Man leaves the table and throws marshmallows to the other two, both of whom are seated. The two Blue Men catch the marshmallows in their mouths and then spit them out, sculpting and hanging the foodstuff on the hanging wires. The Blue Man who threw the marshmallows proceeds to throw paint balls to the other two, who catch them in their mouths and then spit them out onto the marshmallow sculptures. This segment, which changed during the more than eight months between this performance and the one from the “Avant-Garde-Arama” show, was more precise in its execution and more fleshed out—presumably the actors had rehearsed more and were more confident in their work. The performers appear more polished and deliberate in their actions than in the videos of prior performances. Even so, it still relied a great deal on chaotic spontaneity that the group had embraced. More importantly, it removes the audience members from throwing the

marshmallows, giving the performers more control over the progression of the performance. Asserting more control over the performances instead of handing it over to unknown spectators allowed Blue Man Group to shape the presentation in nuanced ways while capitalizing on the more spontaneous moments that occurred.

The mess-making continues, with unraveled rolls of paper all over (an early version of what would later become the finale in multiple Blue Man Group stagings) and more paint. The finale of this performance involves the three Blue Men drumming on large drums covered in paint, and when the performers strike the instruments, the paint splatters all over. The continued chaos that the cast members cultivate may have a roadmap, but nobody knows how or where the paint will splash or the paper will unravel. Embracing this chaotic element of spontaneity and improvisation is one of the hallmarks of Blue Man Group's approach to the avant-garde. As the group continued to stage performances in theatres and other indoor venues, it explored other ways to embody this chaotic avant-garde aesthetic.

Blue Man Group continued its relationship to avant-garde theatre spaces with performances at Franklin Furnace on January 19-20, 1990. My copy of the video recording of this performance, which is credited as being "by Tom Zafian," is described on the video case as "A Complete Historic Performance from the series: NOT Performance Art" (*Blue Man*). According to the back of the videocassette case, NOT Performance Art is "a selective documentary of performers and performance which was shot in the East Village of New York City from 1987 to 1996" (*Blue Man*). The performance, which took place on January 20, began with a darkened stage with a handful of large screens hanging all over the stage; the screens have a blue neon tint to them, at least on the video. The actors proceed to drum—one Blue Man is visibly drumming behind the screen. He is illuminated in silhouette in one of the screens

periodically and then the lights fade out on him. Another Blue Man behind another screen becomes visible briefly and the lights fade out, followed by a third drumming Blue Man behind a third screen. All three Blue Men drum, followed by the lights going up and then out quickly a moment later. The Blue Men each take a drum solo during this segment. One Blue Man, however, prepares to end the segment but the other two continue to drum, so the one Blue Man is grudgingly forced to continue drumming. The Blue Men then approach another moment that would be ideal on which to end this segment, yet one Blue Man continues to drum while the other two stare at him. Finally all Blue Men reach an organic ending for this section. The lights subsequently black out.

The next segment emphasizes the first overt connection to chaos theory in this particular performance. It begins as the lights come up on a dark liquid (presumably paint, but it is unclear from the video) streaming down from various holes at the top of a white screen. As this occurs, music is playing—it sounds pre-recorded, and is not the tube instruments that Blue Man Group invented later in its career. Video footage of a moving fractal projects on a sheet or screen; the images on screen resemble pink prisms expanding and contracting on a blue background. As they play on the screen, a shaving foam-like substance pours out of this screen at a few different points. Suddenly the screen goes black and unreadable words flash momentarily.

The music continues to play in blackness, which is followed by the lights coming up on the Blue Men standing down stage, facing the spectators. They slowly look around and at each other. In unison, they each pick up small LED signs from downstage and proceed to wear them around their necks. The signs light up and tell the spectators to read only one sign “for each round.” The Blue Men look around at each other’s signs, as well as down to their own. The signs all flash different statements about the performance and their experiences at the theatre. Some of

these include “This is a nice one to read/The one on the left was better but it’s too late. You missed it” and “The chances of you having read the same 3 as someone else are 1 in 27.” Such statements, constantly reminding the spectators that they are attending a performance, illuminate the group’s chaos influences.

After this segment, the Blue Men take off the signs and, with no transition, one of them grabs a portable stereo. Similar to the earlier performance, the Blue Man plays “Anarchy in the U.K.” All three Blue Men bob their heads in unison to the song. One Blue Man abruptly shuts off the song and sets down the stereo. In another holdover from the previous performance, all three Blue Men proceed to grab, in unison, boxes of *Cap’n Crunch* cereal and messily eat. The sound of the Blue Men crunching the cereal seems amplified, making the chewing louder.¹⁸ Each cast member has his own distinct crunching sound and their crunching becomes rhythmic, making it a kind of song. During this scene, Zafian occasionally zooms the camera in on the individual performers—so close, in fact, that it reveals that the bald cap on the actor’s head is slightly askew. Between the deliberate chaotic moments (the foam, making a mess with the cereal) to the unintentional (the askew bald cap), Blue Man Group continued to forward a chaotic ethos. The actors do not have complete control over foam or how the cereal will fall on the stage floor. By accepting the mystery of these and other sections, the principal co-founders fostered a sense of spontaneity and chaos in its work.

This sense of chaotic disruption continues as the Blue Men abruptly set down the boxes of cereal and, again without transition, move upstage to a table draped with a black cloth. Some

¹⁸ Having seen this segment several times over the years, it always appears to be exactly the same crunching sound which suggests that it is pre-recorded. Such sameness over the decades suggests that the group has moved away from its chaos theory influences.

sort of toy or game is on the table. The toy (which involves pushing buttons to further the game) has a talking animatronic man who looks and sounds like an archetypal game show host. The animatronic man responds to the participants pushing the buttons. He invites the Blue Men to play the game, asking them to press buttons that determine how many people will play the game, which game to play, the skill level and player's initials. After hearing the instructions to the game and playing along by pressing a few buttons, the Blue Men neglect to follow the toy's instructions for about a minute, in which they simply look at the game and each other. The game says to its neglectful players "Hey, wake up! What's the matter, don't want to play? Well fine. If that's the way you feel, fuck you!" The deterioration of the child's game is emblematic of the chaos and subversion that Blue Man Group embraced in its early years (and continues to embrace, though as I will discuss in subsequent chapters it has been manifested in different ways in recent years). In an interview published in *BOMB* in 1990, Stanley Moss asked the principal co-founders if the game actually said those words or if the performers changed it within the game. One of the cast members—it is unclear which cast member, as all three of them are credited as "Blue Man Group" instead of by their individual names—responds that "we reprogrammed it" (20). Another Blue Man declares, "I'm a master programmer" (20). By reprogramming it to speak foul language, Blue Man Group was momentarily disrupting popular notions of what a child's toy should be. This sociopolitical subversion of mainstream mores further places the group in the avant-garde.

This philosophy was further explored in the next segment, in which the Blue Men pull back another black cloth, under which is a large upside-down container about the size of a small garbage can. The cast members lift the container up to reveal a cube-shaped mold of yellow gelatin (judging from the actors standing next to it in the video recording, the cube looks like it

may be about 18" x 18" x 18").¹⁹ The Blue Men feel the gelatin for a while, bouncing it around, until they break it open with their hands. Inside the gelatin cube is the head of a white man whose torso is concealed behind the table. He is not wearing any blue makeup, though he sports a black cap, presumably to keep the sticky foodstuff out of his hair. The Blue Men stand upstage of him as he opens his eyes, looks around and speaks loudly and clearly, with jazz music playing intermittently between his lines:

My mind is clouded by the puma of indifference [*jazz music plays momentarily*].
 Viscous puma, you have made a connoital suspension of my head [*jazz music*].
 [*quieter*] I'm in a fuzzy neutral. My heart is stuck in park [*jazz music*]. [*louder*]
 I'm in a life or death struggle with the puma. Hands and paw. [*quieter*] There are
 no winners here. Only the puma and me tie for second place [*jazz music*]. [*louder*]
 But when I think that all is lost, I unleash the bison of my passion [*jazz music*].
 And I send that puma packing! [*jazz music*]. Get thee hence, slothful puma!
 Bonehead puma of ennui! [*jazz music*]. I curry favor with the buffalo of my zeal!
 [*jazz music*].

The non-Blue Man then ducks his head down into the table. This brief section of the performance is the only moment that includes spoken language or a non-Blue Man on stage (save for audience participation). Moreover, the monologue is something of an anomaly in the

¹⁹ The practicalities of incorporating Jell-O into the production proved challenging. Reports about the amount vary from 30 gallons in one article to 70 pounds in another and costing up to \$880 per show—though likely it was \$880 per week. The Jell-O molds were donated by Glorious Food's Jean Claude Nedelec, the man Stanton and Wink worked for when they first met (Hubbard 110).

work of Blue Man Group. Apart from *Funeral for the Eighties*, in which the Blue Men spoke during the press conference, there is no evidence suggesting that the Blue Men have ever spoken before, during, or after a performance—though the performers have spoken during interviews. Further, excluding spectators participating in select sections of the performance, I have not found any documentation suggesting that non-Blue Men have been a part of the live productions in any major capacity. In the aforementioned interview in *BOMB*, Stanley Moss asks the principal co-founders about this speaking human on stage, which is markedly different from other Blue Man Group performances. One of the cast members notes that this segment “was a show-specific piece in monologue time” (19). Another co-founder states that this non-Blue Man performer was “a character named Adolph Beck reciting what was called ‘Bonehead Puma of Ennui.’ It’s about not succumbing to the puma. And he looks like he’s gonna go with it, but he’s drawn to the bonehead, to the buffalo of his zeal” (19).²⁰ Beck’s poetic monologue eschews conventionality, even in this unconventional production. Akin to Beck’s refusal to submit to the “slothful puma” because it might be easier, Blue Man Group refuses to create linear theatre with a clearly articulated narrative.

The performance continues on in this fashion, with several segments that do not appear to have any narrative or thematic connection, apart from the aspects of subversion and chaos. In one scene, the Blue Men discover a cabinet on stage. One Blue Man opens it, and they find a doughy substance. They pull it apart and carry it to another cabinet. Upon opening that cabinet

²⁰ Beck is presumably named after Adolf Beck, an innocent man convicted of fraud in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He went to prison for crimes committed by another man. The connection between the character and the historical figure is not clear. For more on Adolf Beck and his legal woes, see Watson.

door, hundreds of marbles spill onto the stage.²¹ Another video appears, this one featuring a Mandelbrot set. Named after mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, the set of images shows a fractal image as the camera zooms close up to it, revealing an endless loop of nigh on identical images. The video of this Mandelbrot set incorporates several colors, including purple, red, orange and, of course, blue). As the video plays on a screen, a recorded song plays simultaneously. It is an early version of “Mandelgroove” or “Opening Mandelbrot,” as both songs have similar structures. This may be the first appearance of a Blue Man Group song that would later be recorded for the album *Audio*. The Mandelbrot set keeps with a chaotic theme, in that it incorporates fractals and seemingly has no connection to the previous scene. In a later segment, one Blue Man throws a ball of paint to another Blue Man across the stage, who catches it—presumably in his mouth, as that is a long-running scene in Blue Man Group’s performances, although it is unclear from the video. The Blue Man then spits the paint out onto a canvas. The first Blue Man then throws a paint ball to the third Blue Man, who catches it in his mouth and spits it out onto a spinning frame. The Blue Men continue in this fashion for a few more rounds. The final segment of the evening involves one Blue Man drumming on two flat drums, with the other two Blue Men pouring paint onto each drum. The drums are lit from below and the spectators see the paint flying up into the light each time the Blue Man strikes the drums. This segment, another long-running scene, ends and the three Blue Men bow their heads to the audience before exiting upstage to applause.

The above description of Blue Man Group’s performance is working on multiple levels. By painting with drums, the group posits that art can be a large mess of spilled paint all over the

²¹ In an interview, one of the principal co-founders states that they used 6,300 marbles in this scene (20).

floor, though the true artwork came with creation of said mess. The spontaneous and unplanned aspects of theatre are a part of a larger tradition in the arts. Blue Man Group did not invent spontaneity; it simply relishes the endless possibilities that the spontaneous can bring to a planned production. The artwork that resulted came more from a postmodern emphasis on process than an intended result, other than an assumed desire to spill paint on the floor. The use of fractal images suggests an effort to embrace the chaos in one's life, which can bring a kind of order and serenity. Finally, creating a different performance for each spectator by using the LED signs, Blue Man Group fostered a communal experience amongst the performers and audience members. Indeed, in all three of these early indoor performances, creating community, critiquing art, and embracing chaos was a significant part of the Blue Man Group aesthetic. Further, while they are not unique to the avant-garde, all of them are connected to it either aesthetically or through the process of creating in the avant-garde: creating an avant-garde community fosters growth and expansion of ideas; critiquing art is an integral part of not only Blue Man Group's work, but also the work of other avant-garde artists, such as The Wooster Group. Blue Man Group's early indoor performances, then, were a touchstone for the group's ideals and a litmus test for the viability of future interest in the organization.

Beyond those I have described above, Blue Man Group gave multiple performances in the roughly three-year time period that this chapter covers. The group quickly became a regular contributor of experimental fare in the short time span of three years—1988 to 1991. Particularly, Blue Man Group's relationship with P.S. 122 during the late 1980s and early 1990s was significant to not only the group's development as a cohesive company of artists, but it further solidified Blue Man Group's involvement in the New York avant-garde theatre scene. As Blue Man Group became better known throughout New York City, the group began performing

internationally. The August 1992 *Playbill* for *Tubes* offers detailed information regarding dates and locations up to that month, including participation in festivals and special programs.

For the past two years, as part of P.S. 122's Field Trip Program, Blue Man has appeared throughout the country: Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis; the Pyramid Arts Center in Rochester; the Milwaukee Art Museum; Movement Theatre International in Philadelphia; the Flynn Theatre in Burlington, Vermont; the Dance Place in Washington, D.C.; the Bardavon Theatre in Poughkeepsie; the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans. Also in the British Isles: Mayfest '90, Glasgow, Scotland; The Green Room, Manchester, England; The Brighton Festival in Brighton, England. (18)

Though the program lists few dates for these performances, it remains clear that Blue Man Group was actively performing both throughout the United States and internationally during the first few years of its inception. Also notable is the group's participation in special festivals and programs, including P.S. 122's Field Trip Program and Cleveland Public Theatre's Performance Art Festival, which suggest that Blue Man Group maintained some credibility as an experimental or avant-garde status during this period. Susan Kattwinkel notes that the group first appeared at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in January 1991 and the production "won an Obie award" (137). The appearance at La MaMa is significant in relation to the group's avant-garde status. If spectators did not view the group as avant-garde, its association with La MaMa gave Blue Man Group avant-garde credibility by association. In his review of the La MaMa mounting, Stephen Holden offers some contextualization: "The group went on to perform in downtown clubs like King Tut's Wah Wah Hut and Dixon Place and at spaces like the Performing Garage and Performance Space 122" (C5). On the heels of its performance at La MaMa, several months

later, Blue Man Group would go on to participate in Soho Rep's "Yes, But Is It Theater?" series in June 1991. Critic Robert Sandla wrote that, due to some of the offerings in the series, co-artistic directors Marlene Swartz and Julian Webber "may demolish Soho's rep" (40). Sandla may have been referring to Soho Rep's position as a theatre known for producing scripted yet experimental plays. According to Sandla, the performance series was designed to offer "three new 'plays' by artists whose work defies easy classification" (40). These brief critiques of Blue Man Group's early work details how the group focused on creating challenging work in spaces known to cater to audiences seeking such non-traditional theatrical experiences.

In sum, during these early years, Blue Man Group performed in some of the most respected avant-garde and experimental spaces in New York. Eventually, however, the group found success with larger audiences. In July 1991, the group participated in a performing arts series at Lincoln Center, the same venue that produced the aforementioned Broadway productions of *Anything Goes* and *Six Degrees of Separation*. The performance series, titled *Serious Fun!*, has been described as a "festival of innovative, contemporary performances at Alice Hall" (Stamas and Zane, 68-69). It began in the summer of 1987, and each new festival provided opportunities for artists as diverse as Robert Wilson, Bill Irwin, and Sarafina, Africa's premier dance-percussion group (69). There is no known recording of the *Serious Fun!* production, though it was likely similar to the successful performances at Soho Rep. Chakravorti and Spence note that "in the summer of 1991, they were invited to perform at a Lincoln Center fundraiser. Matt (Goldman) recalled: 'It got a buzz going. We sold out 200 seats fast and got a standing ovation. It was crazy for us' (6). It is not clear if this fundraiser was connected to *Serious Fun!*, but both relate to the theatre that mounted Broadway productions, which is perhaps the group's first significant move away from the avant-garde. In light of the success the group

experienced in a relatively short period of time, Blue Man Group was at an impasse: should it continue performing to sellout crowds in various spaces or instead mount a long-running production in one theatre? The group would answer that question with the opening of its first permanent production, *Tubes*, in late 1991.

- Finding a Home: Blue Man Group at the Astor Place Theatre

Blue Man Group experienced a good deal of critical success in 1991 when it opened its permanent production at the Astor Place Theatre, winning the Village Voice Obie Award, the Critics' Choice Award, and the Lucille Lortel Award (Chakravorti and Spence 1). These recognitions, along with the production at La MaMa, the sellout performance at Lincoln Center, and the buzz that the group generated through its other appearances, led the principal co-founders to consider opening a full-length show in a theatre for a more substantial run. While performing in the same space would draw a larger audience and allow for more detailed design, it would also prove costly and time consuming. Indeed, a permanent home would require both capital and the ticket sales that would keep the show running long enough to turn a profit. Would audiences come to see a group of three mute, bald, blue men on stage? Would those who had already seen the group return?

