

On the Scene with Mark Russell at New York City's Public Theatre

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I. Introduction

International theater festivals are now in their third iteration, since they first emerged in the immediate post-WWII period. During "Phase I," these global events provided much needed, high-visibility performance opportunities after the war for outstanding theater artists to showcase their work. The Avignon or Edinburgh Festivals, both launched in 1947, are typical examples. During "Phase II," however, the programming of international fests expanded in order to serve their audiences more broadly. They began celebrating national and regional ensembles on their stages; and by including other media (art exhibitions, music concerts, film screenings) alongside the main theater offerings. Presently in "Phase III," festivals now serve their publics by offering a wide range of artistic products: noteworthy stage productions, art exhibitions and concerts, commissioned work, artistic conversations, workshops, touring programs, interdisciplinary experiences, interactive events, educational opportunities, and many other activities for very diverse and cosmopolitan audiences.

Despite the size and importance of these festivals today and the complicated challenges of their organization, very little critical attention has been paid to the management practices of the artistic directors who guide them. Instead, festival artists and productions showcased at these events receive the lion's share of attention. Yet over the past half-century as international theater festivals have continued to develop, artistic directors have devised a wide array of methods to create, organize, produce and sustain their events; and more attention needs to be paid to these management strategies.

This article examines a few of those strategies underlying programs at the *Under the Radar International Festival* (UTR) produced by New York City's Public Theater.

This annual event is certainly reflective of what is happening among the growing number of global festivals and their programs. Solidly established in its niche of experimental, interdisciplinary, contemporary theater, UTR serves "a global cultural community that crosses national boundaries and insists on the international character of culture," in the words of The Public's Artistic Director, Oskar Eustis.

This article explores how UTR's artistic directors source their programming, and how they create structures for involving their local communities beyond the basic need to attract audiences. The article also speculates on the need for further investigation of artistic management practices at global theater fests because the field desperately needs more detailed study in order to identify festival trends and publicize best practices among members of the American theater community.

II. Sourcing Performances

The *Under the Radar International Festival* is guided today by Artistic Director Mark Russell. No stranger to new and emerging theater trends, Russell served for more than two decades as Executive Artistic Director of New York's acclaimed PS122, an organization presenting and commissioning artists whose work challenges boundaries of live performance. Under Russell's leadership, and with the help of his co-director Meiyin Wang, UTR selected groups for this year's festival from carefully chosen world stages. These artists came recommended by a special group of global managers and producers who know Russell's work. "I have a lot of spies around the world who tell me, 'Mark, you have to see this one. This is the right one for you.'"¹

Russell was speaking of the challenges faced by many producers seeking artists and ensembles to populate their stages. Finding the work is perhaps the most crucial challenge that festival managers face because that's the *primary product* that audiences come to see; programming will mainly determine a festival's success or failure. UTR focuses on new international work: always contemporary and experimental, occasionally political, frequently interdisciplinary, and always surprising.

Though it may seem a relatively easy task to scout talent in the age of the Internet where so much information is available online, in fact the World Wide Web is poorly equipped to support the work of performing arts producers. Mainly, experimental theater productions cannot be easily scanned or assessed by televisual media, unlike 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional flatwork and sculpture. Hence, recruiting the talent for an international theater festival is especially challenging.

This year at UTR, for example, Russell and Wang lined-up contemporary performance artists as disparate as Lars Jan with his multimedia show *The Institute of Memory (TIME)*, set amidst glowing kinetic light sculptures; Antoine Defoort and Halory Goerger's *Germinal*, mixing visual art, theater, music and computers in a hilarious and thought-provoking show; and also a live recording of a serialized podcast about math, art, and everyday life, entitled *People Doing Math Live!* The 45-minute piece interacts with a live studio audience as they present feats of math, new music, and foleyed dramatics. "But I also cross that," Russell remarked, "with things that are not so well known. Like I'm bringing in Ahamfule Oluo from Seattle. He's a Nigerian-American storyteller who also leads a 16-piece big band. So it's going to be amazing to see what happens . . . they tear-up the rules."

