

Cirque Dreams: Illumination

By Neil Goldberg, Jill Winters & David Scott
At the Hippodrome Theatre through October 17

By Aaron Bell

ILLUMINATION SHOWS ITS BRILLIANCE

The house lights go down in the historic Hippodrome Theatre. We're brought into a fast-paced newscast program when we hear the superbly resonant voice of Onyie Nwachukwu, who plays the Reporter. She tells us that another regular day has just begun, and that the daily occurrences in the "Cirque Dreams: Illumination" world will soon be lighting up the stage.

Although a tad disturbed by her slightly nasal, high-belting, soulful vocals, one comes to appreciate Nwachukwu's stylized singing; it completely fits her fun-loving, scoop-seeking reporter essence. One can't help but appreciate her wonderful articulation and vocal clarity when she serenades us with a fabulously written opening number. This song, "Change," gives us the main idea of the entire show, "If you don't like it, *change your mind*."

One's mind is indeed changed by this sparkly production. The many feats of physical excellence and theatrical genius suggest how everyday life would look with an incredibly heightened sense of imagination. Santiago Rojo's costume design and Betsy Herst's production design bring that concept to life with their explosively colorful and symbolic wardrobes and sets. One sees cast members dressed as animated street cones, traffic lights and construction items. The set uses neon effects to brighten up the town atmosphere.

The characters' relationships with each other and their environment are interesting elements as well. The Reporter's relationship with the Homeless Clown (Martin Lamberti) sparks humorous tension yet helps spread the show's message. Usually, if Lamberti's character goes too far in his enjoyment of the "Illumination" world at other people's expense, the Reporter immediately stops singing and chastises him. The unique bond between the two personalities is crucial to the theme of how one views life's events.

One also appreciates the equally interesting relationships between the ensemble characters while they masterfully perform dance combinations that help the Reporter tell the story. Each stunt is merely a creative exaggeration of otherwise dull things that one might see while walking the streets of a big city. Though none of them sing, the ensemble members' physical stunts, bodily communication and connection to the audience keep the house of the Hippodrome in awe.

Unfortunately, those important relationships aren't always seen, especially when the physical stunts are happening. While the Chair Climber (Andrey Moraru) ascends a mountain of chairs using his immense acrobatic skills, the Dancer (Stelly Rodriguez Vega) is blocked the entire time as she grooves to the lively music supporting Moraru's act. An unmasked view of all the actors while the stunts happen would have been great, but Vega is unblocked for the remainder of the show.

The cast, mainly comprised of gymnasts, aerialists and acrobats from Russia, Mongolia and the United States, build a bridge between athletic sport and performance art and then cross back and forth easily. The costumes, sets and props colorfully complement the grueling body work performed for long intervals of time.

Facial expressions and body language support Lamberti's flawless comic timing. In the "Right to Remain Silent" scene he directs a romantic drama with four members of the audience. Using only his body and a whistle to communicate, Lamberti has the whole Hippodrome in hardy hysterics as he corrects the cast's mistakes. Face and body are the keys to this number, as not a word is said the entire piece; every actor did the scene complete justice using only those tools.

The symbolism in "Illumination" is mind-blowing. Normal objects one would see on the street become animated personalities. Female ensemble members sport orange and white conical gowns to represent street cones. The Traffic Twisters (Uranmandakh Amarsanaa Buyankhishig Ganbaatar Erdenesuvd Ganbaatar and Odgerel Oyunbaatar) are acrobats who wear skintight white leotards and hold up street signs to alter the flow of the vehicles portrayed by the Reporter and other ensemble actors.

Great blue stilts bring construction objects to life. Paul Gonzalez's realistic sound effects—the horn of a taxi, the engine of a speeding car and even the subway rumbling underground—reinforce the bustle-of-a town environment. One can't help but constantly look around the entire stage, as one thing after another is sure to be an attention-grabber.

Though very entertaining, the show is also a bold statement that empowers us everyday city-dwellers to push the envelope and use our imaginations to create a more interesting world around us. If traffic lights and construction sites don't usually spark your interest, they will after this amazing production has brightened the otherwise monotonous frame of daily life. It will also teach adults to keep their imaginations open when facing real-world issues. As a problem-solver and electrifying production, "Cirque Dreams Illumination" is a show not to be missed.

By Bri'Anna Horne

CIRQUE DREAMS IN THE CITY

"Cirque Dreams: Illumination" by Neil Goldberg, Jill Winters and David Scott, is a show that combines classic circus stunts such as tightrope walkers and clowns with new theatrical stunts such as body jugglers, chair balancers and high-flying girls in cubes. Thus "Cirque Dreams Illumination" brings a new light to the traditional circus by giving it a shockingly modern twist. This twist allows every second of the show to be a little more enjoyable because the show exceeds any expectations one might have for a classic circus or a modern musical.

This combination makes the audience believe something that starts out as a classical circus can completely flip and turn into a modern spectacle. For example, when one thinks about juggling the first thing that comes to mind is someone juggling a bunch of bowling pins to a random sound track. In this show, however, the whole idea of juggling is transformed by a performer who juggles more than 30 balls at a time, bouncing them off a drum set to make his own music. The traditional and the modern are supplemented by music and singers to create a fascinating trifecta.

"Cirque Dreams: Illumination," now playing at the Hippodrome Theatre, hardly stands up to its name, however. The title leads one to expect a great deal of lights and acrobats similar to the second scene, in which a pitch-black setting uses lights to create amazing illusions, but the show fails to do so in any other act. This doesn't mean that the show fails to entertain but that it could really use a different name. A much better name would be "Cirque Dreams in the City."

This would best suit a show that truly grasps the hustle and bustle of the city. The inability to concentrate on the big picture when so many other things are going on is typical of an urban environment. So is the heightened possibility of finding talent on any street corner because someone new is always trying to make it big. The urban environment is evoked by the backdrops, which include a busy train station and a graffiti-infested brick wall. The set even incorporates the title in graffiti where it read "illumin8." The costumes also reflect this urban environment, often by resembling traffic signs.

With undiscovered talents you are sure to find those who are not as talented as others, and boy does "Illumination" reflect that truth. This show has its good acts and its bad. As for the bad, the singer was simply that. How could the directors choose Onyie Nwachukwu out of all the other actresses who could have auditioned for the part? Didn't anyone notice her voice was not all that great and she had a lisp? Overall the singer is an unnecessary addition; the performers could speak for themselves and in cases when they could not their performances are so breathtaking, speaking is hardly relevant.

In addition most of the dancers are either poorly experienced or the choreography is too simple to challenge them. One would hope that the dancers would be impressive as the gymnasts, but this is rarely true. One of the rare exceptions is the break dancer whose body-bending performance can only remind one of broken bones. With every one of his moves the audience remains in pure shock at his flexibility.

However there are some excellent performances. One of the best features four girls hanging in the air on nothing but a

single 3-D cube. Dressed in spandex one-pieces, these gymnasts mount onto one single cube, moving together connected to each other not only by hands but also by even feet and necks. Their connectivity and unison is the best example of the show's emphasis on strength, flexibility and concentration.

However, other performers such as the traffic cone dancers take away from the main performance. This makes it extremely difficult to concentrate on the girls. On the other hand, this style is an inventive way to mix in this idea of the urban environment, which reinforces the show's mash-up of the classic and modern.

Another excellent performance in the show incorporates audience members into a silent movie directed by a clown (Martin Lamberti). He directs completely by a whistle, with which he commands and explains to these volunteers their parts, actions and emotions in this motion picture. Though the scene does run a little long, the love affair scenario being "filmed" is hilarious. The clown in particular stands as a great comic character, who enthusiastically mimics the volunteers when they do something wrong or indifferently. The clown goes into every scene with a pep in his step and a smile on his face, which makes him even more lovable.

Another interesting scene incorporates a bathtub, strap flyer and dancer. The strap flyer hangs from fabric above a bathtub full of water as he dips and soaks himself before spinning and spraying in unison with the music; meanwhile the dancer twirls around below blowing kisses. In this act you will lose any assumptions you once had about common household objects, for whenever you look at a bathtub in the future, you will think of this water fantasy.

Despite some tight-wire slip ups and bad singing, the crazy characters, headless business men and painters, comic fire hydrant dances, amazing acrobatic stunts and beautiful performances make for a compelling show. It beautifully incorporates traditional circus themes such as tightrope balancing and comic clowns with a modern twist such as the 3-D cubes and the bathtub scene. "Cirque Dreams: Illuminations" is a show stopper, because there is something for everyone—whether it's a good laugh, some excitement or a great experience.

By Chrisite Smith

THE HIPPODROME'S PATCHWORK QUILT

The ribbon from your wedding dress, the back pocket of your lucky jeans, the stained sweater from your first day of high school. Each a story on its own, charming in a unique way. Cut them up, sew them together, stand back and admire your masterpiece: all of your favorite items meshed into a brand new treasure, even if the pieces do not necessarily match or please the eye. It is cherished for its individual components no matter how haphazardly arranged. This is the nature of a patchwork quilt.

The Hippodrome Theatre recently introduced Maryland residents to its own patchwork quilt, "Cirque Dreams: Illumination." The show possessed many features of a quilt, with its explosion of clashing and busy designs, its careless arrangement and its lovable qualities. Both "Illumination" and a patchwork quilt can initially confuse the eye, but ultimately provide comfort and satisfaction. Viewers were mildly irritated by the excessive chaos that constantly took place on the Hippodrome stage, but were willing to overlook that in order to enjoy the tremendous talent found within this chaos.

Due to its lack of a plot line, the show progressed through a variety of acts, similar to a high school talent show, although with far more sophistication. Even though each scene was its own story, there was still the possibility of unifying the pieces. This was clearly something the show strived for, though the execution was rather poor. When watching a show of this nature, viewers hope for some merging of acts so as to become fully absorbed in what is more than just an amateur variety show. Because that amalgamation was lacking, it took away from the otherwise very professional quality of the show.

The show definitely lacked organization. This was evident in everything from the ever-changing themes and types of characters on stage to the clashing costumes and scenery. Because the show was called "Cirque Dreams: Illumination," one immediately assumed that light would heavily influence the show's development. Yet this was only true in the first few scenes, especially the one where moving light figures paraded around a pitch black stage. Beams of light were transformed into arrows, clocks, stick figure people and staircases. A character known as the Vagabond wandered around the stage, interacting with the various light objects.

Yet after this scene, the theme of light was dropped, replaced by one of construction work. Dancing traffic cones, caution tape and electrical wires became the new motifs on stage. No sooner did viewers become used to this, though,

than a new scene began with absolutely no relevance to the previous one. To confuse viewers even more, the following scene went back to a construction site. Similar to a patchwork quilt, pieces were thrown together without much concern for composition.

This would have been alright if director Neil Goldberg had chosen to give the show no theme at all; the audiences would have then accepted that this truly was just a variety show. Yet Goldberg attempted to compromise between the two, unsuccessfully striving for themes of illumination and construction. This left viewers questioning his intentions and efforts.

Although the diversity of theme was irritating, the diversity of actors was certainly not. Not only did the actors represent eight different nationalities, but their talents varied widely as well, with everything from Mongolian cube aerialists to a Russian tightrope walker, from a Cuban dancer to an American saxophonist represented.

It was both eye-opening and touching to see such widespread talent from all over the world come together for a common cause. This shows that international cooperation is possible and already a reality in unexpected areas. It is not too often that one sees a man from Ukraine balance on top of nearly 10 chairs, and there are probably few who are aware of the Mongolian State School of Contortion. One could say that “Cirque Dreams Illumination” was just as much a cultural experience as an entertaining performance.

The problem was the director occasionally went a little overboard. It was rare that the audience only had one performer to watch at one time; characters made constant entrances and exits, each performing his or her own piece, often at the same time as someone else. One found it difficult to choose just one spot of the stage to look at. The audience would burst into applause for a trick performed on the right side of the stage, while one was watching the dancers in the background or the singer parading around stage. In short, there was simply too much going on at once.

This was not entirely bad, as it occasionally covered for the acts that went on too long. “Flipping Out,” the final scene of act one, was a prime example. In this scene, a man would lie on his back and thrust his female partner into the air using only his feet. Although incredibly impressive, it would have been equally so had it been only half as long.

This brings us to an interesting question the show raised: what is the difference between being entertained and being impressed? When a viewer is impressed, it generally means that he or she feels a strong sense of admiration for an unusual feat; this does not necessarily mean that the viewer is enjoying it. However, one does not need to be impressed to be entertained; this simply means that the viewer is having a good time watching the scene in front of them. One could be quite impressed by the talents of the foot manipulators without finding this scene nearly as enjoyable as some of the others. Ironically, the best scenes were those that required the least acrobatic talent.

The show’s highlight, for example, was an improvised comedy scene, “Right to Remain Silent,” about the filming of a romance movie. Martin Lamberti portrayed the director, and the actors were four selected audience members. This scene had no acrobatics, no dancing and no singing, but relied instead on improvised acting from a man who used only a whistle and his body as a means of communication.

He would demonstrate exactly what he wanted each character to do, and if they made a mistake, he always had a quick and comical response. For example, when one of his “actors” was having difficulty entering the stage correctly, Lamberti turned it into a joke, mimicking the man, then demoting him to a different role. If an “actor” forgot a piece of blocking, Lamberti acted it out alongside him or her. This is the scene one remembers most clearly, not the trained tightrope walker or cube aerialists, but the man with a whistle and a good sense of humor.

Sure, the quilt was patched together a little roughly, but just as a regular quilt is loved for its individual components, “Cirque Dreams: Illumination” is loved for its distinctive segments. Viewers will experience some incredible talent and manage to have plenty of laughs along the way. Each piece of fabric or performance is a memory, a story, an idea or just something fun, compiled to make us feel comfortable and satisfied. How could one not enjoy such a show?

