It’s 10 minutes to show time at a performance of Blue Man Group, and the noise in the theatre is so loud that the audience seems more like a group of revelers at a party than spectators in a theatre.

People are boisterous, anticipation is high, the buzz is electric. By the time the Blue Men appear, the audience is screaming with delight.

It’s a scene repeated most nights in New York, Boston, Chicago, Orlando, Vegas and wherever Blue Man Group is appearing. How often do you see theatre audiences so revved up at the end of most shows, let alone before one has even begun? The decibel level rises as the evening goes on. By the end, the atmosphere is euphoric.

The Blue Man Group experience is unique and not confined to the United States. There are or have been productions in Tokyo, Toronto, and numerous European cities including Berlin, London, and Amsterdam. Millions of people of all ages and nationalities have seen the show, and countless numbers are repeat visitors. Although the off-Broadway production has been around since 1991, the demand for it is still strong and Blue Man Group has heeded the call with this national tour—a tour that features a combination of the Blue Men’s most popular pieces with fresh material created exclusively for this iteration.

Why all the excitement?
It’s impossible to say exactly. Blue Man Group is totally off the grid—a contemporary comedic piece, performed by three silent, bald-and-blue characters who engage in a variety of set pieces ranging from primitive to sophisticated that combine music, comedy, science, technology and mind-boggling creativity. Just as in old-time vaudeville, they have something for everyone.

“We’ve done surveys to figure out who our audience is, and we’ve found that our demographic ranges from eight to 85 years old,” says Puck Quinn, creative director of character development and appearances. “That’s when we know we’re doing something right. A kid can come to the show and just enjoy the rhythm or the mess or the colors or the spectacle. Adults can come and do the exact same thing, but they might also come away with something to think about. When we do our work well, the show succeeds on multiple levels.”

Amid the riot of colors and music, the eating and flying food, are the LED screens displaying sometimes silly, sometimes witty, sometimes thought-provoking messages. There also is a sonorous pre-recorded voice guiding the audience through clever set pieces about a variety of topics such as modern plumbing, technology and choreography.

But the Blue Man Group show is mostly visual and aural—as opposed to oral. The Men are mute by choice. Language is not an issue, so the show travels well to other countries. Beating paint-covered drums and creating cascades of color has visceral appeal in any culture, and the “feast”—in which a member of the audience joins the Blue Men onstage to dine on... a Twinkie—retains its humor and sweetness wherever it plays.

“I think the reason the show works goes back to our ideas about the character,” says Phil Stanton, co-founder of Blue Man Group with Matt Goldman and Chris Wink all those years ago. “It might sound heady to talk about it this way, but the Blue Man is a kernel of humanity or a kind of Everyman. The blue paint gets rid of race and nationality.”

Adds Quinn: “The show deals with topics and issues that are common to every culture: Communication. Sensory overload. Beating music...
and heavy rhythm. Dancing. All of that crosses every border. We have things that we want to say, and the message is there if you want to hear it, but we don’t care if you don’t. We just want everyone to have fun.”

The relationship between the Blue Men and the audience is the most intriguing part of this phenomenon. The audience could be considered an additional—and unpredictable—character. It’s not just that a woman from the audience is selected to appear onstage each night to partake in the “feast,” or that a man is chosen to get “Jelloed” (new verb?) or that viewers in the first few rows are so close to the action that they’re given ponchos to wear in case paint or other stuff lands on them. It’s that the audience response catalyzes the Blue Men. That symbiosis is what fuels the passions of the show’s devoted fans.

“The relationship with the audience is everything,” underscores Matt Goldman, “because at the end of the day, the Blue Man is really just trying to connect. He knows, either intellectually or at gut level, that in order to get to that ecstatic, heightened moment, he must connect with these strangers. That’s why the Blue Man is so respectful [of his viewers]. He wants their trust. It’s all about connection.”

Clearly, Blue Man Group is connecting. Stanton recalls a man who saw the show 70 times (“he wasn’t a weirdo”) and others who’ve seen it 20 or 30 times. “Usually, if people see a play they liked, they’ll tell their friends to go see it,” says Quinn, “but with our show, people want the experience of seeing it with their friends. And that creates energy and intensity from the start…. It’s not a passive experience. It’s more like going to a sporting event.

“I tell people that you don’t really start seeing the layers of the onion peeled back until you see the show for the second or third time. I also think people come back for very specific reasons: they want to really listen to the music or pay attention to a particular moment because they couldn’t quite figure out how it was done. And they come back because they want to see how the show is different from night to night. The other thing is, we change the show. Every couple of years we swap out a whole bunch of material. We want it to be relevant to time and period.”

The national tour should only expand Blue Man Group’s fan base and recidivists will discover a performance quite different from its predecessors.

“We are going to be in large theatres, and that was one of the main impulses for finding another way to deliver a lot of the content,” says Stanton. “We have a new set design, with LED surfaces and LED curtains. It gives the show a completely different look. And we’ve found that we can use the technology to help people focus more.”

The finale—one of Blue Man Group’s most celebrated hallmarks—is now completely new; replacing it, its creators say, took guts.

“We always wanted the show to feel like it was working toward that moment, that ending, when all the things that make us fragmented in the modern world go away and we become one group,” says Stanton. “It’s hinted at in certain places during the show, and that’s what the arc of the evening is about: two cultures encountering each other and realizing by the end that there are no barriers between them.…

“T

here aren’t many places where you can be with strangers and have this shared experience. The new finale has a similar concept, and the same goal: to make the audience look around and encounter other people. Visually, we’re taking it to another level. We hope audiences will find it even more powerful.”

Material for this article is courtesy of the Blue Man Group website.