The different production challenges of each show--UTR hosted eighteen troupes this season--need to be carefully assessed on-site around the world by festival managers who are considering inviting them. Festival organizers are not just seeking talented and original work, but also work that can be effectively produced at their venue: the ensemble's size, the technical support needed, and the scale of the work are just as important as the artistic and entertainment value of the production. Artistic directors call for submissions and proposals, of course, and they can review DVDs and access press and YouTube excerpts of productions by troupes seeking engagements. Yet all festival managers must also spend a great deal of time and money traveling in order to view performances and festival activities firsthand. Additionally, they travel in order to meet with other managers and share ideas about what they've seen lately. In the case of Russell and Wang, this means two things: choosing the appropriate festivals to visit,² and finding the appropriate managers with whom to share ideas.

Russell has a select list of special fests noted for producing the same kind of experimental and interdisciplinary work that he likes to bring to New York. Italy's well-known *Inteatro Festival* in Polverigi, for instance, features cutting-edge experimental theater (<http://www.inteatro.it/inteatro-festival/?lang=en>). Another of his favorites where he also has the opportunity to meet with other managers is the ten-day *Groningen Noordezon Performing Arts Festival* in northern Holland (<http://www.noorderzon.nl/en/>). "For the past three years we've met there because this particular festival seems to have its finger on up-and-coming artists." The *Groningen Festival* graces Russell's group with accommodations and show tickets for several days, while they view the work being

presented, speak with different artists, and exchange information on performances they've noted elsewhere.

"I've been doing this for thirty years and so I know a lot of people," Russell remarked. "And I've made a group I call 'The Directors' Circle' that combines people from around the world who green-light performances from their regions."

Russell and Wang's globetrotting efforts are not unique, however, especially when viewed against the work of other artistic directors from larger, multi-million-dollar festival events. Marie Collin, for example, the artistic director of theater offerings at the prestigious Paris Autumn Festival, also feels compelled to experience prospective work firsthand. "Yes, I travel a great deal each year to see productions," she remarked, "especially to discover new work I've only just heard about in order to be sure that it is right for our program in Paris."³ Yorgos Loukos, the former artistic director of the huge annual Athens-Epidaurus Festival, was also director of the Lyons Opera-Ballet; he would live for half the year in France, and tour the world with his ensemble each season. He was a one-man selection committee, in fact, globe-trotting in order to personally select all the artists for the Hellenic Festival's program.⁴

Some of these efforts of festival managers to identify good programming are given a boost by a unique network of managers based in Europe, active for more than thirty years: the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, or IETM (<https://www.ietm.org/>). Founded in 1981, IETM is an association of more than 500 performing arts organizations and individuals working in the field of contemporary performing arts worldwide. They meet informally to discuss theater, dance, circus, interdisciplinary live art forms, and new media. "I attend once in a while," Russell

pointed out. "They call them informal because originally they were meetings between festival directors who visited each others cities to see work and discuss issues in the field, the essence was the conversations and connections, not necessarily the plenary sessions."

IETM does not limit itself only to meetings and discussions where members can share ideas. They have an extensive list of publications dealing with contemporary festivals, they link practitioners with each other in order to share best practices, and they serve as a sort of lobbying organization for the whole field. "It's all about getting the work around," Russell emphasized. "With my director's circle, I'm trying to create a smaller group of people who can really talk to each other. About 25 people is right, and the relationships developing out of that have really supported some pieces that are important."

It isn't surprising that an organization like IETM should arise in order to serve the needs of performing arts presenters. There exists, after all, a "festival circuit" that many ensembles pursue each year as they tour their work globally. A few other professional associations flourish to serve the field--mainly in Europe--such as the European Festivals Association, or EFA. But while EFA and other organizations serve all the arts festivals (music, dance, theater, cinema, etc.), the IETM group focuses on contemporary performance work, especially interdisciplinary work.