By Emma Dohmeier

CIRQUE DREAMS: CHILDHOOD FANTASY... OR NOT?

Have you ever imagined what a circus would be like? As children most of us have wished to join a circus, pretending we are the ones doing splits and backbends like acrobats or running around playing tricks on our fellow performers like clowns. “Cirque Dreams: Illumination” promises just such a child’s fantasy, only to fall a bit short.

Even if one had never been to the circus as a kid, one might have high expectations for the show. One might expect the stereotypical circus with elephants, tigers, lions, tightrope walkers, a ringmaster and clowns. “Cirque Dreams” had to be modified for the stage, so obviously it couldn’t have animals. Also it didn’t have a ringmaster; it didn’t even have rings because the stage is too small.

Though “Illumination” does meet one’s expectations for a tightrope walker and an amazingly hilarious clown, it still falls flat. The plot is promising: a day at the most unusual train station you’ve ever seen. Schoolgirls perform astonishing feats of agility from 20 feet in the air; policemen flip each other off their feet, and a lone saxophonist riffs over the score. Meanwhile a young reporter (Onyie Nwachukwu) tries to maneuver her way around all of them to get her story.

The reporter is your guide, setting the stage for the next act and linking each new section to the last; she’s an essential part of the show and needs to be heard and understood if you want to follow the storyline. But because she has a lisp, it is very difficult to comprehend what she is singing, and you are left in the dark about each scene change. At other times her voice is overwhelmed by the music, and once again you are left to make your own connections, and this gives the show a disjointed feel as you are introduced to each new acrobatic marvel.

Besides being a bit difficult to understand sometimes, the show has so many things going on at once that it boggles the eye. For example in the first act while Siarhei Kuzniatsou perches atop rolling paint cans, a bunch of bodiless coveralls cavort in the background as the porter (Andrey Averyuskin) and others scramble around the stage distractingly.

Also in the second act during the traffic twister routine, Uranmandakh Amarsanaa, Buyankhishig Ganbaatar, Erdenesuvd Ganbaatar and Odgerel Oyunbaatar contort their bodies in backbreaking ways. At the same time, the popper (Robert Muraine) is doing his dance routine, the reporter holds a steering wheel while meandering around the stage, and various other company members exit and enter while pantomiming driving. During these routines one yearns to be a chameleon who can look in two different directions at once.

Another thing that fails to live up to expectations is Jean Chiasson’s scene. At first it is very dramatic as he rises out of an old-fashioned tub, dripping wet, holding on to these thin little straps. But spends only enough time in the air to do one trick before he dips back into the bathtub, and when he rises again he remains very one-dimensional, always perpendicular to the tub. At the same time a lone dancer (Stelly Rodriguez Vega) circles the tub “dancing” with the flier. The scene looks strange at best and opaque at worst.

Despite these disappointments, the show has a few redeeming qualities. The clown (Martin Lamberti) is the best part of the show. In the first act he does this amazing sequence, where the stage is only lit with black lights and people and objects are slowly revealed as the clown interacts with them. This scene has a dreamlike quality as disembodied hands beckon; a saxophone produces dancing notes all by itself, and a glowing stick figure appears out of thin air, line by line to fool around with the clown. It is an absolutely amazing visual feat and the best part of the show.

Later in the first act the clown stages a scene using four audience members. These volunteers take part in a silent movie as the clown instructs them as to their parts using only a whistle. On the whistle he mimics the usual cadences of speech to direct the “actors,” and after about 15 minutes, the audience members know their parts and perform them just as the clown has “told” them to.

In addition to the clown’s antics, the porter’s piece stands out. He plays a full drum set with nine juggler’s balls with such precision that he sounds like he is playing the drums with sticks. This part also incorporates some optical illusions, as the porter is tossing and catching the balls, it seems he has four arms—he is that fast.

But overall “Cirque Dreams Illumination” is unimpressive, and one leaves the Hippodrome Theatre feeling the same as one went in, tired and worn out. Along with lackluster performances and a disjointed storyline the scenes don’t differ much one from the other; each song sounds like a variation on the last. In the end “Cirque Dreams Illumination” isn’t a dream come true.

By Kamille Jones

CIRQUE CAN'T WAIT FOR TOMORROW

“Cirque Dreams: Illumination” incorporates acrobatics into a stage play, and so, as the lights dim in the Hippodrome Theatre, one expects not only the style and grace of movement but also the suspense of narrative. Unfortunately, the show is successful as a production but not as a story.

“Illumination” has everything a successful play should need: music, lights, costumes and most of all excitement. And yet the show still leaves one’s mind with questions unanswered. Without a story there is no narrative or key concepts, and the lack of a vivid storyline makes the production more simplistic than need be.

Production elements alone cannot express meaning and ultimately cannot stand alone. The play is full of life and emotion but the storyline remains scattered and inconsistent. For example, early in the play an obviously talented dancer graces the stage with a tightrope act. The performance is excellent, but what is its purpose? If the audience doesn’t know, then how will it know for sure if the gymnast meets his own standards?

The opening song, “Just Changing News,” constantly updates news reports of what’s taking place in the city where unlikely characters come to life in a surreal atmosphere. A spotlight overpowers everyone on stage as a tall African-American woman walks down a short flight of steps singing the news. The vocalist shows the different states of emotion by her range, but these small details are not enough to stand alone.

The play has taken one’s mind back to a place in childhood where anything was possible. As adults and young adults we tend to judge and not be moved easily, but in youth we channel imagery and use our imagination to fill in the gaps. The skill of anticipating what is to happen next and avoid judgment prevents us from devaluing art and should be considered at all times when viewing a play. Youthful openness is encouraged by this play because it stops you from passing judgments from the beginning.

Understanding a play starts with the first thing you see, which is the set. The urban graffiti brick and smoky junkyard background consistently add a sense of depth. This constant reminder of everyday life was reinforced by the use of equally rough and urban elements. The oversized props such as the huge telephone booth, giant ghetto blaster radio, and immense antiquated video recorder all capture the audience’s eye. These exaggerations of reality give one a good balance of the surreal and lifelike. The playful attitudes of the characters also create a balance with this grittiness.

A fearless cast of acrobats, singers and background dancers never quit interacting with the audience or each other. One can’t consider it acting; it is all a performance, though this is not necessarily a bad thing. Some viewers may ask, “What is a play without acting?” But a mask is removed when a character is simply himself or herself and presents everything from their talents to their training. There is value in this type of artistic exposure; when the audience can feel the passion, gimmicks are unnecessary.

The idea of the unmasked performer connects to real life, even when it is exaggerated by someone who can hang on a rope from the ceiling. The incorporation of song and dance provided a looking glass of what life could be if we weren’t so serious from day to day.

Wearing a white T-shirt, hoodie and jeans, the pop-lock dancer is the least extravagant character on stage and yet he makes each scene his own. He has no lines but his expression is worth a thousand words.

“Illumination” is nice, but the constant shifting from ballroom dancers to ballerinas to hip-hop dancers proves very distracting. All the dancers are exceptionally expert at their craft individually but the play sorely lacks unity. Whenever the news reporter appears with her crowded entourage, along come dancers and other “common city folk.” The over-exaggeration of a day in the neighborhood turns into the idea of a block party. It is very entertaining but ultimately the play’s demise.

There is no overall message in the play. The idea of walking away from a play with a big smile on your face is good, but in the grand scheme of things that’s not enough to live up to the great plays of the past. Those plays make you feel and think and don’t just bring you to the edge of your seat in excitement.

“Can’t wait to see what’s in store for tomorrow” is the closing line of this play. That implies a suspenseful story line that simply does not exist. Was the show entertaining? Yes, but how do you weigh that success if the audience’s eyes are dazzled but their hearts are untouched?

By Mariah Blue LIFE IN THE SUBWAY

Crackling and sparking are the sounds we hear as the curtain rises on Neil Goldberg’s “Cirque Dreams: Illumination” at the Hippodrome Theatre. The audience is warned, “Be careful of live wires and cables,” and scene one opens with the singing TV reporter Onyie Nwachuku in an inner-city subway station, giving the audience a synopsis of what’s about to happen. As the Clothing Magician and his partner the Fashion Illusionist tantalize the audience with their quick transformations from one spectacular costume to another, they share the stage with other random performers.

This is typical of the whole show. Some of the acts are definitely entertaining, but the random performances that accompany the main acts make everything confusing and hard to follow. It’s easy to be amazed by the skilled acrobats and contortionists, but it’s just as hard to focus on their stunts because one’s eyes are darting back and forth across the stage so as not to miss anything. Although life can’t always be neat and orderly, the audience does have to focus on the key aspects if they are to identify with the performers. Because of the irrelevant acts on stage, this is hard to do.

From the title, “Illumination,” you would expect a show filled with spectacular lighting, glow-in-the-dark images and maybe some 3-D features. This show, however, fails to deliver on the promise of its title. Only one part of the entire show emphasizes illumination—when a sticklike figure appears from the darkness, his body outlined by a glow in the dark florescent light as he dances across the stage. It’s a good scene but not enough to justify the title.

As the reporter introduces each section of the show, an explosion of activity fills the underground subway station. High Flying Aerialists contort their bodies through a spinning cube that elegantly twirls above the tracks. Below a pop-lock dancer is gliding and twisting his body across the stage floor to the sound of the jazz saxophonist blowing a funky tune amid the hustle and bustle of the pedestrians. Although the aerialists seem to be the main act on stage the level of activity is so distracting and overwhelming that you may not get the full effect of the spectacular events above.

In the scene, “Right to Remain Silent,” the whole stage is quiet except for one man, one whistle and a large crowd laughing. Without uttering a word, Martin Lamberti plays the director of a silent movie and introduces the rest of the cast—volunteers from the audience—with a toot on his whistle, funny gestures and a few props. He is so creative with his whistle that he seems to talk with it.

As funny as Lamberti’s antics are, the placement of this scene seems odd. It ends the first act before the intermission. It would have been more effective at the end of the whole show, because this act is totally different from any other. Without acrobats, music, dancers or singing Lamberti and his whistle could have been a perfect way to end the entire show with a funny and upbeat scene.

In the many scenes of “Cirque Dreams: Illumination,” the music coming from either an off-stage tape or from an on-stage musician sets the mood for each scene. For example, the aerialists move beautifully, but when their body language blends with the tunes, both seem more artistic. Without the music these acrobats would seem no more than athletes. The music lends an elegance that reveals their movements as things of beauty and not mere physical accomplishments.

We all assume that ballet and modern dance are artistic but we never seem to think that acrobatics can be artistic as well. But with the music the athletes’ precise, agile movements are emphasized by the rhythms and the melodies. As the acrobats perform to the sultry sounds, you begin to experience an emotional response; sometimes excitement and sometimes melancholy.

One of the most memorable and moving scenes is “Drenched,” where a strap-flyer lies in a filled bathtub. He emerges triumphantly from the tub dripping with water as he pulls himself up by his strap showing both athletic strength and dance ability by gliding above the stage. With each dip back into the water and each reemergence, he elegantly

splashes the stage below. The strap flyer's blue shiny costume fits his body like a glove, so you can clearly see the water as it drips from his body.

By contrast, the ending of the show is especially weak. The magicians, contortionists, aerialists, chair climber, wirewalkers, juggler, reporter, saxophonist and pop-lock dancer all come out, each one doing his or her thing when it should have been an explosion of activity united together. The production should end strong not weak because you want the audience to remember that last burst of excitement.

Yes, all types of amazing acrobatics fill this production but it still doesn't quite fit together. The production is all over the place; it starts in an underground in a subway station and ends up with a man in a bathtub. "Ladies and gentlemen we are experiencing some difficulties," the announcer says in at the start of one scene. He's right; it's extremely difficult to follow what's going on.

By Martha Robichaud CIRQUE DREAMS'S NEW SHOW NOT SO DREAMY

There is really little about Cirque Dreams' new show "Illumination" that is dreamy or illuminating. In fact, one is left in the dark for the majority of the evening. The production's premise is not quite consistent enough to make a real plot. The shoddy "story" is supposed to be a news report about life on the streets, but one finds oneself asking things like, "Why is there a bathtub in the middle of the stage?" Granted, a circus show is not necessarily meant to have an in-depth story, but one feels a bit cheated that what sounded like the promise of a dreamscape is actually a cheesy cityscape.

This show is strange and confusing, and not in that cool, trippy kind of circus way. If Disney were to make a circus about the city streets, it would look like "Illumination." All the characters were so happy—and odd. The hairdo of one of the acrobats distinctly reminded me of one of Dr. Seuss's little creatures in his story "Horton Hears a Who." "Illumination" is appropriate for children but perhaps not appropriate for adults. In the same way that most adults aren't fans of rollercoasters, most adults will probably feel a bit overwhelmed by "Illumination."

Here's the thing: Cirque Dreams is *not* Cirque du Soleil. Back in the '90s, Soleil filed a copyright lawsuit against Dreams for their use of the word "cirque." Although Cirque Dreams won the battle, it is still a wanna-be Cirque du Soleil. The performers may be close enough in talent, but Cirque Dreams's "Illumination" lacks the mystique and magic that makes Soleil what it is. The magic in "Illumination" feels too contrived—and magic that looks fake and planned isn't magic at all.