The increased interest in Blue Man Group over the course of 1991 gave Goldman, Stanton, and Wink the chance to pursue producers for the production. The two producers who joined the production, Makoto Deguchi and Mark Dunn, had a three-year option beginning in November 1991 (Chakravorti and Spence 6).²² Deguchi had a fair amount of experience working

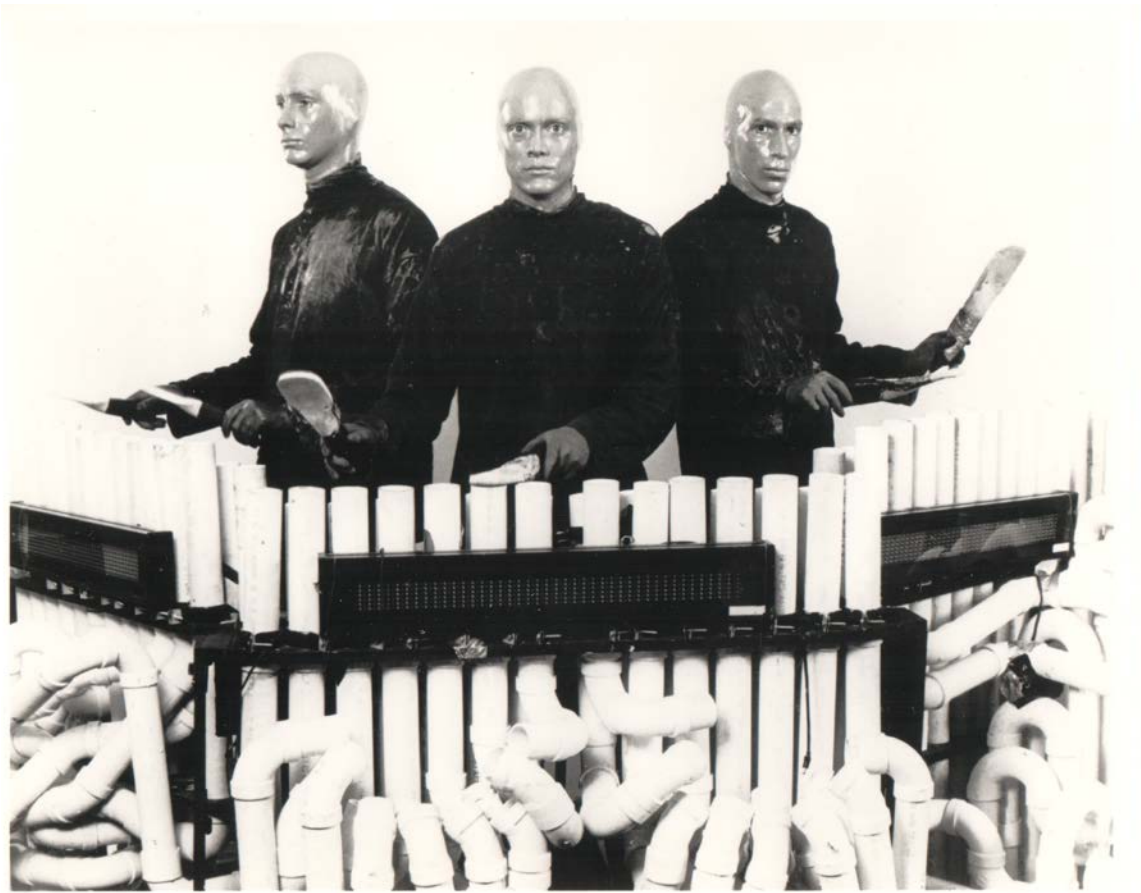
²² It is not clear when the principal co-founders started searching for a producer, but it seems likely that this would have happened in mid-1991, approximately around the time when

in theatre both in Japan and New York, amassing credits at Circle Repertory Company and BAM (*Playbill* 23-24). Dunn had previously worked as an art dealer; *Tubes* was his first theatrical production (24). The producers brought capital to the table and the performers had a show to tailor specifically to a space they had never inhabited. No financial details about the deal are publicly available—Blue Man Group prefers to keep its finances private—but reading between the lines, it becomes apparent that the principal co-founders were interested in expanding their enterprise. The group and its producers went looking for an open performance space and decided on the Astor Place Theatre.

The Astor Place Theatre has a rich history of housing theatre artists toward the beginnings of their careers. In 1968, the space was home to Israel Horovitz's *It's Called the Sugar Plum* and *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, the former starring Marsha Mason and the latter starring Al Pacino, who won an Obie Award for his performance. During the 1970s and 80s, it was home to plays by Sam Shepard, Terrence McNally, Larry Shue, and Harry Kondoleon, as well as the musical *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* ("Astor Place Theatre"). Prior to the opening of *Tubes*, the space was vacant ("Astor Place Theatre"). The choice to pursue the Astor Place Theatre seems to have been born, at least in part, out of convenience: not only was it available, it was also located in a building that was owned by a friend. The group agreed to a rent-to-buy arrangement for the theater, though no details of the terms of the purchase are available (Chakravorti and Spence 7). Efforts to secure a performance space in a rent-to-buy arrangement suggest that the organization was serious about further establishing

Blue Man Group was performing, or had finished performances at either Soho Rep or Lincoln Center.

itself. With this agreement in place, Blue Man Group finally had a home to in which to open a permanent or long-running production.



Promotional image for Blue Man Group's production *Tubes*.

Photo by Martha Swope, Courtesy of Blue Man Group

The rehearsal process for *Tubes* was apparently a smooth one creatively and the production opened at the Astor Place Theatre in November 1991.²³ The history of *Tubes* is

²³ I will focus on the rehearsal process for *Tubes* in greater detail in chapter three.

explained in part in the August 1992 *Playbill* for the production, where the Blue Man offers thanks to several individuals and theatres for their support. The first on the list was Ellen Stewart “for commissioning ‘Tubes’ and for providing rehearsal space and resources” (26). Stewart seems to have given the group both financial assistance and resources to develop what would become *Tubes*. The title for that piece, however, was more elusive. Chakravorti and Spence state that the principal co-founders “kept putting off naming the show until Playbill said it was going to press in an hour and needed a title. They were in a room with lots of tubes so they named it ‘Tubes’” (Chakravorti and Spence 7). The tubes that were a part of the production were not simply randomly chosen for the title. Richard Zoglin points out that the title *Tubes* came from “the industrial tubing that snakes along the theater walls, hangs from the ceiling and laps up onstage” (1992, 62).²⁴ The tubes, therefore, reflect both the aesthetics of the group as well as a thematic comment about the Blue Man’s moving beyond the stage and snaking his way into the audience’s life. The tubes go so far as to move beyond the stage by chaotically covering the walls and ceiling, reminding the spectators of the randomness of the performance they are attending.

Although *Tubes* became a big hit, the success that the group enjoyed was not immediate. Matt Goldman has addressed the challenges of moving into the Astor Place Theatre for a long-term run: “We played P.S. 122, La MaMa, all these hip, arty venues before we opened at the Astor Place Theatre. So some in the downtown art crowd thought we were selling out. But the work didn’t change” (111). Goldman seems as much concerned with branding the group as “hip” and “arty” as he is in defending the choice to open a resident production. While it seems unlikely

²⁴ The tubes have also been a central part of the resident Chicago production, which I will examine in greater detail in chapter four.

that the rehearsed content did not change much from previous performances to those at the Astor Place Theatre, I contend that the group and its performance did change simply because of the long-term run. As I have charted thus far, in its early years the group moved around from space to space, even traveling to other countries, which placed less pressure on the principal co-founders and their producers to sell a set amount of tickets every week. It is also worth noting that Broadway and other major long-running theatrical productions require repeatability, making the shows a readily consumable package. Such practices fly in the face of the spontaneity and improvisational aspects of the group's early work. Ultimately, taking over the Astor Place Theatre may have been a step away from the avant-garde. While many theatre companies aligned with the avant-garde have had their own permanent performance venues (notably the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and The Wooster Group), those groups do not typically open one production as an open-ended run the way that Blue Man Group did with *Tubes*. In a sense, the organization went on to achieve too much fame and success to remain a noteworthy part of avant-garde theatre.

Regardless of this tension, Blue Man Group achieved a small modicum of popularity during this run: serving as the subjects of favorable reviews and articles in the *New York Times*, receiving a 1990-1991 Special Citation Obie Award, and appearing on the cover of *TheaterWeek* magazine. The principal co-founders have addressed how the change from being on the margins to moving toward the mainstream occurred:

It was scary because we were undercapitalized and the theater was only half full.

We were scrambling. There was pressure every single day...But we did get TV appearances with Kathy and Regis, and on the Tonight Show. After six months, in

one week, we were sold out for six weeks in advance. It turned on a dime. We went from being a nonprofit to a for-profit. (Chakravorti and Spence 7)

Turning a profit helped both the principal co-founders and their financial backers become a bit more comfortable in the group's status as a cultural figure, as well as its fiscal stability. Making money and receiving so much publicity no longer placed the organization in the margins. The increase in revenue, however, does not preclude an artist or group from the avant-garde as a rule. Rather, the change for some artists, particularly Blue Man Group, is connected to the move from its process to the final product. Further, performing essentially the same production several times a week for an open period of time did not keep with Blue Man Group's approach to chaos and spontaneity, even if the production still allowed for brief unscripted moments. Though the group was still postmodern in its meta-awareness, the emphasis on process no longer remained. Blue Man Group was evolving in ways that did not keep with its purported values of avant-garde, chaos theory, and process-driven work.

Instead of attempting to offset any whispers of selling out, Goldman, Stanton and Wink went on give more than 1,200 performances at the Astor Place Theatre over the next three years. They did so without any other performers stepping into their roles. By the time that the three principal co-founders had given over 1,200 performances, as well as the many that they gave prior to opening at the Astor Place Theatre, the organization saw the need to hire other performers to wear the blue makeup. Being a Blue Man may have been rewarding to the principal co-founders, but hiring other actors would be a wise choice, as well as a chance to take a well-deserved break from the grind of performing for years straight. The next step for Blue Man Group was to find more performers as understudies and, ultimately replacement cast members.

CHAPTER THREE. THE BLUE MAN BACKSTAGE: BLUE MAN GROUP'S LEGAL AND CASTING CHALLENGES

Blue Man Group's early and continuing successes on stage have overshadowed some of their off stage issues. The producers released a director—whose name is not publicly known—for unknown reasons approximately two months before the resident New York production opened. Then in an unrelated incident, once the production opened, one of the principal co-founders, Phil Stanton, accidentally injured himself and was temporarily unable to perform, leading to an understudy taking the stage. These unconnected events are two, but by no means the only, off stage challenges that Blue Man Group has faced during its history. In the case of the former, the director hired next, Marlene Swartz, could not secure a satisfactory contract from the producers of *Blue Man Group: Tubes*, which led to her filing suit against them. In the latter, the understudy took on Stanton's role with little fanfare, ultimately leading to an understudy playing one of the Blue Men. Though unconnected, in this chapter I argue that these events when taken together show Blue Man Group's affinity for situating the principal co-founders as the main creative forces behind the organization. While Goldman, Stanton, and Wink certainly deserve credit for continuing the group after the other six original members left, several other individuals have also made contributions to the group's artistic successes along the way. In the case of Swartz, the group has engaged in denying her a more central role in the success of *Tubes*. In the case of casting other performers to play Blue Men, the organization claims that casting choice allowed the principal co-founders to focus on other artistic aspects of Blue Man Group. Both events, as well as some subsequent events, make apparent Blue Man Group's simultaneous use of inscription and erasure in its own history.

As described by Joseph Roach, inscription and erasure play heavily in constructing pleasing narratives of history: “Inscription foregrounds and reiterates favored representations; erasure occludes the undesirable ones” (159). Inscription, therefore, offers idealized or preferable narratives, no matter how inaccurate or distorting they may be; whereas erasure conceals, disregards, and eliminates representations that challenge the inscribed ones. In the case of Blue Man Group’s erasure of Swartz, the group downplays her involvement and contributions, while the use of replacement performers is a kind of shifting point for the group, thereby allowing Goldman, Stanton and Wink to generate more stage material. The explanation for the organization’s approach to Swartz may be simple: if one person claims to deserve more money and credit for Blue Man Group’s success, other people may demand it as well. The principal co-founders were simply protecting their organization. Nonetheless, Blue Man Group’s erasure of Swartz and inscription about roles the principal co-founders have played is an attempt to shape a narrative that, unsurprisingly, casts the organization in a very positive light. Such affirming narratives have become central to Blue Man Group’s shaping of its own version of history.

- Blue Man Group Goes to Court

Although Blue Man Group was conceived and created by the performers, and the group achieved success by performing self-directed work in New York’s experimental theatre spaces and in festivals all over the United States, what came to be called *Tubes* evidently needed the guiding hand of a director in order to help shape and focus it into a mainstream success. To help them find that shape and focus, they turned first to the aforementioned unknown director, and then to Swartz.

The group's enlisting of a director aligns with contemporary theatre practice. Stage work since the latter part of the nineteenth century has often been driven by an individual with a single vision. As theatre historian and theorist Charles Marowitz writes:

If we date the emergence of the director from the late nineteenth century with the advent of people such as George II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in Germany, Henry Irving in England, and Stanislavsky in Russia, we see that 'direction' was essentially a form of discipline imposed, usually by one strong-minded individual, upon the sundry arts of theatre. (1)

The director has several responsibilities, and according to Marowitz, one is imposing a form of discipline on the others involved in the production. I contend that Swartz offered much to Blue Man Group's first resident production, particularly getting the group and the production back on track after the first director was fired. Her professional experiences working as both a director and artistic director confirm that when she was hired by Blue Man Group, she had a professional profile that validated her abilities regarding how to guide a production and a group of artists; significantly, one of the principal co-founders testified as much. For the most part, however, Blue Man Group has consistently downplayed Swartz's participation, paid her little compensation, and essentially erased her work as the director and guide of the production, resulting in her filing a lawsuit against the producers and Blue Man Group *Tubes* (BMGT) Limited Partnership that she won.

Marlene Swartz fits into Marowitz's description of the stage director: she is not only the founding artistic director of Soho Repertory Theatre in New York, but has also throughout her career fostered new work. As such, she was an understandable choice to take on the demands of shaping *Tubes*. Swartz's biography in a program for *Tubes* states that she "presented the

premieres of work by Len Jenkins (sic), Mac Wellman, Eric Overmyer, David Hare, Gertrude Stein, Gunther Grass, Pablo Picasso, and especially to have unearthed and presented the world premiere of Preston Sturges' *A Cup of Coffee*" (Playbill 23). Her biography thus suggests that she was (and is) not only comfortable working on new and developing works for the theatre, but that she specializes in such work. Swartz's perseverance as a director and producer of new works suggests that she knows how to guide creators developing new plays. Given her experience, therefore, Swartz knew the demands of directing and creating theatre that flew under the radar of the larger commercial theatre market.

As I have described in the previous chapters, by mid-1991, while achieving a modicum of success in avant-garde circles, Blue Man Group was taking on a new business venture with its long run production planned for the Astor Place Theatre. The principal co-founders and producers understood that moving into a permanent theatre would be an exciting undertaking, though it would also create challenges. How would the performers adapt the production to this space? Would the production require new material? To help the group answer these and other questions, it recognized that the piece being created for the Astor Place would benefit from a director. Initially, Blue Man Group worked with two directors who "failed to work out" ("Affidavit in Opposition to Motion for Summary Judgment"). As noted above, it is not known who the previous directors were, when they were hired, what they contributed to the production or why they failed to work out. This part of Blue Man Group's history is shrouded in both mystery and controversy, and for unknown reasons, the producers thought it best to release those directors before the production opened.

In September 1991, two months before the scheduled opening, the producers approached Swartz to take on the assignment. She accepted the offer, and immediately began staging the

production—necessitated by the immediacy of the planned opening date—while simultaneously negotiating her contract. Swartz later contended that she believed that if she waited “until a final agreement was reached as to her compensation, the opening of the Play would have been substantially delayed and its financial success would have been gravely imperiled” (Complaint 3). She did receive payments for her work; specifically, she received \$4,000 upfront and began receiving weekly \$100 royalty payments (Affidavit in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment 2).²⁵ In her suit against the group and the producers, Swartz claims that between September and November 1991, “the Producers accepted all of the services rendered by plaintiff, knew that plaintiff expected to be compensated for the reasonable value of her services and continually represented to her that they would compensate her fairly and appropriately” (Complaint 3). That the producers willingly avoided offering Swartz a contract not only prevented her from receiving fair compensation, it also diminished the role of the director of its production even though they admit her importance to its success.

²⁵ Swartz cited the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers (SSDC) to support her claim that she was owed more money. “Pursuant to the SSDC Contract, the director of the Play was entitled to a fee of at least \$6,825, plus a minimum guaranteed royalty payment of two percent of all gross weekly box office receipts from the production at the Astor” (Complaint 4). Both the lump sum and the subsequent weekly payments that the producers paid Swartz were, then, considerably lower than SSDC’s typical contracts. This evidence, however, does not entirely support her argument, as the producers observed that Swartz “never was a member of the SSDC” (Affidavit in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment 3).

Downplaying Swartz's importance to *Tubes* was not only evident in the group's countersuit against her, but also in her meager compensation from the producers. Her weekly payments for \$100 suggest that she did not deserve more compensation than such a paltry sum. In her study on stage directors copyrighting their work, Margit Livingston suggests that directors "are usually regarded as employees of the producer (or, at most, independent contractors) who are paid on a project-by-project basis" (431-432). Swartz's would-be contract, ostensibly, also would have focused on her work on a project-by-project basis. Her work on *Tubes* was her sole responsibility, even though her direction contributed to the group's success. Once Swartz's work on *Tubes* was finished (i.e., once the production opened in November and she was finished laboring for the group), the producers seem to have believed that the remaining money that they owed her was the regular royalty payments, as opposed to a salary that she would have agreed to with the producers. She sought a contract from the producers over the next year and a half, all the while receiving weekly royalty payments of \$100—the number eventually rose to \$150 once the producers recouped their investment (Affidavit in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment 3). The organization first refused to finalize a contract with Swartz, but then it paid her a sum less than the professional stage directors society suggests. In other words, Swartz was treated poorly by Blue Man Group and its producers. Instead of sitting idly by, Swartz took action and filed suit. Though Swartz's legal action came from pursuing money that she believed the producers owed her, it is also clear that she was seeking to situate herself as having a major impact on the success of Blue Man Group. For example, in the Affirmation in Opposition to Defendants' Motion for New Trial, Robert N. Chan, on behalf of Swartz, writes that "[Blue Man Group principal co-founder and performer Chris] Wink explained that the Blue Men and the producers, all of whom had very limited theatrical experience, relied on her extraordinarily successful 23-

year career” (4). Wink’s admission that the group relied on Swartz’s expertise is further supported by his testimony. Wink testified that “Marlene was wonderful” and that “she got us back on track” (Affirmation in Opposition to Defendants’ Motion for New Trial 4). Such admissions indicate that Swartz’s contributions to the group were considerable, even if the producers still refused to offer her a contract.

Perhaps Swartz’s most serious accusation is that the producers refused to pay her an acceptable salary for her work, though she did receive weekly royalties. In her Complaint, she claims that the “(d)efendants have willfully failed to pay plaintiff the reasonable value of her services, which constitute ‘wages’ within the meaning of Labor Law §190” (Complaint 5-6). Through this complaint, Swartz was situating herself as one of the central collaborators of the production, while the producers were downplaying her contribution. Such downplaying of Swartz’s direction not only supports the producers’ claim that she did not deserve more money, it effectively erases Swartz from playing a major role in the production, even though she clearly did so when she accepted the job offer as director. The producers, however, were not willing to recognize those contributions, or accept Swartz’s claims to deserving more money.