It is important to note, however, that a number of artists, critics and managers have become suspicious of this emerging network of festivals, and the managers who direct them. More than a decade ago, for example, theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt sounded the first warnings about these global stages, observing: "A certain homogenization creeps into productions touring this circuit . . ."⁵ The Canadian critic, Mick Kaye, has

specifically questioned " . . . the emergence of an international touring theater in which visual spectacle, physical movement, and music--all of which can appear vaguely meaningful to an international audience--are at a premium . . . air-brushed 'Europroducts' that can move anywhere." ⁶ Recently, even more harsh criticism stems from artistic directors like Lee Su-Feh of Vancouver's Battery Opera: "I find the performing arts festival circuit to be one of the dullest things to have happened to the performing arts. The same work gets shown at festival main stages all over the world and they are mostly deadly dull."⁷

III. Community Engagement

Despite such criticism, global theater festivals continue to develop and expand each year. While searching worldwide each year for exciting new artists, many festival managers wish to do more than simply showcase the world-class productions they import. They also want to exert a positive influence on their local artistic communities by nurturing new work, promoting cultural discussions among the local spectators, converting abandoned spaces to popular arts venues, and similar projects. To this end, they build satellite activities into the festival experience for their audiences.

In Athens, for example, Yorgos Loukos boasted of the impact his festival has had upon the local theater scene: "I've found several abandoned factories in Athens and Piraeus and I've fixed them up. Now the people are really going there!" Educational outreach is another popular strategy that festivals use for nurturing the local community. Italian Artistic Director, Kiara Pipino, for example, who directs the small Valle Christi festival in Rapallo, Italy, hosted a touring theater ensemble from a university in the

United States during the off-season in March 2014 in order to serve English-speaking high school students in the Rapallo area where her festival gears-up every July.⁸

Russell, too, is passionate about scoring an impact upon the already-dense cultural landscape in New York. He partnered with the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP), to host a two-day professional symposium where APAP members could also see productions of festival shows at *Under the Radar*. APAP is the national service, advocacy and membership organization for the performing arts presenting industry in the United States; and the convener of APAP/NYC, the world's leading gathering of performing arts professionals every January in New York.⁹

Broadening the perspective of the artists themselves, in New York and the larger USA, is another goal shared by Russell and Wang. In 2015, for example, they brought in one group from Argentina and arranged a two-month national tour for them following their New York booking at The Public. "It was a show that had ten people in it, a big set, and we got him eight weeks of touring in the United States," Russell remarked. "In doing that we saved on visa costs, travel expenses, and other things." Russell also spread the word about the work of the company in doing so.

In her second year in 2015 as co-director of *Under the Radar*, Meiyin Wang shared Russell's passionate concern for UTR's community. In a 2015 interview, she remarked to Jody Christoferson:

One of the things that is most important to me is the experience of the festival community--the audience, the artists and the staff. How do we create moments for the community to come together? How do you create

the best environment for the collision of different ideas, senses and aesthetic propositions . . . How do we create the contexts for formal and informal conversations?¹⁰

A third way in which Russell and Wang served the local cultural community this year was by linking *Under the Radar* to local businesses, offering paratheatrical activities for his audiences. Many theaters, of course, partner with local businesses like bars and restaurants, offering theater patrons reduced rates on dining. *Under the Radar*, however, takes this approach a step further. This year Russell renovated the spacious Levin Mezzanine above The Public's main lobby in order to create what he calls "the library" where audiences can meet and chat with the artists.

"It's this area where we expect the artists to hang out after the shows," he explained. "Each artist has created a list of books that inspired him. And then the Strand Bookshop searched through the files and found those books. And they'll be on display. So you can go and say, 'Oh, I saw that show!' And then you can see where the artist is coming from." Russell also made sure that his artists marked-up the books and left notes in them: "They've put in notations and you can also write a card and stick it in the book yourself to respond to their markings. Or take the card out and buy the book."¹¹

Russell and co-Director Wang also staggered the performance times for all of the groups at UTR, so that artists have many opportunities to see each others' work, audiences have a variety of performance times to select, and opportunities for artistic exchange abound. For example, one of this season's plays from South America, *Escuela*, written and directed by Chilean artist Guillermo Calderón, performed over a four-day period, with early and late afternoon curtains as well as early and late evening curtains.