The show just tries too hard. Like a preteen girl at her first dance, the creators of "Illumination" apparently didn't feel comfortable with the show's natural graces and so overcompensated. Just as the young girl covers her pretty face with makeup, the creators cover the awe-inspiring talent of the performers with too much junk.. The aerial cubists, who crawl about on big wire cubes that hang from the ceiling, are phenomenal, but one's eyes are drawn to the dancing traffic cones in the background. A big applause moment might be missed because two ladies with gigantic sparkling hats enter, pose and exit.

A dreamy metropolitan world isn't a bad concept on its own, but "Illumination" went overboard in the wrong directions. The artists performing in the foreground are often worth watching but always in the background is some distraction: headless city workers, a human train or two people dribbling basketballs out of synch behind a wire fence. And why? Why are the mesmerizing contortionists dressed like street signs? A couple of acts are actually a little difficult to make out because both the background and the costumes are so busy.

The show opens with a colorful cityscape that looked like it comes straight from a corny '80s cartoon; in front of it scamper several two-dimensional characters. The singer lisps her way through the opening number about the city "shtreets" and the cast wanders about on stage with no apparent purpose but to make an appearance. The sparkly costumes are just about the only things that attract attention, and one cannot be satisfied looking at shiny purple umbrellas simply because they catch the light.

And then there is the music. When it isn't the corny, lisping singer destroying a magical moment, it is the corny computer-game music that kills the mood. The beats don't sound like modern music from the streets but rather more like the soundtrack for a cheesy driver-education movie. At least the music is consistent with the set and costumes.

One exception is the saxophone player, who powers her way through the entire show flawlessly and adds a nice touch to every act she joins. Plus, she looks fabulous in her sparkling black jumpsuit.

But for the most part, the costumes are in the same vein as the music and the set. They go too far in the wrong direction and ruin the magic. The silver costumes meant to represent trash have so many silver pieces of fabric dangling from them that it is difficult to pay attention to the talented acrobats wearing them. The high-fashion ladies' costumes, which have skirts that resemble aluminum foil and hats that suggest metal trashcan lids, deserve some credit, but the ladies themselves are yet another example of a distracting detail. And then some costumes just don't make sense. For example, why is there a sailor from the '30s in a city from the '90s?

The show isn't all bad, though. One can't help but stare in wonder at the black-light act, in which an entire hidden world is slowly revealed through light tricks. The acrobats are all incredible. Two acrobats who use one another as bouncing boards (literally) manage 20 consecutive flips. An essential part of any circus is the clown, and Cirque Dreams' clown wins many a laugh. When audience members are brought onstage to act out a mimed movie scene directed by the clown, he makes the most awkward audience members the funniest of all by forcing them out of their shells. Both the audience members sitting in their seats and the audience members brought on stage end up having a good time. Even the shyest audience members brought on stage leave smiling.

The problem is that Cirque Dreams' "Illumination" is stimulating but in a bad way. A little stimulation is a good thing when one wants to be entertained. But when the hyperactivity lasts for two hours without a rest, well, then it just becomes over-stimulating. There is a fine line between a little and too much, and "Illumination" does not know where to stop. The show would actually be *more* entertaining if it were stripped of all the superfluous, showy details. The talented artists and athletes would have been easier to appreciate without all the other junk that the creators layered upon them.

In the words of Charles Mingus, one of the best jazz musicians from the '60s, "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity."

By Morgan Phillips **REPORTERS, DANCERS, ACROBATS, OH MY!**

Spotlights shine on a downtown reporter from the TV news show "Just Changing News" as the cast of "Cirque Dreams: Illumination" prepares for a peppy musical number to kick off an exhilarating performance at the Hippodrome Theatre. The newscaster reports on busy city streets filled with bizarre pedestrians, who are wearing dazzling dresses and slick suits at a train station. The clean movements of the dancers and outstanding vocals from the reporter immediately suggest a high-quality performance.

Creator Neil Goldberg sets high expectations by following that opening number with two dancers who change from day clothes to evening gowns in lightning-quick moves right before our eyes. Adding a comical twist, Goldberg immediately gets the audience laughing by introducing the clown of the show, Martin Lamberti, as he marches on stage as the crazy homeless man dancing with a broom. One can only imagine the next fascinating act. The urban setting for the circus acts enabled the show to fuse together two completely different milieus while still amazing the audience with energizing performances.

The cliché ringmaster and clown cars of the traditional circus are transformed into headless business men and animated taxi cabs, adding a downtown vibe and giving the common circus acts a whole new spin. This gives Cirque a whole new meaning as the supernatural circus freaks break it down Baltimore style. Although many of the urban features could fit with the common features of any city, simple details, such as the hip-hop dance pieces and graffiti alleys give the show that Baltimore vibe.

Goldberg does a terrific job of bringing the stage to life by making common city structures and surroundings begin move. Actors dressed as fire hydrants, traffic cones and giant telephones make their way across stage. With 10-foot-tall pairs of pants and giant headless suits worn by the enthusiastic cast, the audience is left constantly on the edge of their seats awaiting the next wacky surprise.

The reporter rushes on stage as the wind blows and lightning strikes and a nearby handy man attempts to fix the fallen wires. In this mind-blowing scene the man gets caught on the wire and consequently does some gravity-defying tricks

as the wire becomes a tightrope. The intentional imprecision of his stunt adds to the sense of danger and leaves you breathless while still giving you a show that you can laugh at.

The show's creator makes sure your eyes are constantly moving and that there is never a boring scene to be seen. The usual black-out between scenes takes away from the audience's focus. Instead Goldberg has decided to add small acts such as ballet dancers and an outstanding saxophonist between scenes not as a distraction but as an example of busy city life in an anonymous downtown district.

Street signs come alive as flexible acrobats weave their way around each other as if they were threads in a blanket while hanging from a dangling cube. The dramatic lights glisten while intense music slowly builds. As they twirl and flip, it is impossible to look at the individual performers, for they seem to be one body moving in perfect unison. As the cubes lower and the acrobats exit, performers on stilts dressed as caution signs crawl through the stage to once again rejuvenate the stage with color and flair.

Not only was the show deeply exiting, but also completely hilarious. The homeless man, who plays as a sneaky jokester, is found throughout the show playing silly tricks. Prankishly unplugging the lights and music, he interrupts the joyful dance number and gets the audience laughing. He returns once again barging in on the break dancers by calling the cops with his enormous telephone.

Just when one thinks it can't get any funnier the ridiculous clown brings on stage several audience members. As the clown plays director, each member of the audience is assigned silly parts such as "sexy lady" and "the lover" to act out a melodramatic love scene from a soap opera. The trick is, the clown-like homeless man only communicates through his whistle along with the occasional hand gesture. As each actor continually messes up the scene the clown gets upset with their stupidity and continues to make them do completely ridiculous things. The improvisation in this scene only adds to the humor; the "actors" in the skit are clueless to what they are to do and there no telling what they'll mess up next.

Overall the show is phenomenal. Goldberg does an exquisite job of fusing the outlandish circus freaks with the excitement of downtown. Taking two completely different themes such as a circus and a city, and mixing them together seems impossible, yet Goldberg does it effortlessly. The whole production stays true to this theme down to the smallest details, such as the stage hands dressed as city folks and props as road work and alley trashcans. The complete randomness of the circus characters fit in perfectly to the offbeat step of the city.

So maybe the downtown life and oddness of the circus aren't so different after all; both have such a variety of different characters that all have their own story. "Cirque Dreams: Illumination" does an outstanding job of bringing out the similarities in these two very diverse settings. This is truly a surprising and abnormal show, but can these mind-bending tricks keep up with the unbearable suspense? You'll have to find out for yourself.

By Samuel Davidoff-Gore

CIRQUE DREAMS: ILLUMINATION ILLUMINATES DISTRACTIONS

Decades ago, a circus' arrival in a town was an event. People would line up to see the show under the big top, cheering and applauding corny clowns, mildly entertaining stunts and a series of unconnected acts, for this was the only venue for feats of strength, balance and flexibility. More recently, cirques have appeared as higher end, more theatrical versions of the circus. Unlike a circus, a cirque has a theme, a plot, music and dance; the performers portray characters and tell a story through their art.

The cirque has come to Baltimore. Locals have arrived to watch mesmerizing performances by some of the world's best acrobats. In Cirque Dreams' most recent creation, "Illumination" at the Hippodrome Theatre through October 17, the creators Neil Goldberg, Jill Winters and David Scott pair the feats of incredibly talented performers with musicians and actors in an attempt to create a cohesive show. Unfortunately, the creators forget the mainstay of circuses: the acts. They obscure the performers with a wandering storyline, unnecessary songs and distracting background performers. They overshoot the balance between theater and circus, leaving "Illumination" in limbo.

In the act "Circulation," for example, four amazingly talented aerialists (Uranmandakh Amarsanaa, Buyankhishig Ganbaatar, Erdenesuvd Ganbaatar and Odgerel Oyunbaatar) manipulate their bodies around spinning cubes. They hang

from the cubes by their feet, necks and heads in such a way that they are seemingly flying. Their synchronized movements stun the audience. While this is going on, two other cubes are spinning below with two other characters. They are not climbing nor are they contorting. No, they are just sitting there, not involved in the scene and distracting the audience from the performance above.

Other performances are equally marred. In “Dangle and Swerve,” a man (Siarhei Kuzniatsou) balances on rolling paint cans while two men dribble basketballs in the background, which adds nothing to the act. Throughout the show, the company performs mundane, unoriginal and boring dances and fire hydrants and headless businessmen prance through the scene, confusing the audience. Instead of making each scene a snapshot of street life, as intended, these absurdities turn the focus from the act to themselves.

“Illumination” suffers further from inappropriate settings for some of its acts. In “Rise & Shine,” Andrey Moraru climbs a stack of chairs until he is balancing on one hand atop 15 or so chairs. His balance is amazing, although the illusion is marred by the somewhat obvious wire support. Despite the quality of the act, its preface of a 911 call renders the performance awkward because it has nothing to do with emergency response; he portrays a sailor. Unless the creators are trying to comment on emergency preparedness, there is no explanation for this context. Most acts are like this; the setting detracts from the feats and artistry of strength and balance.

All good stories need a storyteller. To tell the non-existent story of “Illumination,” the creators decided to include three, mostly ineffective characters. The first is a reporter (Onyie Nwachukwu) who never explains what she is reporting. Her songs focus on change (change of clothing, weather, electricity), but the show is not about change. Even if her songs had anything to do with the show, the words would be incomprehensible because they often take place during an act where the audience is focused on the performers. Her words are also lost due to her lisp.

The second storyteller is the street musician. A wonderfully talented saxophonist, Marybeth Kern brings the otherwise canned music to life. But as a character, she provides another distraction. Most of the time, she sits on a bench, playing the sax. There is no explanation for her presence on stage.

Despite the flaws of the first two storytellers, the third brings a small bit of redemption to “Illumination.” Martin Lamberti, the vagabond mime, brings much-needed comic relief to the show. Haphazardly dressed in a clown-turned-out-onto-the-streets look, he speaks only by blowing into a whistle. From the scene where he discovers a black-lit fluorescent world to the later scene, “Right to Remain Silent,” in which he directs audience members in a movie scene, Lamberti delivers all of his mute lines perfectly, stealing the show from the acrobatic acts. He is the star of the show; unfortunately, his hilarity does not redeem the conceptual flaws of “Illumination.”

“Cirque Dreams: Illumination” is not all bad. The acts are almost all terrific and the performers are extremely talented. From Lamberti’s humor to the cube aerialist’s grace, the show has plenty of highlights. The costumes are creatively designed, especially those of the cube aerialists, which comprise body tights, caution tape and the words “Women at Work.” Unfortunately, these highlights are not the centerpieces of the show. Rather, a mediocre reporter and dancing inanimate objects are illuminated. Which, for a circus, might be okay, but this is not a circus.

Cirque Dreams is not bringing circuses back from the dead. It does not replace the excitement of a caravan of animals, clowns, tents and circus folk. People are not lining up outside the theater with their family to see this “once a year” event. Instead this show proves why a cirque is incredibly hard to do well. Only one company has truly perfected the art: Cirque du Soleil, creating a pinnacle of perfection which Cirque Dreams is far from. “Cirque Dreams: Illumination” is not a circus, and it is far from a good cirque.

Blue Man Group

By Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton and Chris Wink

At the Hippodrome Theatre through November 7

By Aaron Bell

BLUE MEN PAINT SPECTACULAR PICTURE

The normal rumble of audience chatter is suddenly interrupted when increasingly more people start chanting unintelligible dialogue. Before long, one looks above the Hippodrome Theater's stage to find two electronic signs. Relatively simple messages routinely remind us about cell phones and food/drink in the theater in the beginning. Towards the climax of these anonymous instructions, the signs tell us that a specific member of the house has a headache, and that we should all help her make it go away. The sign then instructs us to lead that person in a yoga exercise to alleviate her headache, which has the house guffawing before the lights go down. No actors have taken the stage at this point, yet already the audience is fully engaged.

"The Blue Man Group" is a colorful, lively show that demonstrates the theme of international communication through invention. In international affairs, a small misunderstanding can lead to worldwide chaos. Great Britain taxes tea, so America starts a revolution. This show illustrates how better communication can be fostered between cultures. The title characters seem to represent a foreign culture, as their skin is painted blue and their clothes are all black. They each have almost emotionless green eyes and rarely show much emotion. They take random household objects, such as a bathroom pipe, and strike up a funky tune that puts the audience in a toe-tapping, feel-good mood. Although it has no real story, the show is a testament to how much simpler this country's relationship with other countries could be if we took the time to create more than destroy.

In the beginning number, the three Blue Men play three drums that spray pink, green, and blue neon paint. The drums are filled with paint, and as the drum is played harder, the paint ricochets upward and splashes the stage. After paintings created by drumming and mouth-spewing are given to audience members, the real message of unbiased appreciation of art begins to reveal itself. The visual effects are certainly a vibrant attention grabber as well.