In the Answer to the initial Complaint, the producers acknowledge that they entered into an oral agreement with Swartz to hire her as the director of *Tubes*. The wording in the document, however, makes clear that the producers and BMGT Partnership indicate that Swartz’s contributions were not significant by labeling the “plaintiff’s alleged services as the alleged director” (Answer 3). By referring to Swartz’s “alleged services as the alleged director,” the lawyers for the producers—and, by extension, the producers of *Tubes*—were suggesting that Swartz did not do any work as the director of the production and that she did not deserve credit for directing *Tubes*. The defendants go on to admit that “no written agreement was ever entered

into” between Swartz and the producers (Answer 3). *Tubes* grew in popularity and paved the way for Blue Man Group’s successes, but Swartz’s work was minimized, leading to her diminished role in the organization’s history.

Future productions seem to have been on Swartz’s mind when she filed suit. She claimed that she deserved a percentage of the box office of all other productions. Specifically, she argued that she was due “two percent of all gross income received from subsidiary productions with the same cast as the Play such as the Japanese Production and the Other Subsidiary Productions” (Complaint 4). It is not uncommon for stage directors to have right of first refusal to any subsequent stagings in other cities, tours, and remounts, so Swartz’s concerns about being left out of future opportunities seems valid.²⁶ It is worth noting that one of the producers of the Astor Place production, Makoto Deguchi, had experience working in theatre in Japan and therefore probably could have made a tour to that country possible.²⁷

As Jeremy Gerard observes, Swartz “helped conceptualize ‘Tubes’ for a more mainstream venue and had helped them get back on track after their unproductive work with other directors” (Gerard). Swartz, then, not only helped guide and shape *Tubes*, but also make it accessible to a larger fan base. Making Blue Man Group more appealing to the mainstream is a

²⁶ The Japanese production did not occur (though Blue Man Group eventually performed in Japan many years later). Such a production could be both popular and lucrative, as the Blue Men do not speak any verbal language and much of the content is not unique to a given country or region. For more, see “Collectively Bargained Agreements.”

²⁷ Deguchi later went on to produce a staging of the jukebox musical *Trip of Love* in Osaka in 2008. He also announced that the production was Broadway-bound, but it has yet to see the Great White Way.

significant contribution to the group's success. Even though the group was growing in popularity, producer Mark Dunn claimed that the production was "performance art,"²⁸ improvisational and requires no direction except from the performers" (Affidavit in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment 4). This reveals a contradiction: if the production required no direction except from the performers, why did Dunn and his partners hire Swartz to serve as the director, pay her a salary, and give her credit in program as such? The evidence clearly suggests that Swartz did indeed help conceptualize the production in the new performance space. As such, her contributions should be protected as her own instead of being swallowed into the production with little acknowledgement and no contract. Livingston observes, albeit tacitly, that directors of

²⁸ Performance art has long been contested in the work of Blue Man Group. The principal co-founders noticed the New York art scene in the 1980s and 1990s and found it lacking in fun, particularly amongst the new crop of artists, whereas the Blue Man character consistently seeks out fun for himself. The co-founders observed that "the younger generation seemed to be using grandiose theories to make art something that pushed people away rather than something that invited them in" ("Resonance"). The principal co-founders associated this lack of fun with performance art. "For this reason, we felt a little uncomfortable with the term 'performance art' as a term to describe what we were doing. Even though we have been guilty of using the term ourselves out of convenience on numerous occasions, it has always made us cringe a little" ("Resonance"). Blue Man Group's ties to performance art are further complicated when considering that the group has participated in an annual Performance Art Festival in Cleveland and was featured in NOT Performance Art, a series of video recordings by Tom Zafian of stage performances.

new or developing works might be more deserving of protection than directors staging previously established scripts:

[A]lthough the director's concept for the staging would likely be an unprotectable idea, the specific expression of that idea through the actor's movements on stage, the use of lighting and sound, the integration of music, the pacing of the performance, and so forth could be highly original and specific, and therefore protectable. (460)

Swartz was helping to develop a production that may have been previously performed, but Wink's testimony suggests that her contributions were of great consequence.

Swartz's connections to *Tubes* as its director do not trace back to the beginning of the production's inception, but her involvement warrants more than what the producers acknowledged. The producers made several attempts to discredit her, including making accusations about a lack of professionalism on her part. An Answer to the initial complaint, filed by an attorney for the defendants, declares that Swartz "engaged in a pattern of abuse and harassment towards the defendants" (4). The producers did not explicate this accusation further in the Answer, but the alleged abuse and harassment is likely explained as Swartz continuously attempting to acquire the contract that she believed she would receive. Such attempts to diminish her involvement or discredit her all demonstrate the organization's attempt to erase Swartz's participation in its first resident production. The attempts to discredit Swartz (by accusing her of abuse and harassment; by claiming that she did not direct the production, despite agreeing on that title with the producers; by not agreeing to a contract and then refusing to offer her one) all point to an organization-wide erasure of her from the group's narrative. The erasures of Swartz from Blue Man Group's history do not end here.

Though Swartz won the court case, her legal victory has been overshadowed by Blue Man Group's continued attempts to downplay if not erase her involvement. In the August 1992 *Playbill* for *Blue Man Group: Tubes*, the group thanks several individuals and organizations. Early in the "thank-you" list, Blue Man offers " [t]hanks also to Marlene Swartz and Julian Weber, Executive Directors of Soho Repertory Theatre for including Blue Man in their 'Yes, But It (sic) It Theatre?' Festival and for providing rehearsal space and equipment" (26). Not only did Swartz direct the resident production at the Astor Place Theatre, she opened her own theatre to the group for inclusion in a theatre festival and offered it space and resources. In the same *Playbill*, Swartz and Blue Man Group are both credited for directing the production that was running in August 1992 (21). However, a handbill from five years later tells a different story. In a December 1997 *Stagebill* for the Chicago mounting at Briar Street Theatre, the production is listed as having been "Created, Written, Directed, and Produced by Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton [and] Chris Wink" (14). In much smaller font at the bottom of the page, Swartz receives a small modicum of recognition: "Some of the material included in this production was originally presented in the New York production of *TUBES*, directed by Blue Man Group and Marlene Swartz" (14). This literal minimizing of Swartz's name in the program is not a complete erasure, but it does work to diminish her contributions to the Chicago staging, which included many of the scenes that she directed and staged in New York. The same citation of Swartz is listed in an October 2008 *Playbill* for the production of *Tubes* at the Charles Playhouse in Boston (17). By November 2010, when I saw Blue Man Group in its first national theatrical tour, the credit to Swartz had changed again. The production was largely different from other resident mountings, and therefore was credited as having been directed by Marcus Miller and Blue Man Group (9). Again in much smaller font at the bottom of the page, the credit reads "Original Direction by

Blue Man Group and Marlene Swartz” (9). While not vastly different from the programs in Chicago and Boston, in late 2010 the organization was still downplaying Swartz’s contribution to the group’s early success, especially since many of the segments were likely exact copies of the direction Swartz gave for the 1991 production; it is not possible to verify if all of these segments were reproduced essentially the same. Further, the 1992 *Playbill* was the only program that included a biography of Swartz. The other handbills include no biographical information for her the way that they do for several of the other key artists involved in the production. Swartz’s constantly changing credit further indicates that the organization seeks to manipulate and shape her contributions.

Blue Man Group’s attempts to downplay Swartz’s role suggests that the organization is more interested in inscribing a narrative that presents the principal co-founders as artistic visionaries who had no need of a director to mount a successful production. The situation with Swartz is not the only example of such massaging of the past. Take, for example, the details of the resident Toronto production that have been published on Blue Man Group’s website. The organization claims that “Blue Man Group Toronto enjoyed a successful 18 month run from June 2005 through January 2007” (“Toronto”). What is missing from this brief account is the fact that this production ended with the group leaving the city due to clashes with unions after Canadian Actors’ Equity Association, and that the Toronto Musician’s Union and Local 58 of IATSE all publicly boycotted the production. To be fair, the organization would not want to highlight this kind of news, either on its website or in its official (albeit brief) history. Why should they? The larger concern, however, is that the brief statement suggests that the closure was not embroiled in union boycotts. Such inscriptions, however, point to the organization’s manipulation of history and subsequent shaping of the group’s narrative.

Blue Man Group's concerns of image management have only grown since Swartz's lawsuit. Though taking place after the purview of this study, an example involving a spectator demonstrates a trend in Blue Man Group's treatment of those who do not toe the proverbial line. In 2006 the Chicago production experienced a different setback. An audience member, James Srodon, attended one of the performances and during a particular segment—in which a Blue Man offers a spectator to participate in the performance—claims to have been injured. The segment involves an esophageal camera to be placed in the audience member's (in this case, Srodon's) mouth, and the results are seen on large screens on the stage. Blue Man Group claims that the camera never enters the spectator's throat and that the footage is pre-taped, but Srodon nonetheless states that the segment left him with “‘a traumatic contusion’ to the esophagus” (qtd. in “Blue Man Group Down in the Mouth” 21). Srodon subsequently filed suit, “seeking unspecified damages for battery, negligence, and infliction of emotional stress” (20). While the organization has not worked to erase this event, it speaks to a larger issue that Blue Man Group is not the utopic theatre experience that it claims to be.

Such modifications to what really happened with Swartz, the union debacle, and Srodon's alleged injuries all offer a more pleasing, if inaccurate, version of the narrative, free from discord. Swartz's erasure from the organization's narrative suggests that Blue Man Group picks and chooses which aspects of its own history to reveal, while sweeping the rest under the rug. On the surface, it seems reasonable that Blue Man Group would forward a history that serves the principal co-founders instead of a director the group hired. Even so, Swartz's efforts to inscribe herself as part of the organization's history—she won the lawsuit, which resulted in her receiving both more compensation for her work and credit as a director of *Tubes*—have ensured that she will not accept the group's inscription of the principal co-founders as benevolent geniuses. Her

decision to file suit against the producers and BMGT Limited solidified her place in the organization's history, even if her contributions have been undervalued and manipulated. Ultimately, Swartz has chosen to move on from her experiences with Blue Man Group. I contacted her in 2010 to discuss her work on *Tubes* and the subsequent lawsuit that she filed. She responded with the following:

I have given careful thought to your request and must regretfully tell you that I am not going to be able to help you. For a variety of reasons, I would prefer not to revisit events which took place nearly twenty years ago. I would prefer that my work with Blue Man Group speak for itself, and not be subject to long-after-the-fact analysis for inclusion in a scholarly dissertation. (E-mail to the author)

While she may choose to avoid discussing her role within Blue Man Group's history, she is nevertheless an important artist who helped shape Blue Man Group into what it ultimately became. The group's occlusion of her participation is disappointing, but it does not reflect how the group has responded to other artists who work their way into the organization, particularly performers other than Goldman, Stanton, and Wink to play the Blue Man at the Astor Place Theatre.

- The Extra Blue Man: Casting the First Understudy and Replacement Actors

As I noted in chapter one, several individuals created Blue Man Group, including women. As the group continued to perform and experiment, cast members moved away or on to other projects, eventually leaving Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, and Chris Wink. These three men performed as the Blue Man for over a thousand of performance, throughout New York City, on tour for P.S. 122, and finally at the Astor Place Theatre. After appearing in so many

performances without a break, it is reasonable that they would need to hire another cast member to replace one of them or to ensure that they had an understudy if necessary. While Blue Man Group has stemmed in its telling of its history the participation of Swartz, it has highlighted the casting of an understudy. The organization has argued that such a move allowed the three principal co-founders an opportunity to focus on other aspects of the group without having to also perform numerous shows a week. The group's first understudy, then, may be seen as an extension of the group and its creative goals instead of as an individual with his own artistic agency. Hiring an understudy removes the principal co-founders from their roles as performers and solidifies their roles as producers/managers. There is nothing inherently wrong with casting understudies. Such a practice resulted in allowing the principal co-founders to exert more influence on other aspects of the organization. Regardless, understudies became an important part of Blue Man Group's move away from the avant-garde.²⁹

²⁹ Understudies have long occupied a place in theatre history. In order to understand their use with Blue Man Group, it will be useful to first look at the history of understudies in the theatre. To begin, they have traditionally been seen as supplemental to the main performers in a given production. Understudies take on their understudy roles solely when the actors cast in the roles are unable to participate in a given performance. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first use of "understudy" as a verb was in 1874 in the revised edition of *Hotten's Slang Dict*: "Some actors of position...have always other and inferior...artists understudying their parts" (OED). The understudy, then, has traditionally been viewed as inferior to the "real" actors hired to play the same roles. Their presence is necessary to keep the show running, but they take the stage if the original performers are unable to do so. The use of understudies has a

Matt Goldman has addressed the circumstances surrounding the hiring and first performance of Chris Bowen, the first person who was not a co-founder to play a Blue Man in *Tubes*:

We went from six to eight shows a week and did 1,285 consecutive shows. We were sold out eight weeks in advance, but our producer got panicky at the thought of one of us getting sick, so we had one understudy. We never canceled a show. But then Phil cut his hand, and Chris Bowen, our extra, got bald and blue for the first time. It was fine. He's now our senior performing director. (111-112)

Goldman's comments shed light on the significance of casting an understudy (or "extra") as well as the business practices of the group. Having an understudy on hand to step into the void left by Stanton's absence—made convenient by the fact that Bowen was already a drummer in Blue Man Group's band—demonstrated that another actor could play a Blue Man and ensured that the production would not lose profits and remain intact, both artistically and financially.³⁰

Having Bowen step into Stanton's role could be seen as cause for concern for the future of Blue Man Group. Actors taking over famous roles or entering productions that have been

lengthy lineage in the theatre. Blue Man Group's casting of an understudy continues that lineage, filling a void in the cast if needed.

³⁰ Rob Walker and Chris Wink give slightly more detail regarding Stanton's injury. Walker notes that "Stanton cut his hand one day while fooling around with a router. The understudy stepped in—and it worked" (qtd. in "The Business of Blue Man"). In Emily Nunn's Blue Man Group profile in *The New Yorker*, Wink explains that "Phil was doing some woodworking at home, and he shredded his hand" (qtd. in Nunn).

running successfully can make the other actors in the cast anxious. Of this phenomenon, Marvin Carlson points out that the replacement cast members “can neither present a totally realized embodiment of the remembered interpretation, nor can they reasonably hope to displace it by something distinctly different” (2001, 66). Of course, the replacement cast member was never intended to displace Stanton’s performance—it was supposed to be a replication of it. Stanton not only originated his role in *Tubes* but was also one of the co-founders of Blue Man Group, appearing in its earliest performances. As such, no actor could reasonably replace him, but instead simply fill the void that Stanton left. Bowen, then, would seek to seamlessly dissolve into the character, and ideally there would be no discernable difference from his and Stanton’s performance. In so doing, though, Blue Man Group moved further away from the avant-garde by creating a kind of clone of the Blue Man. As evidenced by Goldman’s above comments, the casting of Bowen as a temporary Blue Man to replace the injured Stanton proved fruitful, and did not cause any known problems while giving Stanton time to heal.

Bowen himself has described his interpretation of the situation:

I became the understudy drummer when Blue Man Group at Astor Place opened. I watched from the loft and documented everything for three years. When original Blue Man Phil Stanton hurt his thumb and was advised by his doctor to sit out a couple performances, I took his place.

(“What Does It Take To Be A Blue Man?”)

Bowen’s own account demonstrates not only the principal co-founders’ unyielding devotion to the show, but also shows that Bowen spent a great deal of time studying and examining the

intricacies of the production.³¹ Indeed, Bowen was likely prepared as much as anyone could be in that situation to play a Blue Man, and the producers did not need to cancel a performance due to the injury. Further, apart from friends and family members of the cast member and understudy involved, few spectators would probably notice a difference between which actor was playing this Blue Man, due to the identical blue makeup, skull caps and costumes that the performers wear. In Brown's own words, he "took [Stanton's] place." Brown took over while Stanton recuperated, which meant that the principal co-founders could be replaced without a significant loss of quality in the performances.

As Goldman describes the situation above, the sole reason why Blue Man Group had an understudy was to appease the producers. The implication is that the principal co-founders (who are listed as "Blue Man Group" in a 1992 *Playbill* for *Tubes*) were so determined or driven to perform that they could not consider that they might require an understudy at any point. Even so, the principal co-founders, however, were aware of how understudies or replacement cast members could benefit the organization before Bowen stepped into the production. The principal co-founders have given credit to Penn Jillette, the magician who comprises half of Penn & Teller, with mentioning the idea of casting other actors to play Blue Men. "'You guys can do what Teller and I can never do! You can clone yourselves!'" (qtd. in "Be Blue"). While Jillette's comment may seem innocuous on the surface, it reveals broader implications about the ethics of

³¹ In his article on Blue Man Group, Rob Walker perpetuates the myth of the principal co-founders as admirably tenacious in their commitment to the show. "There was one understudy, to satisfy the group's financial backers, but while he'd studied the show, he never so much as rehearsed it" ("The Business of Blue Man). Though casting Bowen proved felicitous, it was clearly not due to the principal cast members believing it was necessary.

cloning, agency in the creative process and the commercialization and mass-production of Blue Man Group.

Cloning had a high international profile during the 1990s. Perhaps most notable is the Roslin Institute in Scotland cloning the sheep Megan and Morag in 1996 and Dolly in 1997. Michael Crichton offered cautionary tales involving cloning in his novels *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*, both of which became blockbuster films in 1993 and 1997, respectively. Christopher Priest also tackled the topic of cloning in his award-winning novel *The Prestige* in 1995, which also received a film treatment. Films such as *Species* (1995) and *Multiplicity* (1996) also examined the ethics of cloning in terrifying and humorous takes, respectively. A few years later, the film *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones* (2002), dealt with cloning humans and the pitfalls that come with it. Cultural scholars have also commented on the dangers involved in cloning. Jean Baudrillard writes that “cloning is itself a form of epidemic, of contagion, of metastasis of the species—of a species in the clutches of identical reproduction and infinite proliferation” (196). Thusly, cloning was in the proverbial air of western culture during the 1990s. Returning to Jillette’s enthusiasm on Blue Man Group and the potential for cloning, it is unclear when he saw the performance, though it was at a time when cloning was in the public eye and terribly controversial. His presumably offhand comments about the artistic opportunities that cloning offered inevitably reveal a darker perspective—hiring other actors to play the same roles in essentially the same ways takes away agency or individuality from the performers. Carlson’s comment about the replacement actor’s inability to displace the previous cast member’s work by doing something “distinctly different” suggests that these Blue Man clones would also be robot-like and, therefore, have no agency. While Blue Man Group is by no means the first theatre to hire replacement cast members and asking them to recreate exactly the

performance of the performers they are replacing—commercial musical theatre and the circus are known for regularly hiring replacements governed by such terms—the emphasis on performing the Blue Men in precisely the same way as previous actors radically deemphasizes artistic freedom or individual expression, which are hallmarks of the avant-garde. Such concerns do not seem to have been on the minds of the principal co-founders.