And with multiple stages in The Public's Theater complex, more than one title was scheduled on a single day. *Escuela*, for instance, performed on one day with nine other mixed media presentations from around the world.

Numerous curtain times, innovative discussions and artistic panels, neighborhood connections, unusual theatrical environments--these kinds of activities make global theater festivals today more than simply high-impact stages for showcasing world-class productions. In fact, strategies fostering public engagement at international theater fests are extremely diverse and creative. At the annual Avignon Festival, for example, series such as the innovative "Thought Workshops" and "Discussions" are well attended by the public and the artists. In fact, panel discussions with Avignon artists and related events are carried-on year-round in major French cities. In 2016, the Hong Kong Arts Festival offered numerous symposia, workshops and panels with the artists, including the opportunity to get onstage as extras in the Italian opera presented by Teatro Regio Torino.

Interactive events with spectators are extremely popular.¹² As one festivalgoer expressed it after visiting Montréal's Festival TransAmériques: "This project brought together a group of artists from around the world. It allowed me to establish new contacts with others in my chosen field, and also with other theater disciplines . . . I made fantastic new contacts, met interesting young artists and had incredible group experiences."¹³

Mark Russell at The Public Theater summed up his work as follows: "I'm trying to create a place where the real way to see this festival is to see more than one show in a day. I'd like to give people the same kind of experience that I have when I go to a festival, where

I can see a dozen shows in a few days, and a lot of people don't have access to that experience."

IV. Money Matters

Building this kind of a schedule that offers many shows in residence, and keeping the artists performing and interacting over a two-week period, is a costly and difficult task. "Originally I was trying to keep people here for two weeks," Russell said: "But that became a little too expensive. So now it's more like a 'regular' festival where people come in for three, four or five days. Most groups end up coming in for seven days, but we keep the festival rolling on a sort of repertory basis so there are many different starting times."

Tight budgets limit not only the amount of *time* that *Under the Radar* can host its artists in New York, but budgets also affect the *choice* of artists that a manager can engage. For example, Russell pointed out that it took him the better part of two years to raise the artistic fees required to host this year's production of *Germinal*, one of Europe's most talked-about productions since its Avignon debut in 2013. Many small festival producers face this challenge because a touring show with its artists and technicians, its sets and costumes and special equipment, is undoubtedly an expensive proposition. As a result, many groups do charge hefty fees for appearances: they depend on festival opportunities to earn additional income and generate international publicity for their work through global touring.

In fact, some acclaimed companies, such as the international ensemble directed by Italian "superstar" Romeo Castellucci, have reached the point where they no longer perform for any "local" community at all where they're based. They can't afford to.

Instead, they prefer to generate work only in their private studios and then present it for cosmopolitan audiences found at large, high-impact global venues. Or they seek residencies at festivals that offer them hefty subsidies to create work on the festival site itself, and then present it exclusively for that particular venue.

"Romeo Castelucci works almost exclusively for festivals, and I believe he produces most of his own work," comments Kiara Pipino, Artistic Director of the small Valle Christi festival. "And famous companies tend to insanely increase their summer fees," she points out. Her solution has been to seek out younger artists whose fees are more reasonable. Or to locate famous ensembles who are already on tour near her theater in Rapallo: "They might negotiate a better rate if your venue happens to be conveniently located in between two other dates and geographic locations--literally, if it's 'on the way'."

V. Future Development of *Under the Radar*

Mark Russell is also interested in nurturing the work of American artists, particularly emerging artists in the New York theater community. "I'm trying to build the muscles of another generation of artists, and I consider theater-making as a direction to move in." The *Under the Radar Festival* expanded to create the Public Theater's Devised Theater Initiative, a program of year round activities committed to the exploration of new modes of creating and supporting work, and the creation of systems to support the full life of a project, from inception to production and beyond.