Three giant iPod-esque mechanisms fly down to rest upstage, where the men encounter them with confusion. Upon turning them on, they explore the many apps and functions of what they call gPods. One function, modeling on a real-world app, displays various pages from books with metaphorical and comical undertones. One significant quote is, "2-D and 3-D cultures just don't mix." This inspires them to create a "2.5-D" world to prove that cultures can mix. The Blue Men create something halfway between the flat world and our own by shadowing the human form with radiant neon tracings and 2-D movement. By creating everything from musical paint to a new world, these peculiar blue beings keep slipping in their subconscious message even as they are entertaining us.

The majority of this production consists of pure creativity, and its results. One Blue Man creates a painting, by spewing paint from dozens of paintballs he has caught in his mouth. He then puts a \$5,000 price tag on it, invoking thunderous applause. Video footage of particular reactions from the audience also helps to warm the house to the idea of creation, especially the segment "Late Arrivals," when late-comers taking their seats are filmed in close-up (and probably thrown off-guard.) Rarely will one see such a bold feature in live theater; it certainly imparts the idea of creativity yet again.

There isn't a real plot to this show nor do the characters really develop significantly. "The Blue Man Group," however, does provide a lesson in how fun and helpful creativity can be for establishing and maintaining relationships, whether personal or worldwide. Many charities around the world are prime examples of the ways the arts can reduce the barriers between cultures. Broadway in South Africa, for example, combines the talent and financial effort of top stage performers with needy relief efforts. Because so much time in the United Nations is spent discussing economic issues such as oil, money and division of power, less art and cultural progress is made.

In "Blue Man Group", a random audience member is called on stage to do a dinner scene with the men. In no less than five minutes, as the woman warms up to the food, pranks and art, she is behaving as if she's known the characters for years. Maybe the United Nations, as well as other international organizations, could learn a thing or two from the show's ability to inspire through innovation with others, instead of personal gain.

By Bri'Anna Horne

UNBELIEVABLY BLUE

Your memories of feeling coerced into an audience sing-along, of being pushed and shoved while trying to dance in a crowd should be deleted if you plan to see "Blue Man Group," which came to the Hippodrome Theatre in early November. Audience participation is a major element in this entertaining mess of a show that also incorporates music, dance, art and comedy. All these aspects are enhanced by the frequent involvement of audience members and by the use of Facebook updates and Twitter tweets familiar to everyday Americans.

Reflected on the curtain, before the show even begins, is a quote that says, "When you first meet people of a foreign culture, a great way to break the ice is to offer a few gifts as gestures of friendship... But ultimately the very best way is to create something together. Whether it's a meal, an art project or just a spontaneous dance party, when you create something with others you build a connection that lasts a lifetime." This idea inspired Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton and Chris Wink to create a performance that magnifies the idea that to create something in collaboration is to forge a bond like no other.

One way the performance does this is having the stars of the show—three men painted blue and wearing black uniforms—make several pieces of art. In an early scene, the three Blue Men pour paint onto their drums and as they play, they bounce the paint off the drumheads, into the air and onto a white canvas held above. In another scene, one Blue Man makes a splattered work of art from paint balls shot from his mouth onto a white canvas, while another makes a marshmallow sculpture. Following the creation of these three "masterpieces" the men hand them out to audience members.

Another way they do it is by inviting the audience to a giant dance party. A scene called "Rock Concert Movements" encourages the audience to try out some common rock concert movements: "Fist Pump," "Raise the Roof" and "Wave Cell." You read the instructions flashing on huge screens and in the audience you see people grinning and pumping their fist along to the catchy beat played. In most shows you only sit and watch, but here you are invited to join an exciting party at the end of the show. This creates a great energy throughout the room and it is what everyone needs to keep their legs from falling asleep.

The show also does its job well as a concert, though it has strange ideas about how to create music. The Blue Men not only transform a PVC pipe into an instrument, which is amazing enough, but they take it to the next level by making a song from it.

Something the show lacks, however, is time management. After a while, watching the same three guys doing the same scenario gets old; what was once anticipation is now annoyance. A scene which exemplifies this is that of the "gPod," which resembles an iPod with a rectangular shape and a large touch screen but multiplied 20 times in size. The three gPods on stage features apps clicked by the Blue Men. One app is a sound-wave recorder, and for about 10 minutes the three men stand in front of their gPod, looking at each other and grabbing handfuls of the Cap'n Crunch. It is not until after this staring contest that they begin to use the recorder by crunching on the cereal to a beat. The fact that they can keep a beat while crunching is, like other parts of the show, amazing, but the staring went on too long.

In the finale glowing orbs resembling beach balls for giants are thrown out for the audience to pass around. Your anticipation rises as the balls soar through the room getting closer and closer to you, giving you the chance to be a part of this volleying.

"Blue Man Group" truly grasps the idea that creating something together builds a stronger relationship. This technologically savvy show is great for everyone no matter what your age or experience, because for the most part not a second goes by that does not make you wonder, smile or laugh. Whether it's spewing Twinkies, dance parties, creative music or apps on a gPod, there's always something to enjoy.

By Christie Smith

WELCOME TO THE 21ST CENTURY

"You're going to see the Blue Man Group? I love them!" This exclamation was frequently heard around Baltimore during this first week of November. Yet, for those of us who had never heard of this group, the question, "What exactly is a blue man?" occupied our thoughts. Those who knew what they were getting themselves into as they stepped into the

Hippodrome Theatre happily welcomed the silent men in blue who utilized technology and percussion for comic effect, but the less-informed were stranded in a pleasant state of confusion.

This was indeed no “Oklahoma!” Neither was it a Green Day or Dane Cook performance. Those expecting a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, a rock concert or even a typical comedy show were quickly set straight. Instead of a farmyard set, a row of amplifiers or a wisecracking monologist, one encountered a blend of new media: art created before their eyes, music delivered in a new fashion and silent comedy performed by men painted blue.

Viewers enjoyed having their expectations upended as the show creatively strayed from the norm. The Blue Men, with the exception of four other musicians, were the only performers in the entire show. They alone had to fill up an hour and 40 minutes without talking. Their ability to do so and do so admirably made the show as refreshing as it was impressive. This is because a Blue Man is not just an actor or a comedian. He is also a mime, percussionist and artist, someone who can poke fun at society and bring to life the magnificence of everyday items.

The show begins with a misty stage, some bright lights and three men painted blue in front of a drum set. The man in the middle hits the drum. He hits it again. Eventually, the two blue men on either side of him begin pouring neon colored paint onto the drums, causing bold bursts of color to fly into the air. Thus these commonplace objects create a beautiful and unexpected wonder.

This integration between music and visuals continues throughout the show as the Blue Men demonstrate how art can beget art; each element succeeds because of the other’s presence. Drums beat and colors soar in perfect harmony. When percussion becomes tiring, more visuals are introduced. As one Blue Man creates a picture using the paint balls he holds in his mouth, another simultaneously forms a sculpture out of materials he has also caught in his mouth. As their finished products are presented to two lucky audience members, viewers realize that they have just watched an artist begin and finish a piece of work and were intrigued by every second of it.

The show goes on to introduce us to the 21st century in terms of both content and special effects. As three large iPhones, referred to as gPods, descend onto stage, the Blue Men take the opportunity to make fun of our multi-taking generation. The Blue Man with the first gPod is looking at book summaries that resemble an even more condensed version of Sparknotes. The second gPod is open to a website with ideas for things to do while working: listening to music, ordering take-out and other forms of distraction.

Finally, on the third gPod, we see a long list of random facts one might be distracted by while trying to work. The audience is amused by this depiction of the modern student or employee’s work habits, because most in the audience know that they themselves are guilty of such habits. Satirically, the Blue Men use technology to mock society’s use of technology.

As the Blue Men walk behind a gPod, they appear on its screen in digital form or wearing crazy outfits: dresses, sombreros and the like. This is taken to the next level as they then reappear in front of the screens wearing the very outfits that the gPod app assigned to them. Thus, an entire comic scene revolves around these three large screens, a prime example of modern theater. As video becomes a more prominent part of daily life, its presence is also appropriate in the new theater.

These modern effects allow for the music in the show to take some engaging liberties as well. Percussion playing is not limited to drum sets. Instead, the audience experiences the beat as the Blue Men rhythmically chew Cap’n Crunch cereal or bring out a set of large plumbing pipes of different lengths and shapes. The back-up band, dressed in neon suits and raised above the stage in cages, is no bore to watch either.

That is not to say, however, that the audience is constantly intrigued by everything they see in the show. The question, “When will this be over?” most likely pops into many heads at one point or another. The root of this problem is the lack of intermission. Although a rather short show, due to lack of plot, it has difficulty holding an audience’s attention for the entire 100 minutes. An intermission could easily solve this problem.

Some acts simply go on too long. The Blue Men try to incorporate audience members into many different parts of the show, but take this too far when the task of selecting an audience participant is turned into a staring contest. These long pauses are used widely by the Blue Men, who look at one another in silence for long periods of time. While comical at first, the effect wears off quickly and ultimately becomes irksome.

However, this is quickly forgotten in the show's finale, which revolves around none other than butts. Audience members are taught the various dance moves to be applied at rock concerts, the most important being shaking your booty. The band launches into a song all about moving one's rear end. Among the numerous synonyms for "butt" incorporated into the song are such favorites as "crock-pot," "giant fluffy bears," "George Forman grill" and "life's work."

Then six large inflatable balls appear on stage, each lighting up different colors. The Blue Men use them as drums at first, before releasing them into the audience. Viewers become a part of the show as they pass the giant balls back and forth and are sprayed with silly string and confetti, all the while shaking their "pants pillows" to the butt song. Once again, the show pokes fun at society's ridiculous habits at rock-concerts, as well as our infatuation with moving our backsides.

It was with this that the show ended, although there was, of course, an encore to follow. Many left the theater with bewilderment of "What the heck did I just watch?" but many were energized by the final number and satisfied with the whole show. Not only were they entertained, but they were enlightened about the new direction of stage shows. Computer screens and strobe lights are quickly replacing backdrops and spotlights. Society is changing; it's time our art follows suit. We have most definitely entered a new age of theater, and shows such as "Blue Man Group" allow us to happily embrace it.

By Emma Dohmeier

A MULTI-COLORED PERFORMANCE.

The Blue Man Group is a flock of fellows who literally paint themselves blue and do things you would never expect. They never perform amazing stunts, never show off their athletic prowess, never sing. They never even talk at all during their performance, but earlier this month at the Hippodrome Theatre, they created a show that was absolutely original and hilarious. Despite their unconventional views on society and unexpected ways of making music and art, their show was surprisingly appealing. The whole performance centered around communication in different ways: between companions at the dinner table or through art forms that had some unexpected twists. For example, eating hostess Twinkies with knives and forks as a meal, or painting the whole front side of a person and using them as a giant stamp on a canvas.

As you entered the theater, a large screen offered an excerpt from the book "International Diplomacy for Dummies," which, by the way, isn't a real written work. At first this seemed irrelevant, but you soon realized how much the Blue Men resembled a totally different breed of humans. By putting themselves in those roles, the performers gained the freedom to think outside the box and find completely new sides to the way we live our lives.

Their acting was as important as their make-up in conveying this notion; they never showed any facial expression nor said a word but they made us laugh hysterically the whole time. The actors looked out of this world with blue paint all over their earless faces. Throughout the course of the performance they would do something, like put on music, then cock their heads and wait to see what the audience's response would be. If the reaction was positive they would sometimes repeat what they had been doing. The need to communicate with their audience was definitely a big part of the show and really appealed to the crowd because it was like a game that we all got to take part in playing.

In the very beginning, two signs above the stage, one on the left and one on the right, flashed the usual announcements about not using flash photography and turning off your cell phone. But then the signs began to banter back and forth with digs like "Don't listen to the sign on the left: it has control issues," which made the audience roar with laughter. These hilarious signs softened up the crowd and psyched it up for the show to come.

The curtain went up and all you could see behind the scrim were the shadows of men pounding out a beat on drums, the bass drum like an underlying heartbeat to keep them in time, while flashing lights highlighted one man at a time to create a mirror effect on the scrim. In the next scene three Blue Men poured a neon-colored liquid on a trio of drums, creating an explosion of color every time the drums were hit. As one Blue Man was playing, another held a blank canvas above the paint splatters and they captured an abstract explosion of color, and then gave it to an audience member. This referred back to the imaginary "International Diplomacy for Dummies" which talked about giving gifts as a sign of friendship before trying to communicate with another culture.

The costumes were simple and never really changed at all. The Blue Men (Kalen Allmandinger, Josh Elrod, Mark Frankel, General Fermon Judd, Kirk Massey, Peter Musante and Michael Rahhal) were dressed all in black with blue

faces and gloves. The musicians also wore black but had glow-in-the-dark, neon lines on their clothes and painted on their faces which gave them a stick figure look onstage. At first you thought they were just figures on a screen, but halfway through the show you realized they were actual people in very impressive costumes. The band's glow-in-the-dark and almost skeleton-like costumes gave them the appearance of a stereotypical alien who was visiting Earth.

At one point during the production the three Blue Men onstage played with these things they called gPods, which had to be lowered from the ceiling because they were twice the height of the men. The gPod was basically a giant touch phone that enabled the user, "to keep in touch with 100 of your closest friends." The Blue Men also pulled up some books on their gPods that made fun of our society's addiction to technology and the way we never seem to stop moving. In addition to our inability to slow down they also commented on how we always want the abridged version of everything, never the whole picture.