Once Bowen's performance demonstrated that new performers could play the Blue Man successfully, both Goldman and Wink were also able to take some time off from performing. In turn, the group hired more cast members, allowing all three main Blue Men to take much needed time off from performing. While it is not known how involved the principal co-founders were to the process of hiring these initial actors, the details of the Blue Man physical presence are explicit. As I note in chapter one, the organization's website details the Blue Man's description for actors interested in auditioning. The character may be played by either men or women who are "5'10" – 6'1" and have "an athletic build" ("Requirements"). These descriptions suggest that the Blue Man is a kind of cookie-cutter character, someone who may be portrayed by the actors with the proper training in movement and drumming, as long as they are the right shape and size. Though Blue Man Group did not and does not participate in a scientific cloning of human DNA, the group's efforts to mass-produce multiple individuals who resemble each other physically is anxiety-producing. Artistically speaking, the creative process is handed down to the performers, who have no voices, either figuratively or literally. The performers in the production, then, becomes a kind of assembly line creating art by rote. Such specific delineations, to be sure, indicate the shapes and sizes of the three principal co-founders, but the precise measurements nonetheless imply that casting new Blue Men is a kind of quasi-cloning process. As theatre scholar Kimon Keramidas argues, the three main performers discovered that "not only could they

mass-produce their performance, but they could also mass-produce themselves” (316).

Keramidas’ comments illustrate that the group took a major step toward commercialization by hiring other actors to focus on other aspects of the organization. Mass-producing themselves could lead to multiple productions throughout the United States, which was apparently a desired, if unstated, goal for the organization. It also would continue to chip away at the group’s avant-garde credibility.

In addition to giving them time to rest from the rigors of performing eight shows a week, having Bowen and the other cast members play *Blue Men* gave Goldman, Stanton, and Wink the opportunity to focus on the group’s next big move: opening resident productions outside of New York. In Walker’s article, Goldman addressed how Bowen taking the stage turned out to be a gift:

‘It was a catalytic event,’ Goldman says, because it showed that Blue Man Group wasn’t a cult of personality. The founders could oversee the show without necessarily being in the show. That allowed them to take time off at last, but, more important, it gave them time to think about how to expand on what they’d started. (“Brand Blue”)

Noteworthy in Goldman’s observation is the inscription of the principal co-founders as astutely anticipating the organization’s continued success and capitalizing on it. In taking time off from performing to determine the organization’s next moves, Goldman, Stanton, and Wink were giving themselves an opportunity to cast and clone more Blue Men. By removing themselves from the production as performers, the principal co-founders took another step away from their avant-garde roots. Taking a less active role in the everyday performances and its intricacies is an indication that the principal co-founders were focusing on other aspects of the organization, such

as greater expansion and exploring mass media success. Both of these go against the tenets of the avant-garde, which emphasizes critiquing the mainstream and its values. The second problematic part is the concept of an avant-garde troupe expanding on its already thriving production.

Expanding the show may be the clear choice in hindsight, given the group's success (Walker's article was a longer profile from the March 2003 issue of *Fortune Small Business*), but the co-founders had not publicly discussed opening productions in other locations until *Tubes* became a financial success. The show's roots had been planted in the New York avant-garde theatre scene, and uprooting it would signal a shift away from that work. As early as 1994, however, Donald G. McNeil Jr. stated that if they could find enough suitable cast members who could both act and drum, "they'll do 'Tubes' in other cities" (C2). McNeil's comment became a reality, and what the three men started, albeit with six other individuals as well as help from countless others, evolved into permanent mountings of Blue Man Group in other locations.

Blue Man Group cannot be entirely faulted for capitalizing on its growth, especially since the principal co-founders worked as low-salary waiters as they experimented with the Blue Man character. Nonetheless, the group's meteoric rise to financial success indicates that it was increasingly more focused on financial concerns and growth than critiquing social and governmental politics. Another popular form of theatre during the late 1980s and early 1990s was the megamusical, and though Blue Man Group's content is far from that of musical theatre, a comparison may exist. Grandiose stage musicals such as *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* all became wildly successful Broadway productions in the 1980s and still remain popular in the commercial theatre more than twenty years later. Once these and other musicals gained cultural currency, theatrical producers such as Cameron Mackintosh (the producer behind many megamusicals, including the three aforementioned) realized they could be licensed for

productions in multiple cities and international tours. As Jessica Sternfeld notes about the phenomenon of the megamusical, Mackintosh was “packaging them like any other product and exporting them around the world” (173-174). Blue Man Group did not always have the same capitalist aspirations as the megamusical. Beginning with *Funeral for the Eighties*, the founders of Blue Man Group were critiquing mass consumption. Less than a decade later, however, the remaining Blue Men were embracing mass production of the avant-garde, which inevitably moves the work further away from its avant-garde roots and into more of a product akin to the megamusical. In its early days, that product was free for any passersby on the street, in the park or those waiting to enter a nightclub. With the success of *Tubes* and the hiring of replacement actors to play Blue Men, however, the organization realized that it could replicate the production with any performers suitable to play the roles. Blue Man Group began to package its work and send it to other cities for long-running productions, similar to megamusicals.

As a coda to this chapter, I return to the lawsuit that Swartz filed against the producers and BMGT Limited Partnership. In determining when to begin the trial, A. Joseph Tandet, attorney for the defendants, cited that one of the producers sustained a severe back injury and most physical activity aggravated his pain. Robert N. Chan, the attorney representing Swartz, argued that accommodations could be made. He proceeded to express concern about prolonged adjournment because Swartz “is seeking to recover monies from an ongoing production. When that production closes it will be more difficult for her to collect such money” (“Proceedings” 6). Mr. Tandet retorted that Chan’s comment was “pure speculation.” To conclude the matter, the judge hearing the case, Ira Gammerman, asserted “I’ve seen that play. It is going to run for a long time” (“Proceedings” 6). Judge Gammerman’s whimsical prediction nonetheless reveals that, back in 1993, it was clear to people outside the professional theatre community that Blue

Man Group had potential staying power. One way to capitalize on that lasting power would have been to pursue more environmental, avant-garde performances in a manner similar to what the group had done before performing in theatres. Blue Man Group pursued a more mainstream success by continuing a long-term run at the Astor Place Theatre. The longer that Blue Man Group continues to perform in multiple American cities each night, the bigger the organization will grow, thereby moving further away from its avant-garde beginnings. As of this writing in September 2015, Blue Man Group continues to perform several shows each week at the Astor Place Theatre in New York. Indeed, that play is going to run for a long time. Further, the success of Blue Man Group's offstage business moves paved the way for the organization to franchise its brand and open productions in Boston and Chicago.

CHAPTER FOUR. THE BLUE MAN BRANCHES OUT: BLUE MAN GROUP IN BOSTON AND CHICAGO

“Blue Man Group was never meant to be one little show.”

Matt Goldman (*Los Angeles Times*, 2001)

By the early 1990s, Blue Man Group was relatively comfortable in its role as a financially successful company, rooted in an avant-garde tradition while appealing to the masses. Part of that success came from the group’s profiles in popular magazines such as *Time* and *People*, as well as its performances on the national television programs *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* and *The Tonight Show*. The group also achieved critical success, receiving Obie and Lucille Lortel awards for its productions of *Tubes* at the Astor Place Theatre. Between the critical recognition, financial stability, and popular appeal, Blue Man Group saw an opportunity to capitalize on its moment in the sun and pursue long-term options outside of New York City. The organization decided to mount resident productions in Boston and Chicago in 1995 and 1997, respectively. As it branched out with these additional open-end runs, however, Blue Man Group further distanced itself from its avant-garde beginnings. Blue Man Group’s expansion required its principal co-founders to focus more on ensuring the new productions were staged impeccably (thereby ensuring a return on investment), instead of reconnecting to the group’s roots. While opening new productions would mean hiring more technicians and performers, thereby supporting the local artists and crew members, it also meant that Blue Man Group was becoming something of a theatrical dynasty because of its expansion. The same year that the organization opened the Chicago production, it actively denied the producers of the New York production, Makoto Deguchi and Mark Dunn, the chance to enjoy the profits. Such hypocrisy of exclusion, while espousing a commitment to community-building through its work, demonstrate

that Blue Man Group was taking more steps toward the mainstream and away from the avant-garde. Through close readings of newspaper articles, reviews and interviews with the principal co-founders from the early and mid-1990s, in this chapter I argue that, though Blue Man Group claims to have supported the local artists, the embedded truth is that the organization was actively becoming a theatrical empire bent on growing its product at the expense of all other concerns.

In chapter one, I examined the salons that a group of artists regularly held to experiment with ideas and characters, which ultimately led to the formation of Blue Man Group. These salons occurred, in part, to create a community that the individuals who attended were not able to find in the New York art or theatre scenes. As Wink explained in 1991, he and his colleagues were searching for ““this wonderful bistro salon scene, where all the beat poets would have congregated”” (qtd. in Goldberg H6). This may be taken as evidence of Blue Man Group interest in community and building a community since its earliest days. To be sure, building on this idea, the group successfully created communities amongst the performers and spectators with its early theatre productions. In the process, however, Blue Man Group ignored other important communities. Specifically, it eschewed any sense of being a part of the theatre communities in Chicago and Boston in favor of manufacturing its own purported utopia in its respective theatre spaces. While the organization may have been conceived as a reaction against the haughty excess and decadence that consumed the New York art and theatre worlds of the 1980s, by the early 1990s Blue Man Group had become a significant and regular participant in that same scene due to the immense success of *Tubes*. The mid 1990s saw extreme growth by the organization, but with that came a more generalized chaos and less political material. For Blue Man Group, then,

bigger may have meant more money and exposure, but it also meant more distance from its avant-garde roots.

The opening of productions in Boston and Chicago made Blue Man Group a franchise. By opening productions in other cities, Blue Man Group was creating what Dan Rebellato has pejoratively dubbed “McTheatre.” Large-cast megamusicals such as *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* may typify McTheatre, but any stage production has the potential to fall into this category, which, according to Rebellato, turns the artistic process into an assembly line.

Rebellato argues that “In the McTheatre franchise, the workers have little or no control over their conditions of work; all the creative decisions were taken years ago and are locked down” (44).

Such mechanized working conditions contradict Blue Man Group’s supposed emphasis on community even though the group continued to create art in front of spectators. Blue Man Group has gone so far as to create a manual for incoming cast members, much like guidelines for assembling Ikea furniture. The principal co-founders also could not appear in all three productions simultaneously, so the cloning process of the Blue Men expanded during the mid-1990s. Between giving its performers less control over the productions, adding in more cast members, and developing a how-to manual for the performers, Blue Man Group moved further away from the avant-garde ethos that it had previously embodied. One of the ways it did so was by heading north to Boston.

- The Blue Man Takes On Beantown: Blue Man Group and Boston

In her autobiographical account of teaching at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the spring 1995 semester—mere months before Blue Man Group opened in neighboring Boston—Elinor Fuchs (a well-regarded chronicler of experimental performance

in the United States) anticipates the limitations of having theatre-going experiences in Boston comparable to those that she had grown accustomed to while teaching in New York: “It didn’t take long to see that Boston is a theatrically-challenged city. Like dandelions forcing themselves through rock, theatre in Boston struggles to root itself in the flinty environment of late Puritan culture” (83). Indeed, the so called “theatrically-challenged” Boston that Fuchs describes stems from a city-wide ban on theatre more than three hundred years prior, which subsequently spurred the phrase “banned in Boston.” Odai Johnson notes that while the presentation of stage plays was not expressly illegal in Boston until 1750, “the moral environment was so inclement that strolling players and amateurs alike found Boston a chilly market long before they were legally prohibited from testing the field” (2006, 124). Despite the ban, actors continued to stage occasional performances throughout the city, understanding that such actions were illegal. Johnson points out that, in November 1765, two Harvard University students gave a campus performance which resulted in their subsequent expulsions (2006, 143-144).

The early years of the United States shaped a new outlook on theatrical performances. New York and Philadelphia allowed stage plays, and in the early 1790s future President John Quincy Adams began stumping for the same in Boston. Even though the ban was still in place, Boston’s first theatre, The Board Alley Theatre, opened in August 1792 and featured acrobat acts and pantomimes (Nathans 65-66). Apparently sufficient numbers of Bostonians supported the technically illegal theatre performances, because in 1793 a petition to repeal the anti-theatrical law passed by majority vote, though it was never signed into law (67). The next year saw the opening of the Federal Street Playhouse, which began offering regular performances (Nathans 70).

By the nineteenth century, Boston saw more acceptance of theatre with the rise of popular entertainments. The pantomimes and burlesques that Bostonian George L. Fox performed, particularly those involving his beloved Humpty Dumpty character, delighted spectators at mid-century. Regarding popular venues, the Boston Museum, opening in 1841 under the guidance of Moses Kimball, drew theatregoers of all classes. The museum had visual displays as well as a stage for theatrical performances, including vaudeville, operettas and melodramas. Theatre critic William W. Clapp, Jr. writes that the museum “attracted all classes, and it was the resort not only of the middling and lower classes, but of the more wealthy residents, for the pieces were well put on the stage, and the actors above mediocrity. The Museum was then and is now patronized by a large class who do not frequent theatres” (471). The Boston Museum, much like Blue Man Group a century and a half later, developed a reputation for appealing to a wide variety of Boston spectators.

The twentieth century also saw growth in Boston theatre, particularly with permanent resident companies. In 1980 the American Repertory Theatre (A.R.T.) opened in neighboring Cambridge, and two years later the Huntington Theatre opened in Boston. Both theatres are professional and are connected to high profile universities. As Fuchs eloquently states, “[i]t is no accident that the two major theatres, the American Repertory Theatre and the Huntington, are attached to institutions that do win support in Boston, the real show in town, the Big Top, the universities” (84). American Repertory Theatre occasionally produces new work, but specializes in reinterpretations of the classics. The Huntington Theatre Company also produces established scripts. The same year that Blue Man Group opened in Boston, A.R.T. opened a wide array of productions: staging works by Shakespeare, Brecht, and Beckett; the American premiere of David Mamet’s *The Cryptogram*; and a production of Gozzi’s *The King Stag*, featuring

choreography, costumes, masks and puppetry by Julie Taymor (Holmberg 301-302). The Huntington produced revivals of *As You Like It* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, as well as the latest plays by Horton Foote and August Wilson. While both theatres have fostered new plays by Christopher Durang, Kirsten Greenidge, David Mamet and Marsha Norman, neither emphasizes avant-garde performances akin to Blue Man Group's early work in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fuchs explains that, in the Boston theatre scene, it was "difficult to find in Boston what one finds in other American cities of Boston's level of sophistication, experimental theatre groups creating stylistically original work" (83). Blue Man Group's onstage content could boast something that few Boston-area theatres could: nonlinear theatre performance rooted in avant-garde traditions. In order to do this, Blue Man Group would have to first secure the proper performance space for its eclectic production. The organization ultimately chose the Charles Playhouse in the Theatre District.

The Charles Playhouse was not initially designed to house theatrical productions. According to Michael Blowen, it "began life as the Fifth Universalist Church in 1839 and was converted to Temple Ohabei in 1863. The Greek Revival building became the YWCA in 1887 and the Scotch Presbyterian Church two years later" ("Curtain to Rise on a New Charles"). From that point, the space "was transmogrified into a nightclub that evolved into a speakeasy" ("Curtain to Rise on a New Charles"). After it had served as both a church and a venue to illegally purchase and consume alcohol, it seems fitting that, in November 1957, a group of Boston University students co-opted the site as a theatrical venue for a production of Sartre's *No Exit* (Norton 102). The following year, the group turned into a professional theatre and held its inaugural season for the Charles Playhouse. The theatre ran as Boston's longest-lived regional theater at the time, mounting productions until 1970 (102-103). Following the student group's

departure, the space then evolved into a commercial venue for many New York-based plays and musicals (11). Since 1980, the building has also housed another long-run popular theatre offering, the improvised comedy *Shear Madness*.³² Though *Shear Madness* and Blue Man Group do not share artistic similarities, both productions demonstrate that, despite Fuchs' musings, ostensibly non-traditional theatre can, and does, enjoy mainstream success in Boston.

According to *Boston Herald* writer Annette Cardwell, Blue Man Group may have been wooed to the space. In her article on the Boston production's imminent opening, Annette Cardwell suggests that the organization had been looking to open a production in Boston and Jon Platt, who bought the Charles Playhouse in 1995, "brought Blue Man to town" (S19). It would appear, then, that Platt understood the financial potential for a Blue Man Group production in Boston. The Charles Playhouse theatre that Blue Man Group would inhabit seats 525 patrons, a seating capacity more than fifty percent greater than the Astor Place Theatre, which seats 300 (Chakravorti and Spence 9). Clearly the organization had an eye on not only expanding the cities

³² *Shear Madness* holds the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest-running play in U.S. history ("Charles Playhouse"). The idea for the play began with German dramatist Paul Portner's serious murder mystery *Scherenschnitt*, which American director Bruce Jordan read and found intriguing ("The History of Shear Madness"). Jordan and friend Marilyn Abrams adapted the play for an American audience, but entered rehearsals with a basic outline of a script—the story involves a murder at a unisex hair salon ("The History of Shear Madness"). After a successful run at the Lake George Dinner Theatre in upstate New York, the improvised comedy scheduled a limited run at the Charles Playhouse that opened in January 1980 ("The History of Shear Madness"). The play became incredibly popular and continues to entertain spectators more than thirty-five years after opening at the theatre's 199-seat Stage II.

in which to perform, but also foster a much broader fan base to occupy the larger house size. Such an expansion would not only require a more general audience, but it would indicate Blue Man Group's inability to return to the avant-garde status that it previously enjoyed. As I have noted before, while the prospect of selling tickets to a wider population does not inherently extinguish the organization's early avant-garde fires, it does suggest that the group was no longer actively fanning its proverbial innovative and provocative flames.

Once Blue Man Group had selected the Charles Playhouse, the theatre underwent several modifications specific to a remounting of *Tubes*. Michael Saunders explains that "a wall came down. The stage now has a large hole through it...It's as if a house guest moved in and, with the blessings of his host, built a new room instead of just re-arranged the furniture" ("Blue in your face"). Five years earlier, Blue Man Group was performing at various small theatres throughout New York City, often as part of a larger bill, and therefore did not have the luxury of changing the architecture of each performance space. With critical and financial success, the organization was able to take advantage of making the Charles Playhouse its permanent home in Boston and made major changes to the theatre. Not only did the group take down certain parts of the space, but it also rebuilt other aspects. Matt Goldman notes that the Charles Playhouse stage "was raised 6 inches to allow for a combination dressing room, projection parlor and control center" ("Blue, But Happy"). While rebuilding performance spaces to suit a company's needs is not inherently antithetical to the avant-garde, many artists and performers of avant-garde work do not have the capital to commit to such an enterprise. Further, avant-garde theatres typically do not perform the same work in the same theatre for such long runs as Blue Man Group has enjoyed in New York and Boston.

