

a m i  
b l u e ?

You've got to open wide and play hard  
to learn the ways of Blue Man Group.

STORY: NEIL GLADSTONE PHOTOS: CHARLIE LANGELLA

Scattered before me on a dressing-room table in the basement of the Blue Man Group's training facility are the tools of the trade: a bald cap, theater glue, cuticle scissors, Sea Breeze astringent, Q-tips, Lubriderm, and, of course, a couple of dishes of cobalt grease paint.

Infiltrating the blue brotherhood is not an assignment to take lightly; others have tried, but failed to understand the "nobility" (as one crew member put it) of the Blue Man. What nobility is there in playing surf rock on plastic instruments, spitting paint on a canvas and mocking modern art? That's why I'm half-naked in a room full of strangers—I want answers.

Last year, legions of young men responded to open calls for actors about 6 feet tall, modestly built and adept at drumming. For every thousand or so who audition, one makes the troupe, which now boasts over 30 members nationwide. Luckily, I pretty much fit the physical characteristics and though my downstairs neighbors might disagree, I can keep a beat.

The Blue Man Group's long-running show *Tubes*, which opened in New York 10 years ago (later adding productions in Boston, Chicago and Las Vegas), offers an exhilarating concoction of space-age world-beat music, avant-garde performance art and high-minded parlor tricks. In a series of vignettes, three bald and blue mute aliens attempt to comprehend the culture that created Twinkies, rock and modern art. In one scene, for instance, the blue men douse a member of the audience with paint and then make a painting by swinging the unsuspecting volunteer against a large white canvas. Over the course of the evening, Jell-O flies through the air, puréed banana streams out of actors' bodies and reams of crepe paper engulf the theater. It's a thinking man's slapstick circus, and who wouldn't want to be one of the ringmasters?

Transforming into a Blue Man isn't as simple as icing your face with makeup, though. The process usually takes eight weeks of learning how to drum Cap'n Crunch between your molars, catch paintballs in your mouth and play "Peter Gunn Theme" on plastic tubes. Thankfully, a childhood of gnashing sugarcoated cereal and drumming pencils has prepared me for this day, so my half-day crash course should almost bring me up to speed. The makeup to make a cast member bald and blue costs about \$50 (which may explain why ticket prices for the show are \$39 and up) even though I've already got a shaved head and arguably don't require the \$22 bald cap.

A stylist shaves the back of my skull to ensure that the glue adheres well and hands me a black bodystocking known as a mantard. "Is there supposed to be anything between me and my mantard?" I fret. "No."

Though the other two men suiting up today, four-year blue man veteran Steve White and trainer Chris Bowen, ease into their second skin, I sheepishly duck into the bathroom. Wrestling with this spandex turns into something between experimental dance and a Nutty Professor taffy pull. And that word—mantard. It sounds like the TV adaptation of *Rainman* starring Bronson Pinchot.

Once wrapped in the human sausage casing, I begin interrogating cohorts about my new identity. "The Blue Man is interested in everything that happens outside of him," explains Bowen. White, who flew to New York from Seattle five years ago to audition, adds: "They must have a certain charisma and openness and an availability to what's going on around them and to have a presence about them even when they're standing neutral."

It's been years since I vlogged, so instead of showing off my chops, I follow White's instruction to brush a thick layer of opaque glue (that looks unnervingly like Elmer's) onto my scalp. The dresser assists in the intricate bald cap application ceremony. When it's done, I feel like I just got a facelift from a plastic surgeon who advertises on the subway. Doesn't getting bald



THE BLUE REVUE: PHIL STANTON, CHRIS WINK, MATT GOLDMAN.

and blue five times a week, year after year, ruin your skin? "Not at all," maintains White.

Mid-transformation, there's a knock on the dressing room door. In walk the three original blue men: Chris Wink, Phil Stanton and Matt Goldman. Wink's translucent eyes make him seem a bit otherworldly even without makeup. There's a wire extending from Stanton's jacket to an earpiece, supposedly for a cell phone, but it may be for contacting the Mothership. The round-shouldered Goldman could be David Brenner's younger brother (though Brenner is more *Love Boat* than *Mothership*). Goldman clutches my cranium and consecrates: "You have a great head, man." The Blue Pooba has anointed me. We will reconvene

when my instruction is complete so I may learn more about the Blue Man's latest creation, *Audio* (Virgin), an album of Blue music.