However it was ironic that they had to use a lot of high-tech gadgets to get their point across about our addiction to technology. Without the giant gPods to show off the books, their commentary on electronic devices wouldn't have been half as funny. So they had to tell us in a way that would make us listen. Afterwards some 2-D figures up on the screens had a text conversation about the third dimension and what kind of creatures who lived there. This mirrored the Blue Men's experiences with the audience throughout the show, following their theme of finding a way to communicate with a people who were so different than they were. They then decided to try to make a 2.5 dimension where 2-D and 3-D figures could meet each other. Soon the Blue Men came onstage and had a technicolor dance party with the flat figures, on their screens, while creating music by waving flexible sticks back and forth.

The Blue Men had a different way of seeing all of the things we use or encounter in daily life and usually take for granted. It was amazing visually and changed the way one looks at some things. After seeing the show, ones realize that pipes can be used to play any note imaginable just by making them longer or shorter. The Blue Men saw them in a way that someone who had never come across such objects would, like an Indian seeing a shotgun for the first time.

At the end, the Blue Men orchestrated a giant dance party and made the audience get up and shake what God gave them, to a song about all the different things that we humans call our rear ends. As the strobe lights flashed and the audience danced, the Blue Men pushed huge bouncy balloon-like balls that lit up different colors off the stage into the audience. This was a fitting end to a show all about finding a way to communicate and befriend something that's seemingly so alien and unreachable, for what do we humans do when we want to celebrate an accomplishment? We throw a party.

This new take on cultural collision and communication was innovative because the show revealed a whole different side of simple things, all without the use of speech. The actors' portrayal of a completely different species went perfectly and the Blue Men never broke character, not even when they went out into the lobby after the show to mingle with the audience.

By Kamille Jones

DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE BLACK, WHITE OR BLUE

"Blue Man Group," the new show at the Hippodrome Theatre, was more than just an extremely exciting show full of life and originality. It also painted a portrait of cultures, beliefs and values through things we all know and love like iPhones, Twinkies, and Cap'n Crunch. The show brought to life the way two cultures can come together and find common qualities.

Representing one culture were the Blue Men, bald and awkward with their stern wide eyes that never quite seemed to shut and a firm stance of authority that demanded attention and respect. The other culture was the audience which contributed to the performance in many different ways. By working together, the audience and the Blue Man Group created a bond through entertainment. "Blue Man Group" demonstrated how one can burst through the barriers of suspicion and disbelief toward foreign cultures.

Before the show opened, a quote from an imaginary book, "International Diplomacy for Dummies," declared that common factors unite every culture. The play illuminated this interaction by demonstrating the connection between two "cultures." The Blue Men's culture was full of music and art in combination of color; the audience members, on the other hand, were average people who are being entertained by these men. They overcame their differences by finding

common ground such as food and laughter. The love of culture brought them together by proving that the only differences we have are external. Internally we are all basically the same and all capable of artistic expression.

Many shows try to reveal the commonality of human cultures, but this one didn't just talk about it but gave the audience a chance to witness a group of people who look and act different bringing something of worth to another culture. The Blue Men never said a word, but they delivered their message of universal similarities between cultures by their actions. In one of many interactions with the audience, the Blue Men brought out oversized balls for the crowd to move around and thus showed the audience how to work together through teamwork.

The loud booms from the drums were strong enough to make one's heart beat faster. At the start of the play, red, blue and green paint was poured onto the drums and then the colors leapt into the air as the drums were beaten. Different cultures can agree that each culture contains music and color that both sets it apart as a distinctive group but also unites it to other cultures with their own music and colors.

One thing that stood out in the show was the lack of speech. After reading the beginning quote about culture, one expected the show to put a huge emphasis on speech, but in fact the Blue Men never said a word, even as they tried to meet the challenge of the opening quote. The Blue Men were able to entertain, not through words, but by visuals, music and food. The fact there was no dialogue revealed the true difficulty of cultures trying to find common ground.

When people want to communicate without having to speak, they often turn to movement, which can be a talking substitute, because it can generate a series of symbols like a motion picture. Those symbols were created by different segments in the show, each scene relying on a different kind of movement. For most of the show, the Blue Men used this kind of expression, but in the final segment, "Rock Concert Movements," the audience replied in kind by dancing to the music.

Audience participation made the show the success it was. The Blue Men tended to react with a higher energy level whenever the crowd stood to their feet or began to dance in their chair. In one scene, the Blue Men invited a woman from the audience on stage and covered her clothes to protect her from any possible stains. Then they tried to impress the girl with different lightings; one Blue Man even pulled out a plug-in candlestick to "set the mood" of a romantic dinner. This was one of the show's most comical moments, for it poked fun at the universal experience of trying to get a person to like you on a date. The show found common aspects of life in different cultures without even seeming to try.

Such imaginative use of audience participation was not only funny but also delivered a message that people have a lot in common, no matter their shape, size or color. Humor allows us to forget about the differences and rise above any prejudices we may have; it helps us realize the advantages of uniting with one another, whether it is through technology or food. "Blue Man Group" is a wonderful example of the power of movement and visual art to bring different people together in ways they may not even realize.

By Maggie Dier

ELECTRIC BLUE

Thinking about going green? Maybe you should consider going blue. Because some of the best criticism of today's obsession with technology is made with funky beats, bright strobe lights and paint in the "Blue Man Group" show at the Hippodrome Theatre.

The show uses unconventional tactics—such as splatter paint, rhythmic percussion and unlikely food—to convey an important message: that people today are losing touch with each other because they're spending too much time with technology. While most shows would approach such an important topic from a different, more depressing angle, that would only disengage viewers. This production gets its point across by encouraging the audience to participate, something most shows don't do.

"Blue Man Group" takes on its serious topic with comic fervor. Right off the bat giant flashing signs on either side of the theater clue you in on theater etiquette, telling you not to take pictures during the show. But that's not all they do; the two signs start competing with each other with clever wordplay and sarcastic remarks. The electronic signs poke fun at each other and get the audience into the act as well. They request you to sing "Happy Birthday" to people somewhere in the audience. The signs take about 10 minutes for the whole progression, but it feels more like mere moments as time flies.

The Blue Men are childlike, especially in their reactions to one another and to the audience. The Blue Men's wide-eyed faces always seem surprised, adding stimulation to situations that otherwise would be perfectly boring. The scene where they are intrigued by video equipment and decide to go out into the audience with that strange look on their faces is just one example. They take the equipment with them and get very close to people's faces, and go even so far as to lower the camera into a person's mouth. This demonstrates how today's technology is always in your face and how our obsession with it has become overwhelming and obnoxious.

Halfway through the performance a person from the audience is brought backstage. The person is then put into a protective suit and has his feet tied together while he is hung upside down, and the Blue Men proceed to cover him with paint. Then the poor audience member is swung against a giant canvas, to create the final product of an upside-down-man-silhouette. This shows how very little we get out of technology today, using it for ridiculous purposes, wasting our time when we could be interacting with one another in real life, and not watching things on television.

The costumes included in the performance range from bland to captivating. The Blue Men wear all-black unitard suits that became progressively dirtier as the play progresses, soiled with paint and mashed-up Twinkies. The costumes however, work well with the actor's make-up. The blue paint, which covers the lead characters' heads and hands, pops out against the soiled black of their clothes and also makes their expressions stand out more, more especially their emotional eyes.

The musicians in the background have the best costumes; resembling neon skeletons in yellow, green and pink, they stand out and draw one's attention whenever they are visible. The costumes verify the message about technology because they too have unnecessary gadgets that distract from what is going on. The musician's costumes, though fantastic on their own, proved distracting during the performance with their flashy lights.

Later on there's a scene where the Blue Men use bright LED lights to show two digital avatars dancing together showing a connection between the real world and the cyber one. The Blue Men wiggle glow sticks in the air, while the avatars are portrayed as giants. The huge screens with projected rock concert signs, the giant iPods and the cameras used to follow the Blue Men into the audience are only a few examples of the many electronic devices used in the show. Words scroll across the gigantic screen demonstrating the nonsensical statements that people type into the Internet for hours on end.

The unstated message is that people spend too much time on their gadgets and not enough time with each other in the real world. The irony of the piece is that it uses a massive amount of equipment to create its satire of technology. If the Blue Men had gone any further they would have become hypocritical, becoming just one more negative impact of technology. But they stop short of that, and their clever use of technology not only strengthens their case but also gets the audience pumped.

The whole point of the show is to open the eyes of the audience to their disconnection with other people, how they waste their precious time on their little gadgets when they should be out living their lives. The show's use of electricity strengthens its case because they take things that we do every day and magnify them. Our habits become so exaggerated and comical that we are essentially laughing at ourselves.

By Martha Robichaud

BLUE MAN GROUP WIPES AWAY THE BLUES

Even before the curtains are drawn back, one can tell that underneath all the silliness of "Blue Man Group" there is a message. Simply projected on the closed curtain is the following quote from "International Diplomacy for Dummies": "When you first meet people from a foreign culture, a great way to break the ice is to offer a few gifts as a gesture of friendship. It's always good to choose items that reflect your personal interests, and it's even better if it's something you have created yourself." Coming from a book for dummies, this is actually a rather sage message, both humorous and serious. Although the physical souvenirs that the Blue Men offer their audience are somewhat ridiculous (like a chewed-up pile of gumballs), they also give their audience a more serious gift: two hours of reflection on what defines our modern culture.

The Blue Men are literally just men painted blue, but there's something very alien about them. With their shaven blue heads and yellowish-green eyes, the Blue Men appear entirely unearthly. It's in the way they move, too: their synchronicity is so exact that it evokes a great laugh from the audience, but also looks rather eerie. These men manage

to create an entire culture without ever saying a word. To the Blue Men, our world is foreign. The Blue Men gaze in wonder at the ridiculous technology used in this show. All of the electronics that we know and love are blown up to proportions that make even the audience take a step back and look at all of our modern devices as would an alien.

The laughs begin before any live person enters the stage. The computerized instructions to “please turn off cell phones” turn into a tiff between the two computers. While one ribbon of text is streamed across the right hand of the stage making the regular, serious comments, another ribbon of text is streamed across the other side of the stage making sardonic comments about the other’s simple instructions. The second ribbon of text begs the audience not to text because, “it makes the old people feel inadequate.”

Interestingly enough, the show’s creators don’t seem to be big fans of phones, computers and iWhatever’s. In one scene, huge “gPods,” essentially enlarged iPods, descend from the ceiling and, in a catchy song, share some very sad facts about the effect of modern technology on our society. According to the Blue Men, Americans are wasting away in front of their computers and are forgetting how to have real human connections.

But for a show that seems to be mourning the new age of technology, “Blue Man Group” certainly uses a lot of it. It is one of the most technologically advanced shows out there, employing light tricks and projections that seem to come from a Hollywood film set. The Blue Men transform themselves into digital images through a “game” on the gPods, play instruments that seeming only exist on a computer screen and make some truly magical costume changes. Although there is a lot of light and noise, “Blue Man Group” is more than just a loud, flashy spectacle. There’s something that feels very personal beneath all the craziness. The Blue Men aren’t exactly accusatory, but by mirroring our society they provoke from the audience an almost guilty awareness of modern culture’s insanity.

“Blue Man Group” uses everything and anything to make music. Some highlights include sewage pipes connected at different angles and shortened or lengthened to create different pitches, a three-piece melodic instrument made from plastic tubes, and giant balls that are thrown into the audience for a grand finale. The audience is allowed to play with these giant balls as if they are balloons meant to be kept in the air at a party. Later, the Blue Men ask if the audience will “kindly push their balls forward” but to be gentle lest we should “cause them to retract up into the...theater.”

Although these instruments are perhaps a bit over the top, they are fascinating to watch. These foreign instruments create the sense of a new and strange culture, serving as a foil to our own. After all, our instruments would seem just as strange to the aliens as their instruments seem to us. The band behind the blue men, playing classic rock instruments, is flawless. The blue men and the musicians play a range of songs, from things they’d written themselves to classical pieces to Lady Gaga.

The humor in “Blue Man Group” is perhaps somewhat sick at times, playing mostly to teenage boys. However, this type of juvenile humor actually fits in quite well in the context of the show. In a song near the end, the creator of the show manages to find just about every possible English euphemism for the word “butt” and fit them in a catchy techno song that has the entire audience on their feet and wiggling their behinds.

In addition to the sexual humor were the gags that were truly bizarre and disgusting. At one point, a poor unsuspecting audience member is brought on stage to eat Twinkies with the Blue Men. She is given a body suit to wear, which later spurts out what looks like Twinkie throw-up. But the joke isn’t the sheer repulsiveness of this act. The joke of these strange gags is actually the audience’s reaction. When something unusual happens on stage, it forces the audience members to reconsider their idea of normality.

An even more exciting example of audience participation has a man put in a suit and helmet, brought backstage, bound, painted, hung upside down and thrown against a white canvas. This is filmed by the cameraman, who also takes some nice close-ups of audience members earlier on in the show. Beware if arriving late, for you will be filmed as you enter and the image of your ashamed face will be displayed on the huge screen to the tune of the “You’re Late” song. All this embarrassment has a profound impact of the audience, though. By the end of the show the audience is able to unabashedly groove to the “Shake Your Butts” song.

Those Blue Men are smart. There are plenty of shows that have fancy special effects and loud noises, but “Blue Man Group” is able to do this in a way that keeps an audience completely engaged without overdoing it. Every transition is seamless and every scene is equally awe-inspiring and funny. The Blue Men are completely in-tune with one another, able to coordinate or de-coordinate their movements exactly to create the perfect moment. It is the skill of the performers, artistic designers, and musicians combined that creates this powerhouse of a show. “Blue Man Group” is one of the most stimulating shows running, but it’s also one of the most reflective. It’s more than a show—it’s a fable.