The stage production itself, also titled *Tubes*, closely resembled its New York counterpart in that both included mainstays such as the Blue Men making music out of cereal, spitting marshmallows onto a podium in order to sell it as art, and “The Feast.” To prepare the spectators for the playful spirit exemplified on stage, Blue Man Group installed a lobby display at The Charles Playhouse. The lobby included reproductions of paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso, Pollock and more, except the works all incorporated portable Walkman music players into each piece (“Blue Man’s Muses Hit Stage Act Has Roots in Art World’s Excesses”). Such displays no doubt signaled to attendees that this would be a “different” type of show, but the commentary feels hollow compared to the group’s earlier critiques of art and society: in *Funeral for the Eighties*, Blue Man Group burned effigies of Ronald Reagan and a bag of cocaine. Adding the Walkman devices to highly regarded works of art—which were part of different avant-garde communities at the times of their respective creations—is little more than a tongue-in-cheek destruction of canonized works of art without commentary.

When the Boston production opened on October 10, 1995, it received largely positive reviews. Iris Fanger of the *Boston Herald* urged readers of all ages to attend the production: “don’t miss this one, whatever your generation” (“‘Tubes’ Show is anything but blue”). Ed Siegel of the *Boston Globe* found himself laughing during the production, though he did openly wonder about Blue Man Group poking fun at the highbrow abstract expressionists and conceptual artists. “The idea behind much of the postwar, 20th-century art has been that the audience has to be among the initiated to be able to appreciate” it (“Laugh Yourself Blue”). It seems that the Blue Man Group of 1995—residing in a newly renovated Boston theatre, selling tickets for upwards of \$45—did not closely resemble the avant-garde that the organization had previously embodied. While this was undoubtedly not the first suggestion that Blue Man Group

had left its avant-gardist beginnings, it was one of the first to make the implication in such a high-profile way.

Siegel proceeded to warn potential theatergoers that “a lot of it feels like arty cotton candy” and that “the Blue thrills are mostly a blur a day later” (“Laugh Yourself Blue”). Siegel’s comments indicate that, as early as 1995, critics were noticing that Blue Man Group’s stage content lacked the bite of the group’s early sociopolitical performances *Funeral for the Eighties* and *Club Nowhere*. In 1995, in response to such criticisms, Matt Goldman unceremoniously disparaged another popular theatre by promoting his own organization’s uniqueness. In a piece published in *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, he notes that spectators leave the Blue Man Group’s performances talking about the meaning of the show’s content, stating that it is ““very different from going to Cirque de (sic) Soleil, where you can be dazzled, but at the end of the day it was all spectacle”” (“Blue, But Happy”). Goldman’s bitterness is palpable, as Cirque du Soleil had enjoyed several years of touring internationally by the time Blue Man Group opened the Boston production. Perhaps more noteworthy, Cirque du Soleil and Blue Man Group had both been aligned with avant-garde performance traditions—each began as modest reactions to traditional forms of theatre, as well as experimenting with free street performance. Also noteworthy is that Goldman was criticizing another theatre in much the same way that some critics panned his own organization’s work. The opening of the Boston production meant that the organization would need to hire and train more technicians, musicians and, of course, Blue Men. To do so, they principal co-founders opted to create a “how to” manual for future Blue Men.

Early in the Boston run, Goldman, Stanton and Wink were occasionally traveling from New York to Boston to perform in it. When the principal co-founders would take steps away from the production and allow the new permanent cast members play the Blue Men, however,

they noticed that the production ran into problems with the quality of the performances, especially the precision of playing the music. It is important to remember that the principal co-founders helped to invent the instruments that the Blue Men play in performance; the skill required to play these new instruments did not always translate to new players. Clearly Blue Man Group's attempt to clone more Blue Men was not an immediate success. Instead of giving the Boston production the opportunity to experiment with different segments and themes—the way that Blue Man Group began—the principal co-founders sat down to create a kind of operating manual for those involved in the Boston mounting. Matt Goldman goes so far to say that, for the Boston production, “there was no script, no musical score. It was a case study of the wrong way to grow. We realized we had to articulate our vision, so we locked ourselves in a room and spent several days writing the Blue Man manual” (112). The impetus of creating a how-to manual was to discuss themes or topics important to the production, ranging from the film *Being There* to playwright George Bernard Shaw to the cave paintings of Lascaux.³³ The principal co-founders included in these conversations Michael Quinn, a creative director for Blue Man Group (“Brand blue”). Notably absent from the conversation, at least according to scant reports on the manual, were non-Blue Men participants in the productions: musicians and crew members.

Understandably, the points of view from cast members who played the Blue Man were significant to the manual. The principal co-founders simply wanted to offer a similar consistency in the production in Boston that the New York mounting enjoyed. What the exclusivity of the manual's authors suggests, however, is that the principal co-founders served as the sole

³³ The how-to manual is not available publicly and, therefore, I am reading between the lines based on summaries and other scant information included in other sources.

contributing voices in shaping the production and that all other contributors were expected to become Blue Man clones. The cast members in the Boston, and all other subsequent productions, were hired to perform a strictly scripted set of scenes and actions.

The practice of opening a long-running production in cities other than New York became common for Blue Man Group and, by 1997, the group was eyeing another resident production. More actors would become Blue Man clones, but instead of appearing in New York or Boston, they would be performing in Chicago.

- The Blue Man in the Windy City: Blue Man Group plays at the Briar Street Theatre

The history of live theatre in Chicago differs dramatically from that of Boston. Chicago has boasted a multitude of theatre and performance companies, approaches and styles over many decades. This was not always the case, however, as reporter A. J. Liebling famously and derisively referred to Chicago as the “second city” in 1952, positioning New York as the “first” in population and in culture. Despite Liebling’s ridicule, Chicago in the nineteenth century hosted not only touring performances by Sarah Bernhardt, John Wilkes Booth, and Joseph Jefferson (after whom Chicago’s annual theatre awards are named), but also homegrown fare such as *The Chicago Fireman* and *Our Eastern Cousin in Chicago* (Christiansen 2004, 13). By the late nineteenth century, Jane Addams offered drama classes and staged theatre productions at Hull-House. She did so as a tool for social change amongst Chicago’s immigrants, poor, and working-classes (Hecht 172). Hull-House Theatre fostered amongst its participants and patrons a sense of collaboration and community.

The twentieth century continued to prove fruitful in the growth of Chicago theatre. Playwright Kenneth Sawyer Goodman had a vision for a drama program that would bring

professional and student theatre artists together in a workshop environment. Goodman died of the flu in 1918 before realizing his dream, but his wealthy parents contributed \$350,000 to the Art Institute of Chicago as the foundation for the Goodman Theatre, which opened in 1925 (Christiansen 2004, 67-68). The theatre scene further benefited from the Little Theatre movement and the Federal Theatre Project branch in Chicago, both of which made significant contributions to the theatrical landscape of the city. By the 1950s, Chicago saw the rise of the Compass Players, which gave birth, if accidentally, to Second City, a theatre that emphasized “a symbiotic actor-audience relationship and ensemble-based satire created through improvisation” (Thomas 4). All of these ventures have cultivated a sense of communal exchange in the city’s theatre scene, frequently spanning gender, class, and ethnic divides.

The 1970s witnessed an explosion in Chicago theatre, particularly edgy plays that William A. Henry III dubs “‘rock-’n’-roll theater,’ rough-edged, noisy, pulsating with energy” (94). Perhaps the most notable troupe to emerge from this era is Steppenwolf Theatre, which was conceived by then student actors Terry Kinney, Jeff Perry, and Gary Sinise in 1974, and which they incorporated a year later (Christiansen 2004, 220-221). Other significant smaller Chicago theatres to form during this time period include Remains Theatre and Organic Theater Company, the latter of which was the artistic home to now-notable theatre artists Dennis Franz and Joe Mantegna. Stephen C. Gray notes, “in the late ‘70s and ‘80s, the larger, more established companies would welcome entire ensembles from younger theatres such as Remains or Steppenwolf into their theatres, forming artistic partnerships. The sense of theatre community easily spread across company boundaries” (Gray 12). Steppenwolf has perpetuated this practice since becoming a larger, more established company through hosting productions by smaller Chicago theatres such as Lookingglass Theatre and Redmoon Theatre.

Chicago theatre continued to foster a communal atmosphere in the twenty-first century, from Goat Island collaboratively devising theatre pieces, to About Face Theatre producing an annual new work based on the discussions and lives of area gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender young people (Christiansen 2004, 241). While some theatre artists moved away for larger paychecks or more recognition, their absences were filled by other startup theatre and performance groups eager to become part of the community. Though Blue Man Group may have once been one of these startup theatre groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s, by 1997 this was no longer the case. Indeed, by the latter half of the 1990s, Blue Man Group had been firmly established as a successful producing organization with its permanent productions in New York and Boston. It follows, then, that Blue Man Group had key advantages over most of the area theatres when it went looking for a theatre to house its upcoming resident Chicago production.

Located in the Lakeview neighborhood, the Briar Street Theatre was originally built as a carriage house for Marshall Fields in 1901 (“About the Briar Street Theatre”). The owner of the building, Walt Topel, converted it into a sound stage for his film production company in 1970. By 1985, however, the building reopened as a theatre. The first production that year was the world premiere of David Mamet’s *The Shawl*, starring Chicago theatre stalwarts Gary Cole and Mike Nussbaum (Mamet 2). When Blue Man Group was looking for available theatre spaces in Chicago, it eventually settled into the Briar Street space. As in Boston with the Charles Playhouse, preparing the Briar Street space for Blue Man Group’s elaborate production requirements would necessitate a great deal of labor. Writing in October 1997 for the *Chicago Tribune*, Sid Smith wrote that “Blue Man Group doesn’t just rent a theater and play for a spell. They move in whole hog. This process began here last May and involves the work of a small

collective—you might even call it a commune—of 200 or so artists, technicians and designers” (“The Invasion of the Blue Men”).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the organization’s employing of so many individuals, the Chicago production began on shaky ground. Chakravorti and Spence observe that:

[Goldman, Stanton and Wink] chose the Briar Street Theater, with 625 seats compared to the Astor’s 300 and the Charles’ 525. They launched this venture without financial backers or a producer, and had to open a week early and charge for dress rehearsal, to avoid losing money. Traditionally reliant on word of mouth and media coverage for marketing, they developed a tongue in cheek series of TV and ad spots. Shows began to fill up. (9)

As this quote makes clear, in the face of adversity and the potential of failure, the organization began airing several commercials promoting the production. This may have saved the production, but it indicates that the group took yet another turn away from the avant-garde in the process. By actively seeking out television and radio advertising to promote the new production, Blue Man Group was moving away from its tradition of relying on word of mouth and positive reviews. Instead, it was ostensibly critiquing mass media—one radio spot had an announcer intone, “In a world of words and images, of previews and advertisements. In a world of hype and promotional gobbledygook. Shtickity plickety”—while using that very medium to promote its own work. Though the content of these ads capture the essence of works like *Funeral for the Eighties*, such moments of social critique were few and far between (“The Business of Blue Man”). It is unclear how often the ads played, for how long or on which stations. It is likely that the organization sought to reach a wide audience and aired the spots on radio stations playing rock, pop and Top 40 music throughout the Chicago area.

The Briar Street Theatre production, which did not feature the title *Tubes*, opened on October 12, 1997 to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Richard Christiansen fawned on the production, dubbing it “the perfect entertainment for the ’90s” (1997, 1). Jonathan Abarbanel warned that “[i]f you don’t have a good time, you’re probably dead” (36). Not all comments about the mounting, however, were glowing. Christiansen likened the production to “street performance, or fraternity stunt night, raised to a new level” (1997, 2). While not intrinsically an insult, Christiansen’s observation is something of a backhanded compliment, considering that the group’s earliest performances took place on the streets of New York. Further, while the production has been described as “like a high school cafeteria,” the “fraternity stunt” comparison implies that Blue Man Group was no longer emphasizing overtly political content in the performance the way that it had previously done (Steinberg 44). While it is unclear exactly how the production changed from the Astor Place Theatre offering, the content in the Chicago staging emphasized the communal aspects of the event and downplayed political critique. For its part, Blue Man Group was actively courting a more popular fan base to see its productions, thereby yielding a profit on their investment. The group also continued to focus on commercial concerns by exerting complete control over the production and ridding itself of its longtime producers.

By 1997, Blue Man Group had engaged in a prolonged (and public) spat with its producers. In March 1997, Michael Riedel of the *New York Daily News* reported on the tension between Blue Man Group’s principal co-founders and their producers. In sum, Goldman, Stanton, and Wink had decided to take complete control of their artistic endeavor by splitting from the people who helped them develop it into a financial success. Riedel’s lengthy quote presents a counter-narrative to Blue Man Group’s desire to present the principal co-founders as benevolent artists:

Investors in 'Blue Man Group in Tubes' are seeing red. Since opening at the Astor Place Theater in 1991, the wacky performance art show has grossed more than \$25 million, making it one of the more successful productions in Off-Broadway history. In the last 14 months, however, none of that lucre has found its way into the pockets of investors. Sources say the money is being stashed in an escrow account by the creators of Blue Man. The account is being used as leverage in a long-running legal battle between the Blue Men and their original producers, Mark Dunn and Makoto Deguchi. 'They realized how successful the show was going to be, and so they decided to cut Mark and Makoto out of the loop,' said a source close to the Group. After months of legal wrangling, the matter ended up in arbitration, where it remains. Neither side would comment, but another source involved in the production said the Blue Men were holding the money "because they do not want to fund the other side's lawyers." (Riedel)

Clearly this report is incomplete without the source listed or including the perspectives of the principal co-founders; nonetheless, it enhances the image that Blue Man Group was moving more toward a mainstream, commercial/for-profit model of theatre creation and production and away from the margins and the avant-garde. The incident as reported suggest that Goldman, Stanton, and Wink believed that they had worked long enough on making the initial show work, as well as making it work in the franchise productions, and felt that they deserved a larger paycheck. They also allegedly wanted to protect their work instead of allowing it to be more widely franchised and reproduced. Chakravorti and Spence note that "[t]he producer wanted to lock in the show and rerun it. That's the typical Broadway model where Joe creator gets someone to put up the money, they produce it, do shows in New York for a few years, replicate

and tour it around the world until it sputters out” (7). By taking the reins from Dunn and Deguchi, the principal co-founders had more control over subsequent productions. As for the business side of the venture, it seems likely that since Goldman had earned a Masters in Business Administration from Clark University, he could contribute to that aspect of the organization. This shrewd rearrangement of duties, and more importantly cash flow, effectively left Dunn and Deguchi out in the cold.

Dunn and Deguchi, however, were not off the hook entirely. Riedel also reports that Dunn and Deguchi may not have had access to the profits, but by law, “the investors are still required to pay taxes on those profits” (Riedel). It is unclear how Dunn and Deguchi fared in the resolution of this messy divorce, but it seems clear that the principal co-founders fared far better. For his part, Deguchi claims to have been a significant contributor to Blue Man Group’s early success. In a 2008 interview, he answered a question about how he thought of the “unique idea” of Blue Man Group. Deguchi claims that “the prototype came from three street performers that my business partner Mark [Dunn] and I found. Then, we decided to expand it and developed their street performance into a theatrical show” (“Makoto Deguchi”). Further, the unknown author of the introduction to the interview asserts that “Blue Man Group Show is one of the longest-running Off-Broadway shows. It is relatively unknown that the father of this show is Japanese. Makoto Deguchi, a veteran theatrical producer, is that man” (“Makoto Deguchi”). Deguchi, to be sure, deserves recognition for helping Blue Man Group realize the Astor Place Theatre production, though the claim that he is the “father” of Blue Man Group is dubious. For his part, however, the organization has all but erased his contributions to the group’s success and growth, as the principal co-founders receive credit for the organization’s major moves and developments.

The middle part of the 1990s was a time of immense growth, change and risk for Blue Man Group. By opening resident productions in Boston and Chicago and taking over producing responsibilities, the principal co-founders took a major gamble, which ultimately paid off financially if not artistically. As of this writing in 2015, both the Boston and Chicago productions are still running with no end in sight. The next major step that the group made involved another first: Blue Man Group's first attempt to record its work for mass production and consumption. This gamble also paid off in financial dividends. By recording an album and distributing it all over the world, fans did not need to travel to New York, Boston or Chicago to experience Blue Man Group's unique aesthetic. They could spend less money and stay at home by listening to the group's album *Audio*.

CHAPTER FIVE. MASS-PRODUCING THE AVANT-GARDE: BLUE MAN GROUP'S *AUDIO*

“Nothing kills originality faster than packaging it”

Dustin Hoffman (qtd. in “True Blue to an Artistic Vision”)

The 1990s saw Blue Man Group evolve from being a small group of performers in New York's experimental theatre scene to becoming a fan favorite in three of the largest cities in the United States. Beginning with the first small-scale public performance in 1988, free for anyone on the streets of New York when the co-founders were defining and exploring the Blue Man character, the group steadily gained in stature over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout the 1990s, the group increasingly explored mediums other than live performance, appearing on the nationally televised, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, six times in the course of the decade. No doubt due, in part, to these successes, in 1999 Blue Man Group recorded and released its first studio album, *Audio*. The album went on to garner a Grammy nomination and achieve gold record status, meaning that it sold at least 500,000 copies. In this chapter I will discuss how, on the one hand, the album cemented Blue Man Group's status as a purveyor of the avant-garde, while, on the other, it helped move it further away from that status. Simultaneous with this move, Blue Man Group evolved from a theatre company into an international multimedia enterprise. With the success of *Audio*, Blue Man Group began pursuing more mediums, further abandoning its avant-garde theatre roots. Moreover, *Audio* made the live theatre event an easily consumed, repeatable experience for new and long-time Blue Man Group fans all over the globe. Though the group showed glimpses of its avant-garde heritage throughout the process of creating the music, recording, and releasing the album, during this

period the organization nonetheless embraced a mainstream ethos. In this chapter, I will first offer an overview of Blue Man Group's avant-garde predecessors in music (John Cage and the Sex Pistols), then examine its use of music leading up to *Audio*, followed by a consideration of that work and its marketing materials, and conclude with a review of the critical reactions to it. In so doing, I demonstrate that, while Blue Man Group continued to perform theatrical productions, the group's relationship to avant-garde theatre was further compromised by permanently fixing its work for a mass audience. Throughout, I also argue that embracing the commercial music industry muddled the organization's connection to its theatrical roots and, therefore, its avant-garde lineage.