The grease paint must be applied in generous scoops since it will sweat off during training. In the meantime, everything I touch turns to blue—my tape recorder, notepad, backpack—like I'm some leper Smurf. After the eyeliner is applied and crevices filled in using Q-tips, my face doesn't appear as otherworldly as I hoped. My forehead isn't quite oval enough to pass as the Martian ambassador; I look more like Dr. Freeze.

"You're our burliest blue man yet," whispers the dresser as he hands me the black turtleneck and lederhosen that give the Blue Man a streamlined appearance. I think I know what he's implying: Cover up that mantard, pronto.

Upstairs in the white training room, three boxes of Cap'n Crunch are lined up on the floor in front of three "PVC Instruments" that could be pipe organs fashioned from gargantuan ziti. There's also a canvas on an easel, boombox, TV and a handful of chairs for members of the crew who want to see an outside agent naive enough to put himself through this theatrical hazing.

As in life, first I must learn to walk, and before I walk, I must learn to stand. Heels must be kicked out a little, so feet are parallel. Like a gunslinger about to enter a shootout, hands are at one's side and always at the ready. Mouth closed (it's the difference between a highly advanced telepathic being and Bobo The Blue Wonder Chimp).

"The Blue Man is always looking for something, so that's part of what informs us," explains Bowen. In the world of blue, stage directions sound more like philosophical tenets that were scribbled on the pyramid tomb walls when the brothers from another planet visited long ago. (Do you think it's just a coincidence that in Vegas the Blue Man performs at the Pyramid-shaped Luxor casino?)

"If a Blue Man is going to face someone, he's going to face him head on."

I turn, approximating the elk-like grace of my blue leaders. "There can be a smoothness to your movements," corrects Bowen. Okay, so I look more like Beck doing the robot than an ethereal creature whose body is just transport for his oversized brain. Stage director Randall Jaynes, still wearing the Blue Man jersey from the morning's softball practice, coaches me on the proper stance and mental state. "Very little of Blue Man is an introverted moment, everything is out here," he says, gesturing out to the great beyond about four feet in front of me. "You're not pondering."

The three Blue Men are often referred to as a pack of dogs, not only because they should be ever on the hunt, but also because they're supposed to be one creature with three bodies and therefore the three must always check with one another, no matter what they're doing. As the three of us walk together, slightly arched forward and intrigued, I wonder if the Blue Man is more like an interstellar detective or a Tyrannosaurus Rex with a pe-sized brain.

"What is that? What is that?" prompts Jaynes, our master. Like a pack of pointers, we glance at

Everything I touch turns to blue, like I'm some leper Smurf.

each other and then off into the unknown, and then back again. When navigating this foreign world, the Blue Man must be careful, because every decision is a matter of life or death. "It's like that moment when Indiana Jones has got the sandbag in one hand and the idol in the other," urges Jaynes. Instead of nabbing a priceless ancient artifact, I'm grabbing a box of Cap'n Crunch, er, a potentially poisoned box of Cap'n Crunch. "Ask the tough question with your look," commands Jaynes "Are you with me?" As much as I fear that I may momentarily be asked to pirouette, my mind becomes more centered, my posture straighter, my grease paint runnier from nervous sweat. For years I've been staring at people, dumbfounded; now I'm finally among others who stare right back, and we're all searching for something, but we're not sure what.

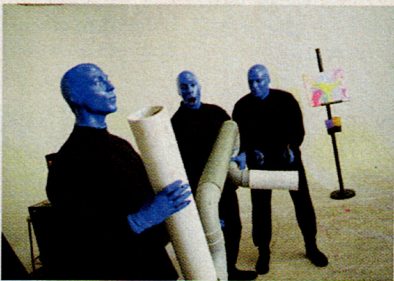
"We go through great pains to create something that's pretty subtle," Wink reflects later. "If you don't look carefully, you'll just think it's robotic. If you look carefully, you'll see something that's intensely human." Without language, it's as if all emotion is distilled into a binary code of intrigue and wonder that travels from the depths of my soul to the space between my eyebrows. And what better way to illustrate the depth of my soul than by swallowing paintballs? Here's where the high-minded parlor tricks come in.