By Samuel Davidoff-Gore

BLUE MEN MAKE ART, FRIENDS

There is nothing more liberating than standing in a theater and shaking your behind while giant glowing balls fly through the air. You forget all social norms that would otherwise bind you to your seat and you allow your inhibitions to float away, just like those colorful orbs. Here is your opportunity to simply enjoy the moment and then crudely laugh as the announcer requests that you “Please return our balls to the stage.” At that moment, you are free and you are happy. You leave the show and spread this liberating giddiness, a worthwhile goal for any production.

“Blue Man Group” can only be described as performance art. The premise of a stage dominated by three men with blue heads and blue hands is wild enough; throw in pop-rock-electronica-drumline fusion music, incredible technology-based scenes and a knack for silent comedy and you have a truly unique experience. And although the unique experience could easily turn into gaudy slapstick, creators Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton and Chris Wink walk the line between bad comedy and true art perfectly. They have created a tour-de-force, a show that will amaze audiences performance after performance and is amazing audiences at the Hippodrome Theatre until November 7.

The show is entertaining, to say the least. The audience laughs throughout the performance and comes out of it with smiles on their faces. But “Blue Man Group” is not just entertaining; rather, it tells a story of three men exploring the world. They certainly do not look like any human the audience has ever seen, nor are they in a world anyone has ever visited. They must find their way and take the audience with them through this world they are discovering. They make art and friends, gaining an appreciation for the strange land in which they find themselves. It is a story of enlightenment and discovery that spreads its message to the audience, with the-more-occasional crude joke thrown in.

The show holds the audience’s attention from the beginning. Two opposing sections of a news ticker ask the audience to “Please yell if you are paying attention.” And of course, the audience complies. The tickers banter as they announce the typical turn-off-your-cell-phone bit, but then they single out audience members, wishing one a happy birthday, congratulating another on being a boring human being. And just when you are getting sick of scrolling messages, the scrim lights up to reveal three blue men drumming. The music pulses, getting faster as the strobe lights increase in frequency until suddenly the stage goes dark. The curtain rises and the audience meets the Blue Men.

The Blue Men are, well, oddities. They do not talk but perform with a connection that transcends verbal communication. They begin their journey of exploration by examining what happens when paint is poured onto drums. The paint flies and they discover that by holding a piece of white board above it, they can create art. The exploration continues with the art making; paint filled gumballs and multiple marshmallows caught in one of the Blue Men’s mouth form a multi-colored splatter painting and an austere, sticky sculpture respectively. The Blue Men have created something together, which they in turn share with the audience, bringing them into this world.

The show journeys on as giant iPods descend, providing apps that, among other things, synopsise great pieces of literature, teach how to multitask and amplify the sound of chewing Cap’n Crunch cereal. These “gPods,” as they’re called, demonstrate technology’s ability to produce music; rhythm can come from any source and music from any muse. The technology provides stunning visuals to entice the audience including computer-generated images of the Blue Men. These images mirror the Blue Men; when an image changes costume, so does the Blue Man it represents. The connections within technology echo the connections created within the show.

Even older technology, such as that modern marvel indoor plumbing, are used to create music and a mindset that anything can be made into art. The Blue Men only know how to explore through the creation of art, and through this discovery, they bring meaning beyond the show. Life is full of art waiting to be created.

“Blue Man Group” employs a stagehand whose job is to film a live feed during some parts of the show that get projected on a screen. The first time this happens, the Blue Men go into the audience, not doing much in particular. After selecting a participant, they go back to a table where they make a 15-minute bit about eating Twinkies. In the end, mashed-up Twinkie come out of orifices in their shirts as well as the participants. There is no value in this scene; it plays to cheap laughs instead of devoting time to music and art. Despite the funniness of the scene, it does not hold up to the high standards of the rest of the show.

Again, the Blue Men select a volunteer, but this time, they send him backstage to put on a helmet and a white suit while a live feed shows that he is being used as a human paintbrush. He emerges, unharmed, and goes back to his seat a friend of the Blue Men. This friendship is what is special about the audience participation used by the Blue Man Group. Rather than using the participant just for laughs, this approach makes the point that the person next to you can be your friend, that he can help you create something. At the start of the show, the Blue Men have no friends, so they need to make some. By going through the audience, they meet people and through contact turn them into friends. The performers construct a lasting connection with the audience, something most shows cannot do.

Despite the acts and the technology, the focus of “Blue Man Group” is the music. One particularly good musical sequence involves a pipe drum where each pipe is pitched for a different note. The Blue Men start beating out recognizable tunes, including Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance.” The audience jams along with the Men and the band, somewhat hidden on platforms but recognizable due to black-lit suits. The music pumps up the audience, sending driving, powerful sound waves into the crowd. While there are few memorable original melodies, the sound stays with you long after the show is over. The sheer force of the beats embeds them in the audience’s minds. And it is that force that propels those giant balls into the air.

“Blue Man Group” is about connections: connections through technology, tactile connections and connections through emotions. The Blue Men create a world of connections by making art. The show opens with a quote from the book “International Diplomacy for Dummies”: “Ultimately, the very best way to forge a lasting friendship is to create something together.” That is what the Blue Men have done with each other and with the audience. It does not just present a story to the audience, it incorporates them into the story, creating a new one each night.

So while you shake your behind, trying to touch the giant ball that has somehow made it to your seat, you see that giant grin on your neighbor’s face and you know you have created something. The Blue Men have provided you with the materials: the music, the balls and the setting. They have shown you how to make art, but it is up to you to follow through with their message. That something is an experience, a friendship. We must work together to create art, and in turn, fellowship. Thus “Blue Man Group” teaches and thus the audience learns. And you are free and you are happy.

Rock of Ages

By Chris D'Arienzo

At the Hippodrome Theatre through December 5

By Aaron Bell

THE '80S ROCK ALL AGES

Leave the small children with the babysitter; we're taking a trip back to the raunchy, trash-talking '80s. Have a seat and travel back in time as we pick out familiar pictures from the wall of the Bourbon Room, a rock-tastic club where most of "Rock of Ages," the new musical at the Hippodrome Theatre, takes place. Before the rock'n'roll epic commences, we are asked to please not engage in any anachronistic electronic activity, such as texting and Bluetooth, though the announcer communicates the instructions in a much more vulgar way, complete with authentic '80s insults. This linguistic freedom contributes to a larger message of doing what one feels and not what one is forced to do.

A lot of material from this sub-genre of musical theater, the rock musical, can be classified as simply "fun" and "exciting," but "Rock of Ages" proves to be more than that. It tells the important story of a dreamer who loses sight of his goal, then finds it through re-evaluation of what he cherishes and works for. Other rock musicals often serve as little more than a loose chain of intense music connected by a weak plot. This show skips past that level and sets a bar for new rock musicals to come.

Lonny (Patrick Lewallen) starts off on a high-energy, high-pitched David Lee Roth original, "Just Like Paradise," leading into the prominent '80s anthem "Nothing But a Good Time," originally sung by Poison. His growls fill the Bourbon Room with an energetic, wild atmosphere that establishes the show's mood.

Lewallen demonstrates powerful singing and great energy as he cartwheels, nun-chucks and delivers well-timed comic lines while introducing the other characters. The show holds nothing back. Foul language becomes normal in the dialogue; there's a scene where an ensemble member nonchalantly performs oral sex, and Drew (Constantine Maroulis) uses a bathroom profanity as if it were a recurring form of punctuation. Audience members who've lived through all or part of the '80s feel at home and completely not offended; they find all the dirty humor hilarious.

For all the comedy, though, the characters are faced with tough decisions caused by harsh circumstances. Sherrie, for example, is estranged from her parents because of her dream of theatrical stardom. When she goes to work at a strip club, she sees the cost of freedom—the obligation to do what's necessary despite one's distaste for it. She makes the headstrong decision to join the club out of confusion about making her own choices versus making the right choices. She later finds that true freedom comes not from making mistakes but from reevaluating oneself because of them.

More trauma occurs when the Bourbon Room is threatened to be shut down as part of urban renewal. When the father-son duo of Hertz and Franz (Bret Tuomi and Travis Walker) purchase redevelopment rights for the entire Sunset Strip, a spirited protest breaks out. A particularly rambunctious character, Regina (Casey Tuma) leads the protesters through two iconic songs, "We Built This City" and "We're Not Gonna Take It." These fit perfectly with the show's theme of rebellion and the choice to do what's right in one's heart. The score contains many such chart-topping hits from the 1980s that effectively help the plot and character development along.

As Drew, Maroulis begins as a laidback, quiet guy with a huge dream to grace stages with his music, comically displayed in "I Wanna Rock," originally by Twisted Sister. As Sherrie, Faulkenberry is more confident from the start but also harbors big dreams, skillfully sung in Night Ranger's "Sister Christian." They find inspiration in each other, and that's what causes Maroulis to become a bolder, more secure person.

Throughout the show, Drew and Sherrie have a few falling-outs and try their hardest to forget about each other. Drew gets his chance at rock stardom, then has a change of heart upon seeing the blindness of rock legend Stacey Jaxx's (MiG Ayesa) to what's really important. Drew sees the dark underside to being a rock star, chooses Sherrie over fame and fortune, runs to her and declares his love.

Drew represents anyone with a goal, and his perseverance says to the dreamer, "If you've set your heart on something, go after it." He goes after his music goals but eventually makes a decision to chase after what truly matters to him: Sherrie's heart. In a romantic, powerfully sung ballad, she accepts.

As an inspirational model to younger kids and adults and a great jukebox musical that will undoubtedly bring back memories for anyone who's had the chance to rock back in the real '80s, "Rock of Ages" is a thrilling experience not to be missed. Its feel-good elements of liberating tunes and message of perseverance will persuade anyone to not "stop believin'," as Journey once put it.

By Bri'Anna Horne

NOTHING BUT A GOOD TIME

With fog machines, strobe lights, strippers and '80s classic rock, "Rock of Ages" storms the stage of the Hippodrome Theatre. This raging jukebox musical mimics time travel, by taking the audience from a time when great rock music is often hard to come by to a time when a rock star's hair was huge and the fashion was anything tight and made of leather. Chris D'Arienzo does an excellent job of incorporating this feeling of time travel into the show which allows the audience to lose themselves in the seats of the theater and have nothing but a good time. As long as you're up for some loud fun and a blast from the past you'll be sure to enjoy.

The show completely throws itself into the '80s, allowing the audience to relive or be introduced to this rock and roll era of money, drugs, sex and fame. These realistic details help D'Arienzo make this time and place believable. The costumes are short, tight, sparkly, gaudy and risqué. Characters like Stacey Jaxx (MiG Ayesa), an insanely melodramatic rock star whose ego is almost as big as his hair, also evoke this bygone era.

A song choice that reveals an interesting truth about the show is Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive," especially the line "It's all the same; only the names have changed." This could not be truer, plot-wise. The plot stays true to timeless '80s love stories like "Sixteen Candles," "Pretty in Pink," and "Footloose," where a boy falls in love with a girl and sees his chances rise and fall throughout the story.

In "Rock of Ages" a shy, hopeful rocker named Drew (Constantine Maroulis) is working as a bus boy at a historic rock club called the Bourbon Room on the California's infamous Sunset Strip. He falls in love with the new waitress, an aspiring actress named Sherrie (Rebecca Faulkenberry). They are meant to be together but untimely forces drive them apart.

This show, however, does have some notable twists which help it stand out from those '80s classics. For example, two German contractors, a father and a son, plan to destroy the "birthplace of rock" and put in a mall. Stacey, who drives a nail through the possible relationship between Drew and Sherrie, is another notable twist. Other than that, the plot stays true to the classic struggle to be famous in the '80s, and for the most part you'll be correctly guessing the storyline the whole way through. However the show compensates for this predictability with top-notch acting, humor and great music.

Each performer in "Rock of Ages" gives his or her all, making the collective outcome even greater. The narrator for example, is a hilarious, sex-crazed closet case, while the German contractor's son has flamboyant personality that has the audience assuming he is gay. Both act as great comic relief as the relationship between Drew and Sherrie gets tense and the deadline for the destruction of Sunset Strip grows closer and closer.

The singing in the show starts off a little shaky, but each vocalist finds a comfort level amid the stage's neon signs and blinding strobe lights and the music comes together beautifully. The narrator is one of the most surprising singers; after making jokes for the first half, he suddenly belts out "Can't Fight This Feeling" with unexpected authority. Drew's strong voice as well got the audience's attention as he sang a variety of well remembered rock music from the '80s. When these great hits are played, one expects the audience to join in, but with the exception of a few hopeful head-boppers, sing-alongs are kept to a minimum.

Although this musical is entertaining, fair warning should be given that it is definitely not one for the whole family. The show finds it extremely difficult to go five minutes without making some sort of sexual innuendo. So if you do plan a family event to see "Rock of Ages," make sure your kids are older than 14.

Besides the great music and acting the time travel makes the show worthwhile. This is true because "Rock of Ages" allows us to relive, revisit and remember the '80s at their best. So if you are looking for nothing but a good time look no further. This '80s rock musical is just what you'll need for a flashback to a time and place that provided so many great experiences.

By Christie Smith

SAVED BY THE JOKES

We all know how the story goes: Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy has a dream. Girl has a dream. Someone comes along and tries to destroy their dreams. Someone else comes along and tries to destroy their relationship. Then by the end, everything is fixed and everyone happy. We've seen it. So why does it feel so exciting and new in "Rock of Ages"?