- Avant-Garde Music and The Blue Man Group

In the Introduction, I defined my use of the term “avant-garde,” but because of its importance to my work in this chapter, it warrants repeating here. My understanding of the avant-garde is distinct from those who claim that it is dead in the theatre. David Savran, for example, argues that one reason why the avant-garde is dead in American theatre is “the increasing exploitation of nonprofit theatres for their artists and product by commercial producers intent on replenishing their stores of cultural and symbolic capital” (12). While I agree that such conditions create a climate that exploits the avant-garde and frequently leads to compromise, its survival within that context is not impossible. In that regard, my thinking aligns with that of Mike Sell, who disagrees with Savran's negative assessment, as well as those of Arnold Aronson and Richard Schechner, arguing that “the avant-garde is still alive today and equipped with a self-consciousness informed by all kinds of penetrating critiques mounted against the avant-garde since the mid-1950s” (2005, 5). Answering Savran's charge in

particular, Sell notes that the avant-garde is based, in part, on responses to systems of power: the avant-garde is “minoritarian/elite, nonparliamentary movements that instrumentalize culture for social and political ends, most generally in response to the insufficiency of political processes available to them” (2006, 280).

Part of Blue Man Group’s avant-garde status in its early years was due to the fact that it was a theatre on the fringes, commenting not only on other forms of art and theatre, but on the larger culture from which those art forms emerged. Since the avant-garde is, by its nature, oppositional to the mainstream, the artists themselves must maintain a presence on the fringes. Based on this understanding of the term, then, it would seem that many, if not most, participants of the avant-garde would either end up transitioning into the mainstream over a prolonged period of time (as did the Sex Pistols) or cease to create work entirely (as did The Performance Group). It is not always the case that long-suffering avant-garde theatre artists must embrace the mainstream, as Richard Foreman and The Wooster Group both maintain their vanguard roots. The challenge with many artists transitioning from the fringes to the mainstream, Blue Man Group included, is embracing a watered-down version of their work, absent of any oppositional stance, in order to appeal to a broader audience.

Based on this definition, one could argue that Blue Man Group did not deserve to be associated with the avant-garde by the late 1990s: the organization was running financially successful productions in three cities, had appeared on nationally televised programs on numerous occasions, and had all but removed from its pieces anything approximating serious socio-political critique. Further, as early as 1995, the principal co-founders themselves were actively eschewing the avant-garde, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to a larger number of spectators. In a 1995 interview with the *Boston Globe*, Chris Wink explains that he and his

collaborators “are kind of a reaction against the avant-garde, the self-conscious attempt to be experimental” (“Blue in your face”). Though perhaps tongue in cheek, Wink’s comments are disingenuous in my estimation, as Blue Man Group had been a part of the avant-garde for years before opening the resident Boston production. By the second half of the 1990s, though, Blue Man Group was enjoying a “best of both worlds,” since critics and reviewers often invoke the group’s avant-garde roots and thus lent its work critical credibility. Add to this, by recording and releasing *Audio*, the group was clearly distancing itself from any perception of avant-garde inaccessibility or oppositional politicization, while simultaneously benefitting from that label. Blue Man Group, then, was still presented as a part of the avant-garde even if its actions said otherwise.

Just as *Audio* is not intrinsically part of avant-garde music, the album is not a replacement for Blue Man Group’s live performances. Instead of serving as a stand-in for the organization’s stage productions, *Audio* reduces Blue Man Group’s aesthetic to an unchanging experience that can be constantly repeated in the comforts of one’s home, car, or some other location. Cementing that group’s work and taking away the social commentary complicates Blue Man Group’s relationship to the avant-garde. Such a move, then, changes the group’s work and what it means. As I will discuss below, none of the music on *Audio* is inherently avant-garde. Moreover, the organization’s choice to release a permanent recording, (that is politically and socially antiseptic, no less) changed Blue Man Group’s work, making it more accessible to a wider audience. As entry into my examination of Blue Man Group’s recorded music, I will offer brief overviews of avant-garde music artists John Cage and the Sex Pistols to understand the ways that avant-garde or oppositional musicians and composers influenced the work of Blue Man Group.

Cage and the Sex Pistols are two musical artists/acts that have had a profound influence on Blue Man Group. This influence is apparent on the Group's casting website, where it recommends books, music, and films that "inform our understanding and interpretation of the character" ("Resources We Recommend"). The list of books is extensive, with works on acting, the performance art movement, drumming, and works of theory, including *How to Improve the World...and Silence* by Cage ("Books"). The list of music features works of Kodo drumming and gamelan music as well as albums by the Clash, Nirvana, and *Never Mind the Bollocks* by the Sex Pistols ("Music"). Blue Man Group clearly seeks to align its work with known avant-garde and oppositional artists with these lists. In so doing, it reinforces its own avant-garde, oppositional roots, and offers the organization a kind of credibility when working in another medium. Indeed, by positioning itself next to established avant-garde, oppositional musicians and composers, Blue Man Group was (and is) fashioning itself as the most recent participant in that lineage.

Cage is widely considered one of the most significant American avant-garde composers of the twentieth century. He is perhaps best known for composing the infamous 4'33", in which a pianist sits at a piano without playing a note, resulting in a composition comprised of the ambient noises and sounds made by the audience members and nearby factors created by chance. Cage also experimented with the theatre. Arnold Aronson credits him with having a hand in the avant-garde entering American theatre in 1952 when Cage, along with choreographer Merce Cunningham and painter Robert Rauschenberg, created *Theatre Piece* at Black Mountain College. Aronson describes the event as "a performance that involved a series of discrete actions selected by chance methods and performed indeterminately by the performers within a given structure" (2000b, 117). Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg experimented with form and content in ways that ran counter to American theatre during the 1950s. As did Aronson, many

scholars have pinpointed *Theatre Piece* as the first happening in the theatre, including Marvin Carlson who describes the performance thusly: “Cage read a Dadaist lecture, films were projected on the ceiling, Cunningham danced in the aisles, followed by an unplanned [entrance of an] excited dog who was enthusiastically incorporated into the performance” (Carlson 2000, 253). Experiments such as *4’33’’* and *Theatre Piece* cemented Cage’s role as a purveyor of avant-garde music and performance. *Theatre Piece* seems similar to Blue Man Group’s early performances, in that both were comprised of a series of unconnected, seemingly random scenes and segments with no cohesive narrative.³⁴ In creating its early works, Blue Man Group, as did Cage, interrogated the idea of what a performance could be—a “silent” composition with *4’33’’* and a simulated “funeral” with *Funeral for the Eighties*. Lastly, both Cage and Blue Man Group began as artists interested in experimenting at the intersection of the mediums of music and theatre and challenging the terms of those mediums; as such, it is understandable why Blue Man Group was drawn to his work.

The Sex Pistols also inflect Blue Man Group’s aesthetic. In chapter two, I noted that Blue Man Group included the band’s “Anarchy in the U.K.” in its early theatre performances. On a DVD version of *Audio*, which featured video footage and several photographs of the group’s live performances, the group includes several tongue-in-cheek radio advertisements promoting *Audio*. One such prank advertisement involved an unnamed voice-over actor wondering how *Audio* would “stack up against the most important albums of all time” (Blue Man Group, *Audio*, DVD). The man then asks fictional “rock critic Richter Portes” about how it compares to albums

³⁴ I am not the first scholar to make a connection between John Cage and Blue Man Group. In his 2002 Master’s thesis, Casimiro Aguilar Garcia observed that Cage and Blue Man Group have both furthered performance art.

by the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and the Sex Pistols. Portes states that *Audio* does not compare to any of them, suggesting that Blue Man Group's album is far inferior to the albums by the aforementioned artists. While the advertisement is clearly a joke, it nonetheless compares Blue Man Group, albeit unfavorably, with major popular music artists of the late twentieth century, including the Sex Pistols. This is not the only indication that the Sex Pistols are important to Blue Man Group's vision of itself.

The group's beginnings bear some resemblance to the early days of the Sex Pistols. In the mid-1970s, punk rock was not widely known, performed, or recorded, notwithstanding the Ramones in the United States. Bill Martin notes that "punk begins not as 'return to basics, stripped-down' rock and roll, but as a reinvention of radical negativity" (90). Radical negativity exemplifies the Sex Pistols' message of anarchy and liberty. "Anarchy in the U.K." is likely the band's best known song. It suggests a culture of chaos, where individuals can operate exempt from governmental or corporate control. Lyrically and sonically, the Sex Pistols, led by front man Johnny Rotten, sought to destroy any socially accepted, dominant practice or authority. As Greil Marcus notes, "[r]ock 'n' roll, Johnny Rotten would say, was only the first of many things the Sex Pistols came to destroy" (Marcus 57). It is important to note, however, that the Sex Pistols expressed this missive of anarchy and chaos through a rock 'n' roll, or rather punk rock, ethos, thus calling into question the group's very message. Despite the band's anarchic message of the masses taking back power from a privileged minority, the Sex Pistols inevitably operated within the confines of a music industry that relies on capitalism to reach a broad audience. If the Sex Pistols wanted to change the business, they would do so inside the business instead of outside of it. Thus, as was Blue Man Group, the Sex Pistols' relationship to the mainstream was a complicated and complicit.

Similar to how the Sex Pistols wanted to challenge what rock 'n' roll music could be, so too did Blue Man Group want to challenge what a theatre performance could be. In some ways, the group wanted to destroy assumptions about theatre, though not quite as aggressively as the Sex Pistols wanted to with rock 'n' roll. Further, like Blue Man Group, the Sex Pistols could not remove themselves from the specter of a capitalistic society and industry. Blue Man Group, much like The Sex Pistols before them, were subject to the conditions under which they lived and created, making it impossible for them to remove themselves from the system. Blue Man Group, and The Sex Pistols, were/are businesses. Running a business demands that the participants accept their roles as creators of a product intended to be consumed—in this case, an album mass-produced and distributed to retail establishments all over the world. While the parallels between the two groups are intriguing, it is important to note that there were important distinctions, most notably, whereas the Sex Pistols took a more aggressive, modernist, revolutionary stance to its music, Blue Man Group's approach is more postmodern, detached, and removed.³⁵ Nonetheless, both groups of artists sought/seek to reach more audience members, and neither can be faulted for such goals. The larger concern for me in this study, however, remains Blue Man Group's apparent willingness to abandon its theatrical heritage for what appears to be a "cash grab." For its part, Blue Man Group's involvement in such a venture, based

³⁵ In April 2015, Andrei Varenikov Voloshin, a retired KGB agent claimed that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics "was behind the creation of the 1970s punk scene and financed major punk bands such as the Sex Pistols" (Flanagan). The goal was purportedly to "create uprisings and bring Western democracies into utter chaos." Though there is no verifiable proof to support Voloshin's assertions, his story reinforces the Sex Pistols' position as a revolutionary act.

not primarily on its art but on its business goals, was indicative of a desire to reach a wider array of fans, expand its international brand and make money.

- More Than a Soundtrack: Blue Man Group and Music

Blue Man Group's use of music in its earliest live performances was sometimes apparent through never prevalent. *Funeral for the Eighties* involved new wave music as background and *Club Nowhere* was presented as a nightclub where attendees would dance to music for one minute. Phil Stanton states that "[s]ome of our earliest pieces didn't have music, and it never felt right. As soon as we got some drums going...we knew we were headed in the right direction" (qtd. in Crisafulli 28). The evolution of the group, which I explicated in chapters one and two, demonstrates that Blue Man Group began to enjoy more commercial and critical success upon transitioning to indoor performances, and upon incorporating more music, particularly live music, that the Blue Men played. By the early 1990s (e.g., the performances at Franklin Furnace), Blue Man Group had fully incorporated music, both live and recorded, as a significant part of its performances. Soon thereafter, critics began to notice that the music was an integral part of the shows. In her 1996 dissertation on technology in multi-media performances, Marlene Thorne Taber observes that "[a]lthough the group does not speak, sound is a predominant element of the show" (89). She may be referring to all of the audible sounds that are a planned part of the production, but her point demonstrates that music is central to the group's aesthetic. Similarly, in her October 1995 review of the stage production for the *Boston Herald*, Iris Fanger writes that the music in the production is performed "by the Blue Men and a trio of musicians perched overhead" (S19). This placement provides extra space on the stage for all of the group's scenic pieces as well as for the large, group-crafted instruments that move on and off. It also,

perhaps unintentionally, makes the band members who are not Blue Men highly visible, allowing them to receive visual recognition for their work. Acknowledging the band members is a refreshing choice, particularly in light of the organization's efforts to diminish the efforts of other contributors.

Early in their history, the principal co-founders tried recording the group's music, but those efforts were not successful. As the principal co-founders acknowledge, "[w]e tried two or three times to make an album but it wasn't satisfying so we held off" (qtd. in Chakravorti and Spence, 10). It is unclear exactly where the group made these attempts, and it is not obvious if the music was original or covers of established songs. What remains clear is that early in its history, the group focused some of its efforts on making new musical instruments. Regarding this, Blue Man Group's principal co-founders have stated that early in the group's history, when they "declined numerous opportunities to record an album" they "opted instead to expand their arsenal of new musical inventions" for use in performance ("Press Release"). In choosing to focus on creating new musical instruments, and composing songs to play on those instruments, the group was enacting a vanguard approach to music, one which aligned them with figures such as Cage. Significantly, with these new instruments, some of which were quite large (the Drum Wall, the Big Drum and the Air Poles), the group needed a place to experiment.

The organization satisfied that need, and subsequently moved closer to recording an album, when it acquired a large warehouse in Manhattan to house its invented instruments. A press release promoting the album states that:

In 1997, Blue Man Group was able to secure a warehouse space big enough to accommodate all of their large-scale industrial gadgetry. A year later, after installing a recording studio, shown on the album cover, Blue

Man Group was finally ready to explore the medium of recorded sound.

(“Press Release”)



Cover of *Audio* by Blue Man Group.

Photo by Christopher Gallo, Courtesy of Blue Man Group.

The description of the studio sounds as much like a laboratory as it does a playground. The cover image of *Audio* shot in the warehouse studio reveals a spacious recording area, involving one Blue Man playing the tubes while the other two are in a sound booth, presumably recording his performance. The playing area of the studio is filled with long and tall tubes that extend beyond the view of the camera: the viewer is able to see the recording studio through the window of the sound booth. From the cover image, the recording studio does not appear exceptionally different from most other recording studios. I contend that the purchase of a large warehouse, in the

expensive metropolis of New York no less, indicates that the organization was growing and had enough capital to acquire a large piece of property, one not designated as a space for public performances. In making this move, Blue Man Group was continuing its march away from the avant-garde and toward the mainstream.

As to the development of the content of *Audio*, the principal co-founders undoubtedly performed a good deal of the music (they all drum throughout); nonetheless, they are not the only individuals who receive credit. Indeed, several longtime Blue Man Group collaborators also participated in the album's composition and performance. Larry Heinemann and Ian Pai co-composed eleven of the fourteen songs with the principal co-founders, while Christian Dyas co-composed six. Heinemann, Pai, and Dyas also played several instruments, as did Chris Bowen (the group's first understudy) and eleven other musicians.

The album's liner notes shed light on how Blue Man Group presented *Audio* in relation to its theatre work. "This is not a soundtrack. This is better" (Blue Man Group, *Audio*, CD). Such a grandiose declaration not only positions that album as a stand-alone artistic experience, but also demonstrates that the group had become bigger than theatre, and planned on marketing itself in a particular way. The sleeve goes on to explain that the recording "extends the listener's experience into new parts of Blue Man Group's world" (*Audio*). While the album aims to extend the group's work aesthetically by reaching music fans all over the world, it also creates new opportunities for the group. Wink points out that he and the other performers "were able to structure the music on its own terms and were able to create a listening experience that is unburdened by theatrical obligations" ("Press Release"). Wink's anti-theatrical remark is surprising, since the group was and remains known primarily for its live performance and, moreover, sought a "live" quality to the recorded sound (Daley 187). The recording, then, is

intended to capture the authenticity of a live performance without the commitment of a live performance. The group has long enjoyed playing with what is live and what is recorded, often blurring the two. Theatre scholar Amy Petersen Jensen has written that one scene in *Blue Man*



The Blue Men play Air Poles, which are flexible fiberglass rods that make “swoosh” sounds as they whip across the air (“About the Instruments”).

Photo by Amy Eckert, Courtesy of Blue Man Group.

Group's work "begins with a fully lit stage space, which is filled with theatrical lighting and props. As the scene progresses, an electric billboard placed center stage becomes a video display space. At a certain point it becomes unclear whether the Blue Men are a video image or performing live" (85).

Though the line between live and recorded is indeed sometimes ambiguous in Blue Man Group's work, Wink's comment about the unburdening of theatrical obligations is nonetheless troubling: his diminishment of theatre being an "obligation" suggests that the organization was simply honoring them because it had to, instead of doing so because the group began by performing theatre. The comment implies that the theatrical productions limited the group from exploring all facets of performance that the principal co-founders would have liked. The performance spaces that Blue Man Group performed in (and continues to perform in) have physical limitations which prevented the group from doing everything that it may have wanted to do on stage. The sleeve to *Audio* confirms this, as it elaborates that the album is meant to "stand on its own and features a much larger band as well as many of Blue Man Group's latest instrument inventions" (*Audio*). Blue Man Group's first album served as an opportunity to stretch beyond the limitations of live theatre and record its own work. In a way, the album simultaneously harkens back to its days of salon experimentation and another step away from its avant-garde roots. As Steve Luber argues, with *Audio* "Blue Man Group was integrated fully into the system of communications and consumerism" and "engaging with themes of networks and consumption, BMG itself became a brand" (179). While the organization had worked to develop a unique brand for the group's content, *Audio* would likely become an easy commodity to consume—a fan could listen to the album anywhere, instead of solely at the group's three theatre

spaces. The album then, was an important step in the evolution of Blue Man Group's artistry and brand.

The title of the album suggests that the recording is an aural stand-in for the theatrical experience. In 1998, Dan Daley reported that “[f]or the past five years, Blue Man Group had been through several studios trying unsuccessfully to capture the show’s essence” (185). While the music may give listeners a good idea of what will be heard in a Blue Man Group performance, the album symbolizes a dramatic shift away from what had made it successful: live theatre. The organization was leaving behind its live roots in favor of a medium that rewards work that does not change (albums) and the money and status accompanying it. In her dissertation, Marlene Thorn Taber offers another reason. Taber met with principal co-founder Phil Stanton in July 1996, and mentioned the possibility of a CD-ROM of the group’s work. Stanton responded that the group was “in the process of putting out an album” because “the production needed items that could sell in the lobby” (118). Blue Man Group is not the first theatre to sell items in its lobby, but the act of mass-producing a record that is published by a major label seems far afield of the avant-garde theatre scene.