In *Tubes*, one Blue Man tosses three paint balls to another one standing about 15 feet away. Each pigment package is then spit in a colored stream across a canvas in affectionate send-up of Jackson Pollack's drip paintings, which accentuate artistic intent over delicate brushwork.

"Now when you bite down on the paintball, you're going to taste something hideous in your mouth, but it doesn't matter because you're so focused on what you're doing you're not going to notice it," warns White, who'll be serving up a condom filled with non-toxic tawny. I flash back to my year playing Little League as a second string right-fielder. Pretty much the best I could do was stop the ball from hitting my face or watch it fly over my head—catching it was out of the question. I've done okay with the practice paintballs, but the real thing comes with the warning, "Okay babe, we drop 'em, they break." I shudder at the thought of a paint-splattered forehead, even though I'm soaked in grease paint. I give the pitcher a slight nod to let him know I'm set. Here's the windup. It's a highball...ooh, off the cheek. My only saving grace is that it doesn't break on the linoleum. The second chance, it's up, a fastball, closer, closer (does anyone else hear "Chariots Of Fire"?), it's in, it's good. I'm a spastic golden retriever with a Frisbee, not knowing what to do next. I bite down and suddenly there's a noxious yolk rolling over my tongue that tastes like it's made out of paste. I guess I'm not concentrating.

"Now you've got something, what are you going to do with it?" spurs Jaynes. I turn around, pick the canvas off the easel and let out a blast like Dizzy on a high-C. The result is a horrendous mustard stain on white tablecloth, yet I am ecstatic. The peanut gallery whoops and I triumphantly hoist my Grammy. I gulp 'n' spit two out of the next five tosses and my batting average has the stands on their feet.

Already running low on time, we quickly take position behind the "PVC Instruments." The original Blue Men got the idea for these *Battlestar Galactica* xylophones while watching an Australian musician whack the ends of two plastic



tubes. They developed that nigger into a two-octave instrument that creates pizzicato melodies resembling rubber bands stretched across the Milky Way. Mastering this celestial harp doesn't require decades of silent contemplation or severe brow-beating by a grey-haired sadist, just the loving tap of a flat rubber mallet. Within moments I'm smacking out "Peter Gunn Theme" in a musical Whack-A-Mole. Okay, so perhaps I'm not exactly a maestro—who knows how all of the notes are arranged—but if it's possible to get a cool surf tune out of an instrument with five minutes of "watch me," said instrument should best be marketed to FAO Schwartz (with a hefty profit margin). Alas, this is art, and each one of the "PVC Instruments" is crafted by hand. Tuning each note requires adding or subtracting just the right amount of tubing.

For the new album, *Audio*, several other instruments were added to the Blue Man's orchestra, including the 12-foot-plus "Tubulum," which bellows long, low, didgeridoo-like tones with the wallop of a drumstick. The "Drumbone" creates sliding notes and the boom of the eight-foot tall "Big Drum" makes Kodo percussion pale in comparison.

As heard on *Audio*, Blue Man music melds tribal, surf and industrial rock 'n' roll. The pliant tones of the Tubulum and PVC instruments fold into burbling, synthesizer-like repetitive motifs while the larger-than-life tom-toms add earthy rumbles recalling music from Africa and the Far East. The slightly more familiar scrappy and twangy ruminations of electric guitar and Chapman Stick distill the percolating, expansive mixture into exalted spaghetti-Western pop that could easily leap into service as the soundtrack for silver screen sword fights or drag races.

Wink describes their music as an expedition for the crossroads where the indigenous and industrial meet: "There's a tribal feel we're trying to get, but not literally."

In some ways, the music is so modern it could be mixed in with drum 'n' bass. Yet Wink figures the sweat gives it spirit: "Someone could use a home computer to make an album with sounds similar to what we're going, but you'll hear the difference, so for us it's still worth it to make these things out of cardboard and plastic."