From the beginning, it's apparent that "Rock of Ages" presents a unique take on our typical romantic comedy. In the middle of an early dance number, the narrator interrupts, stopping everything and saying that because this is a musical, "You better introduce an effing love story."

The audience immediately knows two things: that it's going to get a romantic plot and that the love story isn't going to be taken too seriously. The writer (Chris D'Arienzo) and director (Kristin Hanggi) know how to keep an audience's attention: give them a taste of a typical Broadway plot line but make fun of it the entire time. This way, the show follows the model most theatergoers expect: an opening, a middle and a conclusion, with a story connecting the three. However, the story is mocked by comedy and by the atmosphere of a rock concert, therefore setting it apart from its predecessors.

A love story is introduced. Sherrie (Rebecca Faulkenberry), a beautiful aspiring actress, leaves her family in Kansas to go to the Sunset Strip, Los Angeles, to pursue her dreams. Once there, she meets Drew (Constantine Maroulis of "American Idol"), a wannabe rock star with the stage name Wolfgang. The audience instantly knows that a romance is budding, yet humor relieves the monotony of the formula to follow. It is the typical "love at first sight" scenario, where they bond over their dreams and love for cherry Slurpees. However, Drew's awkwardness in speech and Sherrie's overplayed "good girl," along with the narrator's sideline notes add a whole new comic element to the scene.

Comedy and laughs come in many shapes and forms in "Rock of Ages," the first being our narrator, Lonny (Patrick Lewallen.) Lonny's character is so over-the-top in terms of gestures, such as his spontaneous dance moves, that he appears ridiculous. It is impossible to take a love story seriously when the narrator manages to turn everything into a joke or sexual reference. Lonny makes the play all the more enjoyable by allowing us to laugh at and believe the love story at the same time.

When Lonny makes an entrance or exit, he is not just walking on or off. He might twirl onto the stage, spin around a pole, strike an effeminate pose or enter with toilet paper hanging out of his pants. He has no problem making the audience feel uncomfortable, whether that means telling everyone to make out with the person they are sitting next to or singling out a woman in the front row he finds attractive. Whenever a scene becomes too serious or the audience begins to get swept up in the romance, Lonny enters right on cue, even if it is just for a second, and relieves all of that intensity.

The unexpected plays a large role in generating laughs as well. The audience never has a chance to become comfortable with the love story before another curve ball is thrown in. When Sherrie is down on her luck, fighting with Drew and without a job, she meets a woman on the street who sings to her, comforting her. It might seem sweet at first, but we soon learn that this kind woman referred to as Justice (Teresa Stanley) is the owner of a strip club.

Drew also has bad luck finding comfort during his hard times. His "guardian angel," who is really just Lonny, reminds him that he must go on because he's in a musical called "Rock of Ages" that needs to be finished. He even produces a playbill to prove it—the same playbill audience members are holding. The audience isn't moved to sadness or sympathy for Sherrie or Drew but instead finds humor in their unfortunate situations. Lonny's reminder to Drew that this is only a show removes the seriousness of the situation, as does Justice's attempt to recruit Sherrie for her club.

The comedy in this show is critical, but it is not the only thing that makes up for the show's cheesy plot. The concert scenes play a big role, because viewers get the best of both worlds. Unlike a typical musical, where the audience members remain in their seats behind the fourth wall, "Rock of Ages" allows them to be a part of the music. As the fourth wall is broken, the audience can dance in their seats to the music or cheer for the musicians. Instead of watching the music advance a story line, viewers realize the music is not there to add an extra flair to the show or enhance the plot, but rather to serve as a main attraction. Along the way, the music consequently enhances the plot as well, while allowing viewers to immerse themselves in a rock concert.

After all, how many musicals allow one of the musicians to come down center stage and take a wailing guitar solo? How many musicals shine the spotlights into the audience? And how many musicals call for viewers to get on their feet and dance? The show possesses many lovable qualities of a rock concert, but just enough to support the show without overpowering it.

And of course we can't discredit the voices. It doesn't take much to realize that these actors really can sing—and sing well. Of course, one would hope that a show on such a professional level would hire talented singers, but this cast goes above and beyond. They have a difficult task set before them. The selected songs are some of the best music of the '80s. Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'," Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive" and Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" are hard to live up to, yet the cast does.

Most audience members knew the music at its most popular phase and can relate their own experiences to those on stage. The most impressive number is Sherrie and Drew's rendition of Damn Yankee's "High Enough," which really shows off Maroulis' and Faulkenberry's vocal chops, and makes a rather solemn moment in the play powerful. When comedy isn't present to relieve tensions, the music takes its place.

There are, of course, flaws in the show, but none are serious enough to really affect what is being strived for: a cheesy love story brought to life by humor, the unexpected, a concert setting and the voices of the singers. This truly is a feel-good show. The energy radiating from the actors during the final number instigates happiness in everyone watching. Every character appears on stage at once, covering it in its entirety. As they belt out "Don't Stop Believin'," they don't stand still even for a moment. And so the audience exits the theatre jovially, both smilin' and believin'.

By Emma Dohmeier

“AGES” ROCKS THE HIPPODROME

The lights go down and anticipation crackles in the theater as five men walk onstage and pick up their instruments. Sound blasts through the speakers as the elegant façade of the Hippodrome Theatre is transformed into a boisterous rock nightclub. This is “Rock of Ages,” a jukebox musical that takes songs from the ‘80s to weave a story about two naïve youngsters, Drew and Sherrie, who come to the Sunset Strip looking for fame. With tons of irreverent humor, raunchy and rollicking characters and a set list that can’t be beat, “Rock of Ages” definitely delivered an amusing and sometimes touching performance.

Unlike other jukebox musicals, the music in “Rock of Ages” dovetails with the plot and reveals the characters to be hilarious and sweet by turns. For example, when Drew (Constantine Maroulis) shows Sherrie (Rebecca Faulkenberry) the beginning of a song he wrote and she thinks it’s good, he suddenly says, “I love you,” but under his breath. The show takes some of the most well known and well liked music from the ‘80s to complement the story. Mostly everyone in the audience knows the songs and sings along with the actors as they bring back songs by Asia, Journey and Styx. Besides being well-known and well-liked the songs are all upbeat and catchy complemented by the hard chords of electric guitars, as in “We’re Not Gonna Take It,” which becomes the anthem for the characters’ protest.

Meet Drew: All he wants to do is rock but he hasn’t really figured out how to do it yet. So he bides his time working at the Bourbon Room, which is a rock club, writing music and doing the jobs no one else wants to do, like throwing away vomit-filled trash bags. Then he meets Sherrie, a girl from Kansas who dreams of being an actress to the dismay of her parents. Drew and Sherrie really start to like each other but soft-spoken Drew unintentionally sticks them in the friend zone. Then things really get complicated when the lead singer Stacie Jaxx, (MiG Ayesa) of the band, Arsenal, takes a shine to Sherrie.

Meanwhile the mayor is bribed into letting a German developer, Hertz (Bret Tuomi), and his son Franz (Travis Walker) remake the Sunset Strip into a clean and family-friendly location. The mayor’s assistant, Regina (Casey Tuma)—pronounced Reh-jye-nuh—tries her best to stop it but is kicked out, so she starts her own protest against the demolishers of the Strip. Due to the not-so-squeaky-clean nature of the Bourbon Room, Hertz decides it should be the first to go. But the owner, Dennis (Nick Cordero) and his partner in crime, Lonny (Patrick Lewallen), refuse to take that sitting down. Chaos ensues.

Throughout the performance Lonny also serves as your narrator; he explains the setting, gives background information, makes crude jokes and sometimes runs around with his pants on the ground. He also loves to make snide asides to the audience. For example, when Drew and Sherrie are on their first date and Drew says they are two “friends,” Lonny, who was spying on them, says, “He’s going to regret that.” Later in the show during a tense moment when Sherrie reminds Drew of what he said and Drew denies it, Lonny pops open a door and calls out, “Yes you did!”

Lonny definitely isn’t your run-of-the-mill narrator; he interacts a lot more with the audience, and he often stops the show to talk to us. It really gives us the feeling of actually being in the show with the actors and gives Lonny a chance for some humor that wouldn’t be possible with a regular narrator. For example, in the second act when Drew is feeling defeated, Lonny tries to cheer him up by pulling out a “Rock of Ages” Playbill and telling him that he has the power to change the script.

Right before the end of the first act Lonny walks onstage with a book called “Musicals for Dummies,” which he then proceeds to read to the audience, “The first act of a show usually ends with a bang or a flourish... usually accompanied by jazz hands.” As he walks off the final song in the first act starts and finishes; when the lights come up again, lo and behold the whole cast is wiggling their open-palm hands. Lonny has us in stitches whenever he comes onstage because of his cheeky attitude.

Maroulis’ portrayal of Drew is also skillfully done. Whenever Drew is talking he’s very quiet and awkward, like he’s unsure of himself, but when he gets a chance to sing he becomes a different person who’s loud and confident. It helps to show off his innate sweetness and shyness which makes his talent even more tremendous. After all, how often do you get to see a truly kind rock star? Those two things usually don’t mix.

The dancing throughout the show is impressive; not only is there a lot of it, but the choreography also isn’t easy. During the finale the whole cast is onstage and dancing to “Don’t Stop Believin’.” In the number everyone has to maneuver to different positions, while coinciding with the music and the rest of the cast. They play their air guitars

with the proficiency of musicians and with the sharpness and synchronization of professional dancers. The choreography exactly fits the music and the plot.

One thing that takes away from the performance is the giant video screen mounted on the back wall. Sometimes it just blends in with the scenery but other times it shows images or snippets of movies that distract from what is going on onstage.

Despite being a jukebox musical "Rock of Ages" has a more complicated plot than one expects. The multiple side plots are really funny and are integrated skillfully with the well written main storyline. In addition to the impressive narrative, the music really fits in with all that's going on in the story notwithstanding that the music wasn't actually written for the show.

"Rock of Ages" is a paragon of the jukebox musical. Its hilarious characters and already familiar songs keep the audience engaged and provide a chance to sing along. The use of a band that is actually onstage the entire time, rather than under it, helps to show off the talent of the musicians and makes them characters in the show rather than an isolated group only heard through the speakers. It also helped to reinforce the feeling of being at a rock concert or nightclub. So grab your legwarmers, embrace your inner rock star for a fist-pumping good time at the Hippodrome Theatre with the cast of "Rock of Ages."

By Kamille Jones

A DREAM IS A POWERFUL THING

The audience of "Rock of Ages" time travels from the present day at the Hippodrome Theatre to the 1980s in California. There they find themselves at a raw but universal rock show, "Live from Dupree's Bourbon Room." This nightclub is an urban, rundown rock sanctuary with a congested stage and a solitary spotlight. Nonetheless it provides an exhilarating experience that explains why the '80s remain so fascinating today. What separates this jukebox musical from its many competitors is a novel approach that breaks down barriers by evoking real life.

Rock music—as simple as it sounds—is the key to the play's purpose. The show can express the way actions and choices affect one another, because it chooses a fitting song for every mood, setting and situation. The music of the '80s fits because these are by far the most zealous songs of all time. "Rock of Ages" turns out to be about a whole lot more than just another jukebox musical; it becomes a living creature.

As a being, the show contains a body, voice, spirit, passion, love, ego, soul, breath, conscience and digestive system. Dupree's Bourbon Room, with its realistic bar, stage and lights, is not only the temple that houses every scene but also the body of this living being. One could even call it a monster, an inanimate object that acquires real-life emotions of its own.

The amazingly comical Lonny, the narrator and ironically the sound guy at the Bourbon Room, is the "voice" of the play. The voice's job is tell us what's happening and why. His monologues clarify the show's changing tone and bring it back to his comic control; Lonny, short and stocky with dark hair, wears leather and boots as if he were a rock star himself.

And with the voice comes the "spirit," Dennis Dupree. The owner of the Bourbon Room gives the show life not only by loving his club but also by being aware of its role as a force in the community. The club's inability to "generate adequate tax revenue" almost makes him give up. Even after "packing up" everything except the band, he keeps his head high by looking at the musicians and then out at the audience, saying, "I'm gonna need more bubble wrap." Dennis, with his long hair and deep voice, always laughs and rocks with Lonny on his side, especially when they sing, "I Can't Fight This Feeling," even as their beloved Bourbon Room comes to an end.

A young man, who calls himself Wolf Gang Von Cult but whose real name is Drew, represents "passion." He has a dream of becoming a rock star but he actually spends his days cleaning up at Dupree's. Drew's dreams of becoming a rock star are altered by the arrival of Sherrie, who represents "love." This aspiring actress comes into the Bourbon Room looking for a fresh start but finds romance's unmistakable hold instead.

Sherrie's first arrival in L.A. forces her naive mind to reassess the harsh reality of her career possibilities. As soon as she gets off the bus, her purse is snatched and she's shoved to the ground where Drew comes to her rescue. When she first walks into the Bourbon Room, she can see how life will be completely different without her mother and father. She sees that her idea that she would come to California and instantly become an actress has ground to a halt.

The relationship between Drew, tall and somewhat awkward, and Sherrie, with her wild prints and big hair, creates the romance that drives songs like "I Want to Know What Love Is." This gives the how its universal theme, love. A prop car and a misty street background frame an awkward first date that results in simple friendship. Their unfulfilled romance turns these two lovebirds with big dreams into a pizza man and a stripper.

This frustrated passion allows an opening for an "ego" in the beast, Stacey Jaxx. Jaxx who got his start in the Bourbon Room, comes back for a farewell performance and finds young ladies falling all over the place for him. He has the women, the money and the clothes but just cannot manage to get his act together. Stuck in the edgy hype of songs like "Wanted Dead or Alive," he just cannot find the right thing to do.