As for *Audio*, the album was well received by critics, though there was little agreement on the style of the music. Writing for MIT’s *The Tech*, staff writer Dan Katz asserts that the music is “occasionally repetitive, but for the most part, it’s fabulous.” Katz also describes the drum-heavy music as giving the music “a frantic pace” and that “the guitar parts have a surprising surf-rock feel” (“Blue Man Group”). Ken Richardson, for *Sound & Vision*, on the other hand, characterizes *Audio* as being “souped-up spaghetti-western music” (122). In a separate review from *Sound & Vision*, emily xyz states that, unlike much of the electronic-driven music of the 1990s—techno, house, drum ’n’ bass—*Audio* “sounds more like 1980s jazz-punk

fusion than anything recorded today” (118). Art, of course, is open to interpretation and different listeners and critics will perceive the same work in varying ways. One way to view these differing responses to the same album may be that Blue Man Group was incorporating myriad influences, including techno, surf-rock, jazz-punk, and spaghetti-western types of music; thus, the aesthetic is a hybrid of previously existing styles.

Not all critics connected with *Audio*, however; one went so far as to suggest that the album was a harbinger of change within the group. In her aforementioned review, xyz notes that “there’s an old-school aesthetic at work” (118). What xyz appears to mean is that, given the easy access to computers and the rise of sampling in music during the 1990s, the album was not a cutting-edge recording indicative of the latest technologies at the time. Further, xyz asserts that “for all its avant-garde cachet, *Audio* is fairly dated” (118). The reviewer points to the “tribal rock beats and spaghetti-western riffs played on traditional instruments” and “nary a computer, sampler or drum machine on the entire CD.” For emily xyz, Blue Man Group was making itself seem passé during a time when techno, house and other music styles were on the rise. Many of the reviews of *Audio* point to the music as retreading the past, describing it as “an old-school aesthetic,” “1980s jazz-punk fusion,” “souped-up spaghetti-western music,” and “fairly dated.” In other words, the group’s first album does little to foster an avant-garde ethos. To return to Mike Sell, if the avant-garde “challenges power in subversive, illegal or alternative ways” (2011, 47), Blue Man Group’s *Audio* offered little in the way of opposition.

The group’s pursuit of a mainstream success with *Audio* is intriguing, especially when it is compared to its earlier responses regarding the possibility of attracting a larger audience. For example, for her 1996 book on acting—published three years before the release of *Audio*—Janet



A Blue Man plays the Backpack Tubulum, which allows him to move around and launch rockets while playing (“About the Instruments”). Though intended for aural use, the effect of using instruments such as this one inevitably places importance on the spectacle. When shifting from the medium of theatre to a recording, however, Blue Man Group focuses on the aural at the expense of the visual. Such limitations will arise again when the organization branches out into other mediums.

Photo by Amy Eckert, Courtesy of Blue Man Group.

Sonenberg interviewed Goldman, Stanton, and Wink, in which they discussed an early opportunity to participate in MTV's *Kamikaze*, a variety program featuring short videos, performances, and other vignettes. After meeting with network representatives and viewing some of the material intended to air, Goldman, Stanton, and Wink agreed that they did not want to proceed with it—they describe it as having “no vision,” “schizophrenic” and “ratings driven” (Sonenberg 51). It seems that at the point when the interview was conducted, *Kamikaze* was not sufficiently oppositional or critical of the mainstream. Indeed, one of the principal co-founders stated that, with *Kamikaze*, MTV “wanted to end the live experience of performance, poetry, and comedy like they’ve done to rock music” (52). Subsequently, the release *Audio* demonstrates that Blue Man Group had evolved away from that point of view, indicating that the album was a major turning point in both the group’s work and its chosen medium. Further, the comment that *Kamikaze* was “ratings driven” points to a shift in intent. *Audio*, and indeed all of the group’s live shows, demand a kind of ratings from theatergoers in terms of ticket sales, lest the productions close.

The release of *Audio* coincided with the opening of Blue Man Group’s newest, most high-profile production. Staged in the largest theatre that Blue Man Group called home, it shared with *Audio* the goal of expanding the business of Blue Man Group and increasing its profits. This newest production clearly sought to cater to a wide array of theatergoers at, arguably, the epicenter of excessive American consumption and leisure: the Las Vegas strip. The new production, *Blue Man Group Live at the Luxor*, seated 1,200 spectators, almost double the size of the Briar Street Theatre in Chicago, previously the group’s largest audience (Chakravorti and Spence 10). A larger venue would require some new and altered sequences, as well as the grandeur associated with Las Vegas. Simultaneous with the opening of the show in Las Vegas,

Blue Man Group also recorded a number of television commercials promoting a computer company, an act which further thrust the organization to the fore of American culture. As I will discuss in the following and final chapter, by both embracing the allure of Las Vegas and by working in the medium of television, Blue Man Group would with these move become fully and entirely a purveyor of the mainstream.

CHAPTER SIX. AN ARID WASTELAND: BLUE MAN GROUP PERFORMS IN LAS VEGAS AND IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

By the end of the 1990s, Blue Man Group more closely resembled a popular entertainment, capitalist enterprise than a cutting-edge, avant-garde troupe. It had enjoyed appearances on national, network television, including several on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, had opened permanent productions in three different U.S. cities, and had released a critically acclaimed and well-selling album on Virgin Records, a mainstream label. The following year, in March 2000, the organization opened its fourth resident production in Las Vegas. Later that same year, the group developed and recorded numerous television ads for Intel, a computer technology company, which introduced their work to an even broader audience. Such efforts demonstrate that, while being connected to the avant-garde may have created some measure of uniqueness or cache for the organization's offerings, Blue Man Group was by this point firmly enmeshed in the realm of popular theatre. In this chapter I examine how Blue Man Group deliberately sought legitimacy from popular culture by courting a wider fan base and creating work outside of its live stage productions. To do so, I will offer a background of Las Vegas and how that city's privileging of excess and greed made it suitable for a Blue Man Group permanent production, contextualize the group's move to the Luxor Hotel and Casino, and conclude with a consideration of how the organization shifted into the medium of television by appearing in advertisements for Intel. As in previous chapters, throughout I will demonstrate that Blue Man Group made a conscious effort to move away from its avant-garde beginnings and toward the popular. In so doing, I will argue that Blue Man Group's decision to appeal to an even broader audience during this time period stands as the group's final abandonment of its avant-garde credibility in favor of the popular.

To be fair, as I have noted previously in this study, popular theatre is not patently opposed to tackling sensitive or political topics, as is the wont of much avant-garde theatre, music, and art. Joel Schechter reminds that “popular theatre as subversive, anti-authoritarian, or anti-traditional is not necessarily at odds with that of theatre as diverting, relaxing entertainment” (2003, 8). Several popular theatre traditions are the loci for subversive, anti-authoritarian, and anti-traditional perspectives, such as the Broadway musical *Hair* or stand-up comedian Richard Pryor’s searing cultural commentary. As I have stated in previous chapters, I align my argument with Mike Sell’s interpretation of the avant-garde, who argues that the “discussion of the cultural turn of the avant-garde is prepared by an exploration of a key, though persistently underserved concept in the field of avant-garde studies—minority” (2011, 49). For my purposes in this chapter, perhaps the most important part of Sell’s description is that the avant-garde is “minoritarian.” It is imperative to recognize that vanguard artists are working from the fringes instead of the mainstream. By 2000, however, Blue Man Group was no longer minoritarian, according to any reasonable definition of the word. Blue Man Group had taken up residence in three different large American cities, recorded and released an album through a major international recording company, and was preparing another resident production. This newest mounting would take place in another popular tourist hub, though far different from the others that had come before. Blue Man Group was mounting a production in Las Vegas, where decadence, opulence, and excess are not only encouraged, but the norm. While the group may have emerged from humble beginnings with small productions and happenings in New York City, its evolution into a mega-theatre, money-making enterprise seems appropriate for the glitz of Sin City.

Las Vegas did not always exemplify excess and greed the way that it does now. Much like other urban landscapes in the United States, Las Vegas was manipulated into what its inhabitants wanted from it. For many years the city was similar to other large patches of the American western landscape: a barren desert. Regarding its natural resource offerings, Las Vegas presents little that is intrinsically practical or useful to society. In their sociological study of Las Vegas, Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens observe that, as a desert environment, “the Bureau of Land Management classifies most of the area surrounding Las Vegas as arid wasteland” (1). This characterization points to the protean nature of Las Vegas; it came to be bent and plied into whatever its residents and corporate interests that control it preferred. An early example of this move away from its characterization as an arid wasteland involved one of the region’s few natural resources: gold. In the nineteenth century, before it officially became a proper city in 1905, Las Vegas was home to many prospectors. As has been well documented, the discovery of gold attracted flocks of people to the American West, including Las Vegas. But even before that migration away from the city, and in turn the embracing of the glitz and greed associated with Las Vegas today, people placed great emphasis on the constructed aspects of the locale and its resources.

Las Vegas’ turn away from its natural resources toward artifice continued throughout the twentieth century. Following its incorporation as a city 1905, Las Vegas experienced great expansion aided in part by the burgeoning railroad industry (Gottdiener, Collins and Dickens, 2-3). In the 1930s, with neighboring California as the home to a sprouting Hollywood flush with money and celebrity, the Las Vegas region saw even more tremendous growth, reflected in both the city’s population and economy. Concomitant with this expansion, the city legalized gambling in 1931. This key development in the growth of the city allowed the local government to regulate

illegal ventures already in place while simultaneously generating income from gaming licenses (Moehring 20). Over the next several decades, casinos popped up all over the city. With the boom of casinos brought an excess of entertainment. Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Jimmy Durante, and Lena Horne (to name a few) headlined Las Vegas acts. One of the most popular performances in Las Vegas, and one that has regularly been compared to Blue Man Group, also exemplifies the excess associated with Las Vegas: Cirque du Soleil.

Though Cirque du Soleil has been performing in Las Vegas periodically for more than twenty years, the company's beginnings are not unlike Blue Man Group's. Founded in 1984 to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Jacque Cartier's discovery of Canada, Cirque du Soleil was initially support with financial assistance by the Quebec government, performing in eleven cities during its first year ("*Cirque du Soleil* history"). The upstart circus began performing environmentally, just as Blue Man Group did with *Funeral for the Eighties* and *Club Nowhere*. Once Cirque du Soleil became more popular, the group toured internationally, which lead to a ten-year contract with Mirage Resorts for the company's first permanent production, *Mystère*, at the Treasure Island Hotel in Las Vegas in 1993 (Bennett 419).³⁶ Two more resident productions opened in Sin City during 1998, firmly establishing Cirque du Soleil as a not-to-be-missed Las Vegas experience. Perhaps Cirque du Soleil's most impressive accomplishment in Las Vegas prior to Blue Man Group's arrival there was the opening of *O*, a mammoth theatrical water circus. Performing in the Bellagio Hotel and Resort's 1,800-seat proscenium theatre, the onstage

³⁶ Looking at Cirque du Soleil and Blue Man Group together, it is not difficult to see that after both groups had successful tours, they both opened permanent productions: Cirque du Soleil at the Treasure Island Hotel and Blue Man Group at the Astor Place Theatre. Both have also recorded and released music albums.

action resides primarily in a 1.5 million-gallon, 25-foot deep pool that measures 140 by 78 feet (Albrecht 128). Such excessive production needs meant that it took three years of planning, designing, and rehearsals before the show opened. Blue Man Group, likewise, opened its production at an established hotel and casino, making it the largest theatrical venture the organization sought out on a long-term basis.

Because both Blue Man Group and Cirque du Soleil are modern-day iterations of more traditional versions of vaudeville and the circus, respectively, and because Cirque du Soleil was founded earlier, Blue Man Group often draws comparisons to the postmodern Canadian circus. Once Blue Man Group set off for Las Vegas, the comparisons were more apparent. Both groups had small-scale beginnings compared to their later success, both crafted their performance spaces to fit their specific needs, and both had productions running in various cities. In spite of the similarities, Blue Man Group's principal co-founders have made efforts to distance themselves from Cirque du Soleil. In an interview, Matt Goldman proclaimed that Blue Man Group is "very different from going to Cirque de (sic) Soleil, where you can be dazzled, but at the end of the day it was all spectacle" ("Blue, But Happy"). Goldman's dismissal of Cirque du Soleil's work could be interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek comment, since both groups share similar career trajectories, and emphasize the spectacle in certain live segments. If, however, taken at face value, Goldman's condemnation is disappointing, suggesting that Blue Man Group's excessive productions are more substantial or superior to Cirque du Soleil's. The choice to perform for larger audiences and sell more merchandise is a move that Cirque du Soleil had made years before. Blue Man Group was simply following in the footsteps of its predecessor. Blue Man Group, then, used Cirque du Soleil as a corporate template, if unintentionally. Now that the

organization had a kind of roadmap to expand its brand, it would take on its biggest venture yet: Las Vegas.

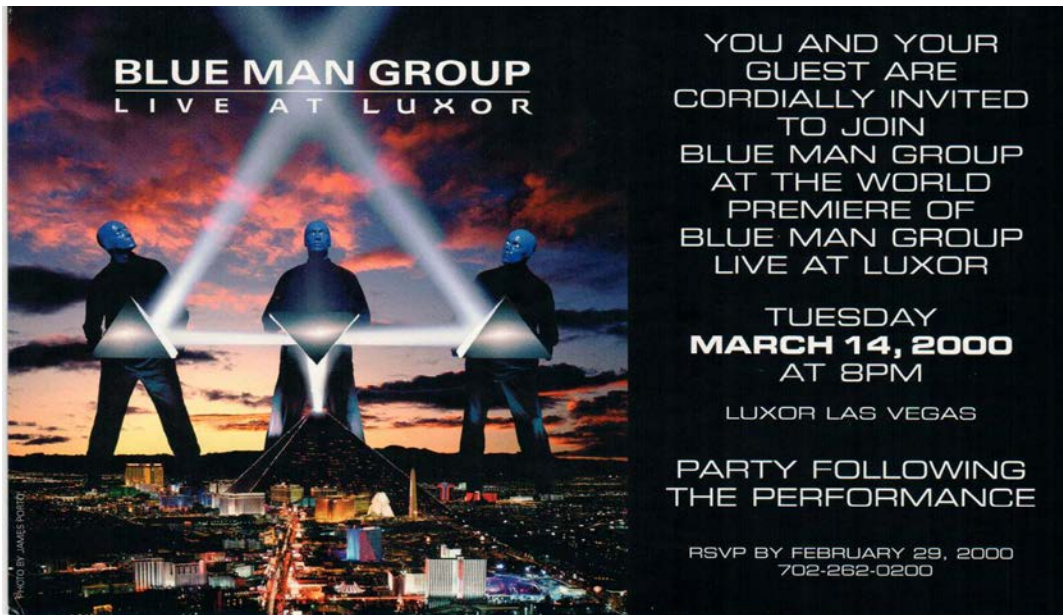
- “Not the Theater You’re Used to”: Blue Man Group Opens in Las Vegas

The opening of the Blue Man Group production in Las Vegas may have happened in 2000, but Mike Weatherford notes that the co-founders had been courted to open a production there as early as 1994; however, those early offers “didn’t feel right” (“Working Blue”). In that same article, Wink goes on to note that ““(w)e know what we can do and also what we can’t do.”” It seems likely that the group had concerns regarding the size and scope of typical Las Vegas productions. For example, Cirque du Soleil’s Las Vegas productions typically seat well over 1000. Conversely, throughout the first fifteen years of its existence, Blue Man Group often eschewed larger theatres for more intimate venues, including when it moved into the Astor Place Theatre. Rob Walker notes that Blue Man Group fielded offers to perform in a large theatre, but opted for the more modest Astor Place Theatre. According to Walker, “Blue Man Group had shied away from Broadway because they didn’t feel they could do a show that would be suitably impressive in such a huge space” (“The Business of Blue Man”).³⁷ Clearly, the decision makers in Blue Man Group changed their minds by 1999, when the Las Vegas production was in development, as the theatre space at the Luxor Hotel seated 1,250 guests. The fact that Blue Man Group had been invited to open a resident production there, in a space that size, indicates that the organization had become a successful brand that would appeal to a mainstream audience.

³⁷ It is important to note that a Broadway theatre space generally seats at least 500 patrons for it to be considered a Broadway production. Several seat at least 1,000 spectators, and most current Broadway houses seat more than that.

As explicated in chapter five, the acquisition of the recording studio in 1997, gave the organization space with which to experiment and develop new material, and in turn changed the group's future. This new space where Blue Man Group could explore new ideas likely prompted the organization to consider opportunities to connect with larger audiences. Wink acknowledged that he wanted to make such a connection, while simultaneously taking a risk. In an interview, he remarked, "[y]ou get to the point where [you ask], are we just going to continue to open in 500-seat theaters' in hip cities such as San Francisco? [. . .] Or are we going to put our asses on the line? It's a different kind of risk" (qtd. in "Working Blue"). Wink's reference to opening productions in "hip cities" is most likely directed toward the group's then-current productions in Boston and Chicago; at the time of the interview, Blue Man Group did not have a resident production in San Francisco. But more to the point, it seems to call attention to the potential to perform for more people outside of "hip cities," create more fans, and generate more revenue for the organization. Blue Man Group actively sought out an opportunity to bring its work to the masses instead of a small subset of people in a hip city.

Instead of opening in another "hip" city, Blue Man Group decided to target Las Vegas. Coincidentally, or perhaps because of the overture, an executive with Mandalay Resorts approached the organization about opening a show at his resort ("The Business of Blue Man"). While Blue Man Group pursued this option it ultimately decided to open a production at the Luxor Hotel instead. The Luxor was built in the early 1990s and officially opened in 1993 ("Luxor Hotel"). It, like other casinos and hotels in Las Vegas, is known for its size, decadence, and excess. Jeffrey Cass observes that "[l]ike many of the recent megahotels, the Luxor stands as a Disneyesque theme park": a 100,000 square foot casino, 20,000 square foot of meeting space, and 4,474 rooms on thirty floors (Cass 242-43). As is the resort that houses it, everything from



Advertisements for Blue Man Group's Las Vegas production.

Photo by James Porto, Courtesy of Blue Man Group.

the Blue Man Group performance space was much larger and more excessive than in previous productions.

In their cover story on the organization for *Entertainment Design*, David Barbour, David Johnson, and Ellen Lampert-Gréaux observe that one set piece -- the table that rolls on and off for “The Feast” -- is “comparable to the size of the entire stage of the Astor Place Theatre” (41). The scenery and props were custom-built for the Las Vegas production so that they would be of larger sizes than those used in the other resident productions. The band in the new production was larger than in New York, and had to be split up into two different sections (Barbour, Johnson and Lampert-Gréaux 41). Along with these changes in production came alterations to the content. Richard Zoglin notes in *Time* that “[a] third of the material is new” (2000, 67). Though he does not elaborate on what was new and what had been removed from previous productions, Zoglin’s larger point is that this is a new Blue Man Group, one that sought to appeal to attendees of all ages and backgrounds. Vicki Goldberg, however, argues that the new content had less to do with evolving material and more to do with excising “in-jokes for the downtown New York crowd” (2000, AR5). Recognizing that such content would likely fall flat for a largely tourist audience, the group replaced this material with music and spectacle. Such changes not only impact the onstage show, but a shift in Blue Man Group’s ethos. Although it is not imperative that the organization keep inside jokes that solely those who live in New York would understand, the changes nonetheless demonstrate that Blue Man Group was acquiescing in order to appeal to a mainstream fan base.