Perhaps I'm just lightheaded from manically tapping tube tones with a bald cap glued on, but there's a primal joy and release in rapping plastic tubes as if they're bones assembled around a bonfire. I am one with the Blue people, sounding like Brian Eno or Phillip Glass jamming out a Gregorian version of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." In *Tubes*, the drug anthem invokes the specter of '60s art happenings that inspired the founders' early search for a bohemian community, which had all but disappeared by the time they came of age in the '70s. (Wink, Stanton and Goldman are all in their late 30s now.)

Once you have participated in the tone ceremony from the other side of the stratosphere, what else is there to understand, you ask? And the answer comes: The Ritual Of Cheese.

At the start of the toss, I'm not exactly sure why they call it cheese, since the practice seems to involve catching marshmallows in your mouth and then sculpting them into a cone using your lips (it's another modern art joke, alright?). I return to the catcher's stance and those marshmallows start flying rapid fire. Luckily, the gooey wads are easier to catch than paintballs.

When I don't get my lips around them, they stick to my face. As the white goo piles up in and on my cheeks, a gag reflex swells in the back of my throat as if I'm a reluctant participant in a hot dog-eating contest.

"You got plenty of room in there, butt brother," assures White. (Um, I hope the Blue Man isn't expected to fill any other orifices

other than his mouth.) I realize the marshmallows are actually marshmallow-shaped bits of cream cheese and wonder if I should mention I'm lactose intolerant. Not much I can do, though, since any chunk of cheese within feet of me immediately sticks to my lungfish face. Once my jowls are packed as a foaming rabid chipmunk, "It's sculpting time!" I bend over a black pedestal and regurgitate a tower of cheese.

"Make a cone, make a cone," barks the crew. "Shape it, shape it." As my head bobs over the gloppy cylinder, I realize the pictures of this will probably wind up on a food fetish Web page.

The final test? A six-block walk from the training studio to the Astor Theater, where the Blue Man show has run for the better part of the last decade. Never have I been so happy to see two other bald and blue men as when I'm strolling down New York's Lafayette Street being photographed by tourists and, worse, ignored by too-cool hipsters. I am the dermatologically challenged freak, the boy in the blue skin bubble, the embodiment of an oxymoron: the successful performance artist.

"Hey, Blue Man!" shouts a delivery boy on a bicycle. Even with my eyes clouding over from the grease paint and the glue tugging my skin, the effects of blue boot camp are starting to seep beyond my epidermis.

As we're wiping off the layers of makeup, Bowen warns me "You never completely get all the blue off." Although I fear the troupe will circle around me and chant "One of us! One of us!" I wonder if he means that the blue people have a different view of the world.

## A stylist hands me a black bodystocking called a *mantard*, which sounds like the TV adaptation of *Rainman* starring Bronson Pinchot.

Upon rejoining the blue forefathers at the recording studio they built to make the new album, I ask about the blue credo, and the wise blue gurus turn the question back on me.

"What do you see that being?" wonders Wink.

"I'm not sure." I reply, "There seems to be an emphasis on communal effort, losing yourself

and certain phrases keep coming up like, 'Be curious,' 'Be forward,' 'Look at each other,' 'Depend on each other.'"

"When we first started the show, there were elements of Blue Man, but they weren't always consistent," says Wink. "People would come up after the show and say, 'I don't think Blue Man would have done what you just did.' Blue Man had its own inner logic. We just wanted to make sure we followed through and made it consistent."

When performers beyond the original three trained to be blue men, debate began about what the Blue Man would and wouldn't do.

"With all of that discussion about, 'Are you on the track or are we off the track?' we don't even know what the track really is. So, we're constantly trying to have discussions about what the track is."

This from former cater-waiters who used to spend their breaks at elaborate functions wondering things like, "What would it be like if waste came out of someone's chest onto the table?" Such notions evolved into metaphorical skits and these skits into an ad-hoc philosophy.

"I recently saw the new Sex Pistols documentary *The Filth And The Fury*," mentions Wink, "And there's one interview in which Johnny Rotten says, 'All we ever wanted to do was tell the truth.' That's all we ever wanted to do."

So, underneath the bald cap and blue paint, Blue Man is just a bohemian with a hippie heart looking for the punk rock "truth." Somewhere along the way, he found nobility.

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