In 2016, *Under the Radar* featured in its main program new work by the first group of these emerging theater-makers. The Royal Osiris Karaoke Ensemble's *The Art of*

Luv (Part I): Elliot was a multimedia installation performance ritual dealing with the search for love. Another Incoming Series troupe that was also on the 2016 program was Dark Matter's *#ITGETSBITTER*, a trans South Asian performance art duo that has also performed to sold-out audiences at LaMama, the Brooklyn Museum, and other New York venues. Russell and his Co-Director Wang described these ensembles as "artists who are charting new ground in different ways and harnessing the energy of the contemporary moment--at the intersection of gender, race, politics, and technology."¹⁴

The 2017 The Public Theater's *Under the Radar Festival* will repeat this project that nourishes American artists. "We take those folks who are usually earlier in the process," Russell explained. "We meet with them monthly, and they fall into a cohort who talk to each other. We answer their questions, we see all their work, we develop them and we give them a showing here--not for review. It's a festival within our larger festival called 'incoming.'"

But his "Incoming Series" is only a step on the way to what Russell sees as his main future goals. For example, he would dearly love to begin commissioning large productions as many European festivals and their partners do. "I don't have a commissioning partner yet," he lamented:

"I do have a seed fund, a small fund, and then a finishing fund that comes into play after someone has commissioned something. It helps artists finish a show before they get here. We're again modeled on that European system where two or three festivals will join together to support an artist and commission their work. The work might be built in one venue and then tour to the others who have funded the work sight unseen. So we're trying

to get to that place but I just haven't found that big batch of money yet."

Russell would also like to create more touring opportunities for productions that he discovers, or even creates with commissions, in order to stimulate new artistic approaches and practices. "One of my dreams is to have a three-city *Under the Radar*. It would happen in three cities almost simultaneously. I think this work needs to be seen more. I remember seeing Robert Wilson when I was growing up in Texas. The idea is to see this field more, give this field more exposure to the different ways of making theater." He even has one group in mind: the Belgian theatre ensemble, STAN (<http://www.stan.be/content.asp?path=ktn91dcb>), that would be an excellent candidate for introducing American theater-makers to new methods for creating productions.

VI. Conclusion

Russell and Wang devoted considerable effort this season not just to showcase the stage productions, but also to engage the public with "satellite" activities, and nurture the exchange of ideas among the artists themselves. *Under the Radar* is also helping cultivate new theater artists and advance their careers by sponsoring their rehearsal and development work at The Public Theater. And their festival is gradually moving towards a point where it can actually drive major new developments in the art form through commissions, in the same way that major European festivals have been doing over the past half-century.

For these reasons, his comments on the 2016 UTR Festival shed important light on how arts managers operate in this ever-growing arena of global culture. This article has been based mainly on Russell's comments in an interview that took place on January

6, the opening date of UTR 2016. Hence, the discussion here barely scratches the surface of the global phenomenon that international theater festivals have become, and their impact upon performing arts worldwide.

One of the topics that surfaced during this discussion and that was not pursued in any depth is the issue of the *economic* strategies of festival organizers. Financing, of course, affects artists, programs, working conditions, performance environments, and even public policy decisions in cities and nations where festivals take place. How does one generate the money needed for a large international festival? How does one balance public and private resources allocated to festivals? Does that balance differ significant from country to country? What exactly is the impact of finances upon the artistic product? And related to this is the question of *marketing*: what innovative strategies have festival organizers devised over the years to gather audiences and deliver artistic product at reasonable prices for this type of unique artistic event?

A second aspect of global theater fests that certainly demands more attention is the challenge of "globalization." For example, are local cultural groups being helped or harmed by the presence of a major world festival taking place in their "home territory?" In the case of The Public Theater's *Under the Radar*, it might be valuable to examine how Russell's relationships with other performing arts producers in New York have developed as UTR's audiences have grown. Is it dangerous to see a once-a-year event harvesting the human and financial resources of a community in order to showcase "out of town" international talent?