Necessarily, the ticket prices for the Las Vegas mounting also expanded. When the production opened, the seat closest to the stage for the Las Vegas production was \$10 more than its New York counterpart (“Visually stunning Blue Man Group just what city needs”). This increase in pricing may have been unavoidable since the organization was financing the Las Vegas production itself. Weatherford states that the group was funding the new mounting

entirely on its own, with only marketing cost covered by the Mandalay Resort Group (“Working Blue”). Though there was a shared partnership, Blue Man Group had to plan on high costs to prepare the production. It is not known exactly how much the production cost to mount, but since it was the largest production the group had undertaken to that point, it stands to reason that the mounting may also have been the most expensive. In an effort to cover the enormous production costs, Blue Man Group pursued its options to capitalize on what had become the Blue Man brand via merchandising. Apparel, postcards, collectable programs, coffee mugs, and more, all adorned with the Blue Man Group brand, as well as original paintings—made during the performance—were for sale in the group’s store. The Luxor perpetuated the corporatization of Blue Man Group by using images of Blue Men on the key cards and poker chips in its hotel and casino. Blue Man Group had come a long way from its avant-garde roots, going so far as to put the Blue Man’s face on money—poker chips may have little cash value outside of casinos, but their worth at certain gambling establishments hold the same meaning as American currency.

Blue Man Group began this altered production with open preview performances in February 2000. The show officially opened in March to largely positive reviews. Remarking on both the impact of the audience and the demands of the performers, John Katsilometes wrote that “the audience never stops smiling. It’s a free-flowing performance executed with machinelike precision” (“Blues in the Night”). Weatherford alleviates some presumed anxiety when he points out that “Blue Man Group isn’t as avant-garde or off-putting as the trademark skullcaps and cobalt-blue greasepaint of its three silent stars would suggest.” He goes on to describe the production as “so darn funny” and declares that the organization is “just what the city needs.”



Photograph of a \$5 poker chip from Blue Man Group's stint at the Luxor Hotel and Casino.

Photo courtesy of the author.

He also, however, questions the production's sustainability in a place like Las Vegas. "Not everyone is going to be enamored of the aggressive, persistently percussive music" ("Visually stunning Blue Man Group just what city needs"). Zoglin, on the other hand, suggests that, with Blue Man Group's arrival, Las Vegas "gets a little hipper" (2000, 67). Perhaps the most negative of the mainstream reviews comes from Joe Delaney, who wrote in the *Las Vegas Sun* that the 100 minute long performance is "too long by 20 minutes" ("Blue Man Group is good, 'illegitimate theater'"). Though relatively minor amongst mostly glowing comments, Delaney's comment suggests that Blue Man Group's work had already reached the apex of its growth potential.

Perhaps the most noteworthy review for the Las Vegas production ran in *Variety*. Phil Gallo states that the group "deserves applause" for its new production ("Review: 'Blue Man

Group”). Gallo finds the mounting a fresh perspective on theatre in Las Vegas, as it is a deviation from much of the city’s entertainment—he derisively mentions “dancing girls and white tigers.” He goes on to give the organization a backhanded compliment on the new production: “The show draws on conceits first explored by performance artists in the 1960s and ’70s, when their every statement and movement had political, sexual or social motivations. Blue Man Group’s act is devoid of any of that pretense” (“Review: ‘Blue Man Group’”). The group’s earliest public performances, of course, were overtly political, but much of that critique had obviously dissipated by the opening of the Las Vegas production. Gallo’s comments appear to be a testament to Blue Man Group’s willingness to avoid any whiff of controversy or challenging content for an audience comprised largely of tourists looking to enjoy themselves; he later describes the show as “the best light-hearted diversion anyone could possibly want.” Gallo’s charge that the piece was “devoid” of “social motivation” is not entirely accurate. The Las Vegas mounting apparently made social critiques about technology and human interaction, but those critiques are not clarified. Moreover, critiquing an overly-saturated media culture is an easy mark, and might be viewed as hypocritical when the artists doing so rely on up-to-date technology for its performances. For the organization’s part, however, it has regularly poked fun at the culture from which it emerged, and did so in a critical yet wink-and-nudge approach, acknowledging their participation in such a culture. The production may have been less political than previous iterations, but it followed other productions that presented some social commentary. The message, however, was (and remains) less searing or critical as it was in early performances like *Funeral for the Eighties*. Of course, Gallo commends the organization for avoiding political material. That becomes all the more complicated, however, when he points out that “varying audience responses at the show caught suggested that it was soaring over some

gamblers' heads" ("Review: 'Blue Man Group'"). Again, it is unclear which segments may have soared over some gamblers' heads, but it seems that the organization likely anticipated concerns such as those Gallo mentions.

One aspect of the move to Las Vegas that was no doubt a benefit to the group was its proximity to Hollywood. In a 2001 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mimi Avins reports that part of Blue Man Group's five-year contract at the Luxor included a clause that would allow them to perform in Los Angeles twelve weeks a year ("True Blue to an Artistic Vision"). While Avins does not elaborate on this contractual detail, her implication is that Blue Man Group was expanding. At one point she mentions the possibility of a tour, which happened in 2003. One significant way for the organization to expand would be exposure to television and film producers and executives in Hollywood. Having the option to perform up to three months a year in Los Angeles must have been alluring to the principal co-founders, since as noted above they were financing the expensive Las Vegas production themselves. Goldman explained in 2008, "Vegas was a gamble. The theater had twelve hundred seats. We did 10 shows a week, but for the first six months, the theater was half empty" (112). Goldman does not directly address it, but the underlying assumption is that Blue Man Group's overhead was so great for the Las Vegas production that having half of the seats empty was problematic for its future.

The larger concern, more than cash flow, was what the move to Las Vegas meant for Blue Man Group's brand, its position in the world of theatre and entertainment. The organization had previously been on the cutting-edge of cultural and political critique with its early performances. As it progressed, however, so did the group's move away from its avant-garde beginnings. By entering the fray of Las Vegas, which is associated with spectacle and entertainment more so than with avant-garde theatre or political commentary, Blue Man Group

had made a decision to pursue more fans and, in turn money. The organization was shying further away from its avant-garde roots and seeking a broader appeal. Though one might argue that this was always the intent of Blue Man Group's founders, that possibility seems unlikely, given the ardent political and social critique in the group's early work such as *Funeral for the Eighties*.

As I mentioned previously, Blue Man Group initially struggled to sell tickets for the Las Vegas production. As noted above, Goldman remarked that "for the first six months, the theater was half empty" (112). Blue Man Group had already altered its work considerably to play Las Vegas. If the production were to fail, would it return to its avant-garde roots in New York? That was never a factor, as the group's fortunes changed once the Blue Men started appearing in national television commercials. The ads, however, were not for Blue Man Group. They were for the computer company Intel.

- "One of the Biggest Ad Buys at the Time:" Blue Man Group's Advertisements for Intel

Once Blue Man Group had achieved a profile as a theatre company seen as unique, the organization began receiving business offers: television specials, films, theme park rides, international tours, and an inquiry about the Blue Man's ability to rap ("True Blue to an Artistic Vision"). Several corporations sought out the Blue Man to promote a variety of products, from M&M's, Tic Tacs, and Life Savers, to antacids and an American Express Blue card. Blue Man Group did not accept any of these offers.³⁸ As Goldman remembered in 2006, "we wouldn't

³⁸ Though Goldman does not volunteer when the organization began fielding offers to do advertisements for other products, in 2006 he stated that "we would get dozens and dozens of those offers a year" (qtd. in Lacher 2006b, 26).

have a meeting. That's not who we are. That's not how we want to be out there in the world" (qtd. in Lacher 2006b, 26). Evidently, the principal co-founders changed their minds regarding how they wanted "to be out there in the world," since the organization ultimately accepted an offer to promote a product. Walker notes that "a few years after the Chicago show opened," in approximately 2000, Intel was one of the companies to contact the organization with an endorsement deal. ("The Business of Blue Man"). At that point, Blue Man Group declined the offer. Intel reached out to the group two more times, and again those overtures were rebuffed. It was not until Blue Man Group was preparing to move to Las Vegas that the principal co-founders began to consider seriously the offer from Intel. Knowing that the finances of the Las Vegas production would be tremendous, they at last agreed on terms to television commercials with Intel; it was a decision that would make both companies more famous and profitable than either likely envisioned.

Intel is a company dating back to 1968 that designs and manufactures digital technology platforms, usually consisting of a microprocessor and chipset ("Intel Corp"). These platforms are often used in personal computers, automobiles, factory systems, and medical devices. In the late 1990s, Intel was working hard to develop the latest technology in computing. It had invested billions of dollars into making its technology faster. To do this, Intel launched the "Bunny People" advertising campaign, in which factory workers dressed in protective gear danced around and celebrated the development of the Pentium II microprocessor. With the development of Pentium III, Intel wanted a new campaign; Blue Man Group became the centerpiece of that campaign when it at last accepted the company's offer.

Once the principal co-founders decided to consider Intel's offer, they agreed on some key terms under which they would appear in the ads: all of the spots had to feature the words "Blue

Man Group,” the principal co-founders would be actively involved, and that they would commit to the project only after the storyboards had been approved (“The Business of Blue Man”). These are significant negotiations for the ads; they effectively turned the commercials into spots promoting Blue Man Group as much as Pentium III, if not more so. Intel agreed and Blue Man Group began working on television commercials for a product that had nothing to do with the organization’s work to that point. In the spot called “Paint,” the three Blue Men (played by Goldman, Stanton and Wink) use various forms of painting—a roller brush, a catapult to fire paint, and even a Blue Man covered in paint—onto a white wall to create the signature “III” that became associated with Pentium III. The Blue Man’s familiar tubes can be heard in the background as the Blue Men make their gooey mess. Intel supported the release of the Pentium III chips with \$300 million in billboard, newspaper, television and radio advertising (“Intel Corp.”). Obviously that covered a wide array of ads in various mediums, and it does not clarify how much Intel spent on the television ads, but it nevertheless demonstrates that the company had an incredible amount of capital on the shoulders of the Blue Men promoting the computer chip. Just as the Blue Men were thrusting paint onto a white wall, Intel was thrusting the Blue Man into American consciousness.

The advertisements changed Blue Man Group almost instantly. Goldman notes that the national campaign was broadcast during major events:

That was in 2000. It was one of the biggest ad buys at the time: The ads were shown at the Grammy Awards, the basketball playoffs, the World Series. Every month, a new one aired. We went from 10 shows a week at 50 percent capacity to 14 shows at 100 percent. (112)

Problems that arose from the lagging ticket sales that Blue Man Group experienced upon its opening in Las Vegas were resolved by the ads. The group was enjoying more success than it ever had. Though the organization had before the creation of these ads appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, recorded an album and opened three long-running productions in major American cities, the ads placed Blue Man Group in a different category, as they would appear in front of television viewers regularly for weeks at a time. This resulted in the Las Vegas production recouping its initial \$7-million investment before it had been running for one year (“True Blue to an Artistic Vision”). Intel, it appears, became the most important factor in Blue Man Group’s success up to 2001. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of these ads promoting Pentium III, however, is that Blue Man Group apparently used Macintosh products instead of Intel. According to The Slip-Up Archive, a website devoted to mistakes and bloopers, Apple presented Blue Man Group as an example of how a company could implement Apple’s technology in a useful way. The webpage detailing Blue Man Group’s use of Macintosh products is no longer available, unfortunately. What remains clear is that Blue Man Group was not solely promoting Intel in these commercials because of how central the company’s technology was to the group’s productions. Instead, it seems that BMG was using Intel to its own end: publicity on a national level.

Success for the organization meant money, fame, and prestige. With it, the group’s avant-garde credibility disappeared. It seems that Blue Man Group accepted that likelihood once it opened in Las Vegas (or possibly even recorded an album), but with the Pentium III commercials, Blue Man Group could no longer reasonably be considered on the margins. It was firmly in the mainstream, and benefiting from appearances on television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. The previously humble group that charged no fee to attend their performances had

embraced the glitz of Las Vegas, its grandeur, replete with state-of-the-art technology. Once the Las Vegas production was comfortably running and had recouped its investment, the next few years would find Blue Man Group releasing a second album, *The Complex*, in 2003 and touring in support of that album. Stanton claims that, up to the point of 2002-2003, the organization did not have grand long-term plans: ““We’ve known we wanted to be in it for the long haul, but we’ve never really known more than 18 or 24 months out”” (qtd. In “The Business of Blue Man”). Stanton may be somewhat accurate when he states that the group does not know what will happen more than 18 to 24 months away, but as early as 1999 Blue Man Group was considering a rock concert tour, which it realized in 2003. Stanton’s comments, therefore, seem both disingenuous and artificial. Blue Man Group opened productions in New York, Boston, and Chicago with no fixed closing date, suggesting that the shows could (and hopefully would) run for lengthy periods. The Las Vegas production also had a five-year contract with the Luxor. The Intel commercials made sure that Blue Man Group would be running for years to come, though no longer would the group be minoritarian. Blue Man Group would be courting not only a more general audience base, but would cater its work solely for a popular fan base. The days of an avant-garde Blue Man Group were over, replaced by a multi-national corporation intent on marketing computer products and the Las Vegas strip to a wide swath of fans. Instead of occupying a place on the fringes of culture, Blue Man Group was firmly in the mainstream.

CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters demonstrate, Blue Man Group's shift from avant-garde theatre to popular entertainment in multiple mediums was neither seamless nor marked by one particular event. Some could argue that the group's avant-garde status was first compromised once the permanent New York production opened, while others may claim that it was the studio album that most monumentally marked that shift. Still others might reasonably recognize the commercials for Pentium II as the significant if not final blow. Regardless of when or how, as I have argued, it is clear that the Blue Man Group of the twenty-first century avoids the overt political and cultural critiques that it once actively pursued when it was a purveyor of the avant-garde theatre movement in New York. It is no coincidence that the organization grew exponentially as it created less searing material. To be sure, as the frequency of appearances on television and radio made the group more appealing to a larger faction of theatre attendees, the political content that marked its earlier work all but disappeared.

Since 2001, Blue Man Group has released two more albums, appeared on numerous television programs such as *Scrubs*, *The Apprentice*, and *Wheel of Fortune*, toured internationally, opened long-running productions in Berlin, Tokyo, and Toronto, developed a children's exhibit that appeared in several museums, and established a presence on Norwegian Cruise Lines. In the process, it has edged even further into the mainstream and away from its avant-garde roots. While avant-garde theatre is not intrinsically superior or more pure than popular fare (e.g. Broadway), it often interrogates commonly accepted cultural norms that are exploitative, unfair, or offensive. A theatre abandoning its political and social critique in favor of drawing in a larger, more mainstream audience—and thereby becoming the very thing it once

questioned—is disappointing. Blue Man Group once offered critiques of societal norms and expectations, dealing with the aesthetics and origins of art to drug abuse and American exceptionalism. Such an approach would be unwelcome in children’s museum exhibitions or on prime time network television.

In the first chapter, I note that Blue Man Group’s formative years included informal experiments, regular salons, and environmental performances free of charge to any spectators. With its placement on the fringes and its powerful cultural commentary, the group was firmly a part of the avant-garde theatre scene. As the group grew and sought greater exposure through opening a permanent production in New York, and in turn excising significant artists and producers from its narrative, it moved further away from the avant-garde. By 1995, the group was looking to expand to another city and grow its brand, and chose Boston. That same year, *Boston Globe* staff writer Michael Saunders envisioned a different future for the group when he declared that, *Tubes* “requires a certain intimacy, [. . .] there’s no danger the Blue Man will hit the arena circuit” (“Blue in your face”). The subsequent moves that the organization carried out proved Saunders was mistaken: in 2003 Blue Man Group headlined an arena-scale, national rock concert tour, appearing in over sixty U. S. cities at venues holding upwards of 10,000 attendees.

By the time that Blue Man Group recorded its first album in 1999, the group had moved even further away from the avant-garde and did not appear to have interest in making more content that critically examined mainstream social or political cultures. With the opening of the Las Vegas production and appearances on television commercials, Blue Man Group had entirely abandoned its vanguard sensibilities. This attempt to appeal to a mainstream audience in America’s entertainment capital was followed in 2005, when Blue Man Group’s touring productions became a part of Clear Channel Entertainment’s Broadway Across America season

(Vickery, 283). Ironically, Blue Man Group's productions have never appeared on Broadway, so the group's inclusion in *Broadway Across America* was, at best, wishful thinking. The organization continues to present itself in ways that omit major portions of its history, benefit from its former avant-garde status, and are occasionally factually inaccurate. As of this writing in 2015, Blue Man Group shows no signs of changing its approach to public perception or embracing the avant-garde once more. Further, based on its massive growth and strategic business choices, Blue Man Group will likely not return to its avant-garde position, critiquing governmental and social politics from the fringes. Blue Man Group is part of the mainstream culture it condemned.

As I conclude this study, it will be useful to consider the artistic and economic moves that Blue Man Group makes in the coming years. I suspect that it will keep in line with the group's path in recent years and continue to embrace a mainstream audience. I have focused on the group's evolution from the avant-garde to the popular, though there are myriad other ways to examine Blue Man Group. I have not thoroughly interpreted the group's recorded music, including its television and film scores. I have also not focused considerably on the group's international performances. Both are valuable avenues of inquiry, and are clearly efforts on the part of the organization to grow the Blue Man brand and move it further into the mainstream and away from the avant-garde, but these topics fall outside the timeline of my study. I hope that future scholars take up the complex work of Blue Man Group and investigate other aspects of its history, art, and labor practices. Just as multiple voices contribute to Blue Man Group's aesthetic and business decisions, so should there be multiple interpretations of the organization's work on and off stage.

Blue Man Group has entertained countless individuals over the years, myself included. As the group continues to entertain existing and new fans, it is important to recognize how the organization has changed over the years and what those changes mean. Blue Man Group eschews the cultural and political critiques that it once reveled in, and doing so helped turn the Blue Man into one of the most pervasive theatre icons in both the United States and internationally. The group did so, however, at the expense of its reputation as a purveyor of avant-garde theatre. That reputation may be gone, but the organization remains, profiting from a culture it once condemned. Though unlikely, the group may return to its avant-garde status, realizing the potential for critique it once showed. By adopting such behavior, Blue Man Group could do what few popular theatres have attained: exemplify an avant-garde spirit while entrenched in the mainstream.

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