The "soul" of the second act is the strip-club owner with the heart of gold. Named Justice, this older woman in a long, flowing robe boasts a soulful voice which she pulls from the depths to hit every high note beautifully in "Every Rose Has Its Thorn."

Then there is Regina, who turns out to be very different from what her thick glasses and long skirts suggest. A young and peculiar girl whose outward appearance is distinctly different and whose voice is sharp and shrill, she is the "breath" of fresh air that gives the play much of its life. With Regina belts out "We Built This City" and "We're Not Gonna Take It," she makes clear her never-ending will for The Bourbon Room to thrive in the community.

Franz, a playful, energetic young man, is best characterized as the "conscience" of this living, breathing creature. He soon realizes the error of his ways in trying to change such a vital neighborhood and thus represents both the angel and the devil of decision-making in layman terms. He sings, "Hit Me with Your Best Shot," in his brightly colored leotard in his efforts to stand up to his father, Hertz.

Hertz acts as a less than healthy "digestive system" whose only concern is devouring the community. The stomach acids eventually are neutralized, though, through his realization of the importance of The Bourbon Room.

How real can a play get? When an audience member waves a real-life lighter in the air, it becomes a symbol of the appreciation for the raunchy, lascivious actions and language of the characters. This vulgarity gives the play a reality, vivid and filled to the brim with life. The relationship between Sherrie and Stacey Jaxx, for example, begins with a comic sex scene in the bathroom stall and ends with Stacey's brutal beating after an aggressive lap dance in a strip club. The reality of these untamed scenes allows the audience a guilty pleasure of being entertained by such rawness.

The drops of the "F" bomb and other curse words begin even prior to the characters' introductions. The emcee using a profanity to describe everyone who wears a Bluetooth does call for some questioning, but these small actions in the beginning prepare the audience for the lively two acts to come.

"Rock of Ages" is a living breathing creation designed by individuals and powered by rock and roll amplified times 10. It is fueled by every swing of the guitar player's shoulder-length hair and possibly by the food from Arby's right up the street from the Bourbon Room.

Does Dennis ever get his beloved Bourbon Room back? Does Stacey learn his lesson? What happens to Drew and Sherrie? If you want to know the answers to these questions, you'd better be ready to dream and keeping in mind Lonny's advice: "The dreams you go in with may not be the dreams you come out with, but they still Rock!"

By Martha Robichaud

"ROCK OF AGES" IS PRETTY RAD

The stage is adorned with eroticism— a "live nudes" sign, a poster of a busty pin-up girl wearing nothing but a red bikini and skimpily clad dancers. "Rock of Ages," like its '80s rock inspiration, is certainly a raunchy show. As the narrator puts it, "Rock of Ages" brings the audience back to "a sexier time—the Reagan Era." The show is about sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll—not much else.

But this is forgivable in a show like “Rock of Ages.” After all, that’s what ’80s rockers were all about. Perhaps we have romanticized the era a bit, but why not portray the world of rockers as they would have liked it to be portrayed? Taking into account its limited depth, this show is at least fun to watch. It’s like a Papa John’s pizza—universally tolerated and super tasty if one is in the mood for junk food. Granted, one might feel the urge to head to the gym after the third or fourth piece, but the pizza is at least temporarily satisfying and enjoyable.

The plot is purposefully formulaic. “Rock of Ages” parodies all the cheesy, predictable love movies made in “The Reagan Era” by following the format itself. The “dramatic conjurer” (a.k.a. narrator), Lonny (Patrick Lewallen), is played as a mix between Jack Black in “School of Rock” and Dr. Frankenfurter in “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” Lonny moves the plot along by reading aloud from his instructional manual about how to put on a show, explaining that every good plot needs love and drama and that jazz hands (the corny, hand-shaking end to all the musical numbers in ’30s through ’50s musicals) are generally recommended for the end of an act.

Not much can be said about the plot itself, but D’Arienzo wittily wrote this stereotypical love story so that it doesn’t matter that the plot is weak. The plot falls into the background while the jokes, music and dancing take precedence. “Rock of Ages” has everything that a show needs to keep an audience engaged: loud music and flashy lights, half naked girls in garters doing stripper dances, half naked men rocking out, love and loss, gay jokes and sex jokes. It may not be fine art, but at least there’s never a dull moment.

The characters are caricatures of the real-life rockers, sluts and old hippies from the ’80s. Drew (Constantine Maroulis of “American Idol” fame) does an excellent job playing the insecure rocker who moved from the Midwest to L.A. in hope of becoming a famous musician. For his unsteady wobble and shaky speaking voice that suddenly turns into a masterful singing voice, Maroulis was nominated for a Tony Award. Justice, played by Teresa Stanley, also does a beautiful job playing the soulful “mama” of a strip club, dazzling the audience with her booming voice.

The other performers do a good job making the show entertaining, although they fail to be as believable as Maroulis. Drew’s love interest, Sherrie (Rebecca Faulkenberry), does a good job singing and dancing, but not such a good job acting. Her voice is squeaky and annoying, and if anything she says her lines with too much feeling. The hippie city planner, Regina (Casey Tuma), plays a character that is supposed to be annoying but takes a little too far until it becomes difficult to listen to her voice at all. The wealthy conservative German (Bret Tuomi) and his flamboyant son (Travis Walker) never fail to entertain, although at times their heavy accents slip.

The costuming is fun, if a bit overdone. There may be a few too many stereotypes going on with the clothing (like the sparkly men’s shirts, cowboy hats and aqua-blue workout jumpsuits), but then the point of the show isn’t necessarily to be absolutely honest about the ’80s. In this context, stereotypes are acceptable. Similar to shows like “South Park,” everyone is attacked equally. Rocker dudes are made fun of just as much as the slutty girls that cling to them; the stereotypical straight characters are made fun of as much as the giddy and dramatic gay characters; liberals are teased just as much as conservatives, and typical crazy Americans just as much as clean, regimental Germans.

Like any of these new jukebox musicals, “Rock of Ages” puts the music first, the plot and the characters second. For those who were youths in the ’80s, “Rock of Ages” is a nostalgia trip. For those born after the ’80s, watching this show is like seeing a vintage rock show. It’s a nice, rare thing to be able to see the ’80’s pieces performed as they would have been back when the artists who performed them were still young. For many young people, those classic rock songs have been associated with their parents and so they aren’t “cool” (think of the song “1985” by Bowling for Soup). Seeing them performed live by handsome, leather-clad men changes one’s perspective a bit.

The atmosphere of the show is much like that of a concert. The awesomely talented (and garbed) band that kicks in when a main character breaks into song remains on the stage for the entire show. The music is well done—even the performers who don’t act terribly well have strong voices. The musicians who remain on stage never slip up, and look like they have a lot of fun playing ’80s rock night after night.

“Rock of Ages” is all about fun. There’s no deep, underlying message—but everyone comes out smiling. For those who lived through the ’80s, it’s like seeing a concert of all your old favorites with a comedy act added that pokes fun at all the silly pop culture of the time. But for those who didn’t live through those days, “Rock of Ages” is still “a blast.” There are a few jokes that only people who either lived through the ’80s or have done some rather extensive research would understand, but for the most part the jokes are relevant to people of all ages over twelve. “Rock of Ages” has sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. What else does a show need to keep its audience attentive?

By Samuel Davidoff-Gore

ROCK FOR THE AGES, PLAY FOR THE MASSES

The rock music of the late '70s, '80s and early '90s transformed a generation. The '80s were an era of crazy antics and even crazier clothes that affected many of today's young to middle-aged adults. It was an era of dreams; anyone could become a star if they set their mind to it. It seems natural that a musical about that scene would appeal to that age group but would leave the younger generation at odds. But "Rock of Ages," now at the Hippodrome Theater, proves that the '80s are alive and well in the hearts of Americans young and old. The music has stayed on the radio and its rebel attitude still pushes the young and young-at-heart to pursue their dreams.

The jukebox musical, on the other hand, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Most famously, "Mamma Mia" and "Jersey Boys" take the works of ABBA and Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons respectively and create popular shows focused on their music. In this vein, Chris D'Arienzo has created "Rock of Ages," a jukebox musical focusing on the rock'n'roll of the '80s.

It is the kind of show written to remind 30 and 40 year olds of the best times of their lives as well as the children of the '90s who grew up with these songs appearing on the radio. And this musical succeeds in this purpose; the target audience goes wild each time it recognizes a song. "Rock of Ages" is exciting audiences across the country; however, as a play it fails to take itself seriously enough. It leaves the crowd energized, but any attempt at having a truly substantial meaning is left at the doorstep, making this a show in need of a real message.

The younger generation has embraced the music of the '80s. The music has been reclassified as golden oldies and the songs have earned historical status. Just as the Beatles are indelible, so these songs have secured their place in pop culture with their idealistic messages. For example, Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" is an anthem that resonates among all ages, but "Rock of Ages" does not transfer the song's message to the plot. People love when they hear "Don't Stop Believing," but they gain nothing from its placement here. The song becomes a mere pop-culture artifact, turning "Rock of Ages" from a play to a show.

Besides the music, the main appeal of "Rock of Ages" is its crude humor. The plot is filled with sexual references, the choreography with gyrations and crotch grabs. Lonny (Patrick Lewallen), the narrator, contributes much of this. Throughout the show, he grinds his pelvis on whatever he can, grabbing it and pointing to it at every possible moment. He wears T-shirts discussing things like Camel Toes. But he is a lovable puppy dog of a character and extremely funny. This humor is essential to distract from the mediocre plot and to put the focus on the music; however, with a better plot, the copious innuendos would be unnecessary.

Unlike most musicals, "Rock of Ages" does not have much of a plot. And what plot it does have goes along the lines of boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy and girl go through rough patch, boy and girl rediscover each other and boy and girl have a happy ending. The boy, Drew (Constantine Maroulis of "American Idol" fame) is a wannabe rocker working at the famed Bourbon Room on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip. The Bourbon Room, run by Dennis Dupree (Nick Cordero), has given numerous rock legends their start, specifically Arsenal, the band led by Stacey Jaxx (MiG Ayesa). The girl, Sherrie (Rebecca Faulkenberry), is an aspiring actress from Payola, Kansas, who decides to move to L.A. When Sherrie is mugged on arrival, Drew stands up for her and a romance is born.

Meanwhile, German developer Hertz Kleinman (Bret Tuomi) and his stereotypically gay son Franz (Travis Walker) bribe the mayor of L.A. to let them demolish the Strip and redevelop it as a mall. The mayor's assistant, Regina (pronounced Reh-jye-nuh) (Casey Tuma), a rock devotee, leads the ensemble in protest with Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It." Thus the antagonists are introduced.

Drew and Sherrie proceed to a picnic date where Drew calls her a "friend," a dooming word for anyone truly in love. Back at the Bourbon Room, Stacey is with Arsenal to give their farewell performance, even though the rest of the band cannot stand him. He meets Sherrie and eventually has sex with her, devastating Drew. The concert starts and as Stacey sings, he gets knocked out. Drew takes over for Stacey and the crowd goes wild to "Cum on Feel the Noize."

While Drew has found success as a rocker, Sherrie is not as lucky. She is turned out onto the Strip and after having a heartfelt conversation with Justice (Teresa Stanley), the owner of the Venus Strip Club next door to the Bourbon Room, decides to become a stripper. And just when everything seems to be going sour for the main characters, we realize that we are in a musical comedy and a happy ending is in store.

Throughout the show, the music is greeted with roars of laughter and applause from the audience. Many are aptly placed within the script. For example, Journey's "Any Way You Want It" describes the services at the Venus, while Europe's "Final Countdown" anticipates the demolition of the Strip. When everyone is considering their present failures, they sing Poison's "Every Rose Has Its Thorn." During a fight scene, Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" rings through the theater. The songs not only incite nostalgia but also move the plot forward, bringing the rebel dreamer attitude to the forefront of the show.

"Rock of Ages" is not just a show with "White Snake and poop jokes," as it describes itself. All the characters have dreams. Some follow them; some give them up. But they never truly forget them. Drew wants to be a rocker and Sherrie an actress. Justice once wanted to be a great singer, Hertz to make formal wear for pets and Franz to own a confectionary. But not everyone can realize their dream. All struggle to make their dreams work and ultimately have to give them up. In fact, Franz is the only one to fulfill his dream, eventually opening a candy shop in Hamburg. But Drew and Sherrie leave L.A. and thoughts of stardom to have a family.

But the message of the show is not that dreams are useless. D'Arienzo puts in the line "The dreams you come in with may not be the dreams you leave with." And this is a great message. But "Rock of Ages" does not focus on this message. Rather, it concentrates on crude humor.

While driving rock songs and lines such as "I'm not gay, I'm just German" are enjoyable, they are no substitute for a good plot. "Rock of Ages" is extremely funny, especially since it recognizes that it is a show, and does not try to suspend the disbelief that this could actually happen. But as a play, "Rock of Ages" fails. If D'Arienzo had taken his theme of following dreams more seriously, then "Rock of Ages" would not only be hilarious, but meaningful. Despite the amazing singing, dancing and acting talent placed on the stage, the show's flaws are evident in all aspects. Crude script writing, abrasive lighting and awkward visuals add to the kitschy-ness.

As a show that entertains and excites the audience, "Rock of Ages" is excellent. As a play that affects the viewer, it fails, but that is not its goal. The purpose is to revere the music of the '80s, that transformative time in American musical history. So what if the humor is crude, the plot is weak and the message is obscured by being too obvious? The audience laughs and goes wild because it is entertainment for the masses. Which is not too bad for a musical these days.