

Catching up with Christo Davis, Head of Audio for Blue Man Group



Christo Davis, Head of Audio for the Blue Man Group World Tour, his deputy sound engineer, Isobel Rush.

For the very first time, the wildly entertaining Blue Man Group visited South Africa and whilst performing at The Teatro at Montecasino, Johannesburg celebrated the 200th performance of their World Tour. For the past year, South African Sound Engineer Christo Davis, has mixed an average of four shows or more a week as Head of Audio for the Blue Man Group World Tour on a DiGiCo SD7, with his deputy sound engineer covering the rest.

The Blue Man Group, established by three friends in 1991, is known for their award-winning shows that continually captivate audiences with music, comedy, fresh stories, custom instruments and technology to bring out a childlike response from an enthralled audience. The show visited both Johannesburg and Cape Town, Christo's hometown before he moved to Melbourne, Australia almost a decade ago and where musical theatre and a list of productions subsequently kept him from returning.

"I did a show with the Blue Man Group in Australia about four years ago and I just hit it off with the sound designer," Christo explained. "We had similar philosophies and approaches as to how we like to do things and thereafter he kept trying to get me back on the road. Last year it all lined up."

With his wife and their toddler travelling with him, Christo has seen the world and met great people while working on this high-energy act.

"What I enjoy most about the show is that the process is somewhat free," he explained. "There are not scripts or scores, and it's basically a bunch of people getting together and collaborating. The show is always evolving and never settles like many other performances do. Here you never quite get into a rhythm and the show is always moving. As an example, every night after the gig we have a note session with the performers and the audio department to sit down and chat about the show. Some nights there is nothing to talk about but many times we take about ten to twenty minutes to find out how the performance went. 'Did it work for everyone? Should we try something different tomorrow?' That sort of process. I really enjoy it because it sets it apart from all the other productions I've ever done."

Every show starts with a sound check and warm up. "Most of the time we work through ideas from discussions from the night before," he says. "On the nights where we don't have anything to talk about, we have a standard set list."

Christo has trained his deputy to mix the show and as is the custom in the Blue Man Group, shares information

with her “A big part of the job is training and passing on knowledge to your colleagues,” he says.

Talking about colleagues, each team member is carefully handpicked for the journey. “The Blue Man Group company philosophy is to try and find people who are good and fun to work with, so they won’t just employ you because you are a great drama person or a great sound engineer. It’s about personalities. I find that very refreshing, and you end up being on tour with a really great bunch of humans. It’s a privilege. I remember a speech we got from the Director when we started off the tour in Singapore. He said, ‘You have to remember you’re going to go on the road for a year, you’re going to be in each other’s faces all the time, you are going to be on stage together, you’re going to be working together and you’re going to be living in the same accommodation. And that’s why we picked every single person according to your personality as well as your skill.’ You don’t usually get that.”

The SD7 has become the console of choice for Christo, who has used it over the past three years. “I love the SD7, firstly because it’s very intuitive and even if you are new to the console, it doesn’t take long to find your way. It’s such a powerful package, I mean back in the day we used to tour with racks and racks of outboard gear and now you show up with your console and that’s pretty much all you need. It does sound pretty good too. At the early stages of digital consoles, they all sounded pretty harsh and unpleasant and then DiGiCo came along and nailed it. Now we have something that actually sounds good as well.”

The other drawcard for Christo is the dual engine – the redundancy system is invaluable. “I was telling a story to one of my colleagues the other day,” Christo recalls. “Some time ago I was doing a corporate when the power supply started burning. What do you do then? The show was over. Now we have the flexibility. I’ve got a backup sitting right there – it’s really great. The other nice thing about DiGiCo is the guys are really fantastic with fantastic support all over the world. I was in Singapore and we had issues with the console. We had a show stop because of a console and had been in talks with the support guys back in the UK. The console had just crashed again and while trying to fix it, James Gordan walked in. I was like, “How is that for service”. He happened to be in Singapore, heard about our issues and walked in. How do you top that? So the DiGiCo support has been great. I’m a big fan and it would be hard to go to another console after this.”

All the kit used on the Blue Man Group tour is supplied by Ampco Flashlight, a company based in The Netherlands. “We tour with all our kit. I think part of that is you get to know your equipment, how best to set it up and how to get the best results out of it especially in terms of the PA and the console. In the timeframe, we have to set up – we only have a couple of days –there is no time to troubleshoot pieces of gear, to have faulty pieces of equipment or to learn a new system. I know I can walk in, fly the PA within an hour and have an hour to tune the system to get ready for sound check. If I had to use different pieces of equipment I wouldn’t be able to get sound on that first night. That’s a big reason for us to tour with our own kit.”

In regards to sound, Christo gave The Teatro at Montecasino thumbs up. “It’s’ a fairly dead venue but not too dead – I’ve been to a few venues where a dead venue almost sounds bad. We are used to setting up with a live environment and that’s the chunk of the venues. When we get a venue that’s super dead, all the work we have done prior to that point is in vain and we have to start again because it all sounds different. A lot of people say a super dead venue is great, but I don’t think so. You need the acoustics and it becomes more natural otherwise it sounds very artificial. The Teatro was nice because it’s dead, but not too dead. You still have reflections, you still have that live element in the venue. It’s one of the nicer venues. I guess when they designed it they must have kept acoustics in mind. They gave it some thought which is great.”

Meet Christo

As a school boy growing up in Cape Town, Christo considered studying Marine Biology. When he was introduced to sound by his cousin, who had Christo work with him at a few gigs over the holidays, Christo went

back to school and started rethinking his future! “My cousin is still in the industry, he does outside broadcast and TV work.”

Christo’s first full-time job was at the Artscape Theatre Centre where he was employed as an in-house sound techie for a couple of years. When the Cats Musical came through in 2001, he decided to make contact with some of the internationals. “I started working on the show backstage, eventually moved to HOD and then went on tour with Cats. That’s where I started touring.”

The highlight of Christo’s career was making contact with System Sound, Australia. “After Cats, they offered me a few more tours and I did the Phantom of the Opera for a few years all over Asia.” Returning to Johannesburg, he did corporate work for Trevor Peters, whom he describes as a great man to work for. “From there I went touring again, and then I got the HOD on Lion King which opened the Teatro Theatre at Montecasino.”

When Christo was offered the touring opportunity for Phantom in Australia, he thought it was a great opportunity and would go for a year... he never left! Eventually, my partner (now wife) joined me and she has been there for eight years, I’ve been there for nine. In Australia I’ve done a couple of nice ones and I have been blessed to make a pretty half decent career out of it.”

Another highlight was working on Jersey Boys which travelled through Australia and New Zealand for three years. “That’s where I started using the SD7. Again I worked with a bunch of great designers from New York and it was a really fun show. It was such a fast pace and very challenging from an operator’s point of view. With that show, I went to Singapore too.

Thereafter Christo did a little stint with Blue Man Group in the Sidney, and then took a couple of months to breath and decide what to do next. During a slow patch in Australia, and having done the show in South Africa way back in the day before, he worked on The Rocky Horror Picture Show. “I was just assisting the operator at FOH, who was Robin Shuttleworth, and so it was nice to go on that tour for a few months.”

It has been an invaluable ten years for Christo, with a lot of knowledge, a lot of contacts made, a lot of life experience, and a lot of sacrifices in between. “It has been all good,” he says, and only time will tell if his heart will lead him back home to South Africa one day.