Stepping back from *Under the Radar* to regard the field as a whole, one might also ask about the intercultural conflicts that these festivals sometimes engender. For

example, are local societal values--religious, ethnic, political--strengthened or devalued by certain types of performance styles or the content of the production itself? And in the case of developing nations, what sort of *ethical* constraints should govern work that is rooted in a foreign culture, and then transported *as entertainment product* to western stages in Europe and North America?

Not the least important question that needs to be studied is the motivation of festival producers like Russell who are passionately devoted to bringing the finest international stage productions to their local audiences. What motivates them to produce this kind of event? What selection criteria do they share for the work they seek? How did they begin their festivals? How long does it normally take a festival to firmly establish itself and become a “sustainable event?”

Happily, the Public Theater's *Under the Radar* festival is generating a lot of buzz these days in the American theater community as its importance and influence grows. One can only hope that its impact in the years ahead will continue to center upon artists and their work, following an arts management model that the most prestigious international theater festivals have already established elsewhere.

Footnotes

¹ Interview with Mark Russell. New York City, 6 January 2016.

² The global "festival universe" today is very large, numbering in my count more than 200+ in the area of theater alone. Thus all festival managers must be selective in choosing what festivals to visit. Theatre Communications Group in the United States, for example, lists more than 150 noteworthy global theater festivals each year; and the European Festival Association (EFA) boasts more than 150 member festivals in music, theater and dance in Europe alone. In fact, the number of such festivals seems to increase annually, challenging artistic directors with an ever-increasing smorgasbord of work to choose from. Teresa Eyring, former Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group, commented on the popularity of global festivals, suggesting that these events help us realize “. . . the ways we function as citizens of this theatre community. . . connecting human beings across time, borders and social and economic strata.” (“My Own Baltimore Waltz,” *American Theatre*, Sept. 2009: 6.).

³ Interview with Marie Collin. Paris, France. 12 Oct. 2009.

⁴ For more information on the work of Marie Collin and Yorgos Loukos, see my article, "Serving Publics: International theater Festivals and Their Global Audiences," *International Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, V. 1 No. 12 (August 2011).

⁵ Reinelt, J. (2001). "Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a 'New' Europe." *Theatre Journal*, 53(3), 365–387. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068949>, p.385.

⁶ Kaye, Mick. *Art Into Theatre: Performance, Interviews and Documents*. Amsterdam: Harwood, Academic, 1996), p. 219.

⁷ Quoted in Ferguson, Alex Lazardis. "Symbolic Capital and Relationships of Flow: Canada, Europe, and the International Performing Arts Festival Circuit." *Theatre Research in Canada* 34.1 (2013): p.114.

⁸ Interview with Dr. Kiara Pipino, 15 February 2016.

⁹ Video highlights of this year's APAP conference can be found on their website: <http://www.apapnyc.apap365.org/news/Pages/2016-Video-Highlights.aspx>. Insightful presentations by global artists and managers cover such topics as "Making Art and the Evolutionary Process," "Emerging Markets: Deepening the Connection with Your Community," and "Relevancy + Advocacy + Audience Building = \$."

¹⁰ Jody Christopherson. "Under the Radar 2015: An Interview with Co-Director Meiyin Wang." *The Huffington Post*, U.S. Edition, 01/07/2015. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jody-christopherson/post_8810_b_6430860.html.

¹¹ In addition to the informal venue of the Levin mezzanine, Russell and Wang also scheduled nine post-show discussions and two Saturday round tables during the two-week festival--all of which were free and open to the public.

¹² "You've got to have meat-on-a-stick, too," asserts Russell, noting the family-friendly approach of many festivals that he visits.

¹³ Comment posted on the "Testimonials from Participants" section of the 2016 website of the Festival TransAmériques: <http://fta.ca/en/our-initiatives/international-rendezvous/>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1.