

# MARK RUSSELL

## Catching the Next Big Thing



A week in the life of  
Under the Radar's  
impresario

BY ELIZA BENT

Mark Russell at Under the Radar 2010.

JEFF CLARKE

**IF THERE IS ONE THEATRE EVENT IN NEW YORK** City that draws a cross-section of theatre types—enthusiasts, hybrid artists, students, professionals, intellectuals, hipsters, arts presenters and international guests—it is the Public Theater's Under the Radar festival. Highlighting the work of both emerging and heavy-hitting artists from international and domestic locales, the festival first took place at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn in 2005. Since then—perhaps because it wisely coincides with the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) conference—UTR has taken over the downtown scene in the unlikeliest of months: January.

Due to UTR's gravitational pull of producers, presenters and international glitterati, a number of other theatre festivals have sprouted up alongside it, such as Performance Space 122's COIL Festival and the Incubator Arts Project's Other Forces. Additionally, each year a number of independent groups slap up mini-showings in pubs and alternative spaces in hopes of attracting stray presenters. Such is the fervor of Under the Radar, and the buzz that surrounds it, that backlash is inevitable: Last year one artist's Facebook status message quipped, "I am so over the radar."

But such remarks and copycat festivals don't seem to faze Mark Russell, UTR's artistic director and producer. In fact, one senses he enjoys the flattery.

So what makes the man behind the ever-expanding festival tick? What are his idiosyncrasies? Most important, what governs the theatrical taste that whips up such an interesting and often challenging festival year after year? Curious whether a "week-in-the-life" approach might yield any interesting

insights, I e-mail the Public's PR staff to ask if Russell would mind having a temporary shadow—one with a notebook.

**WHEN THEY HEAR ABOUT MY EXPERIMENTAL** article idea, Public Theater director of communications Candi Adams and press manager Josh Ferri immediately zip back enthusiastic e-mails and organize an initial meeting. Heading down to the Public on a gray November afternoon, I realize Russell is the only person that hasn't chimed in, and this makes me a bit uneasy.

The labyrinthine journey to the Public's administrative offices is exacerbated by the theatre's massive reconstruction and renovation efforts, slated to finish in December. Ferri gives a warm welcome and shepherds me to the UTR office, where Russell, who has salt-and-pepper chin-length hair and sports black jeans, is conferring with stylish associate artistic producer Meiyin Wang. The windowless office, crammed with books, posters, tchotchkes and bulletin boards, is on par size-wise with a Manhattan bedroom—or broom closet. Still, the computers, printer and fax machine look more up-to-date than those at many not-for-profits. With the producing pair sits one of their interns (they have 4, and when the festival is in full swing this number mushrooms to 15, not including production help).

Ferri and Russell decide it's best to chat in a glass-walled conference room, and down some stairs we go. "I'm really nervous about this," Russell blurts out before I've taken out pencil, paper or Moleskine agenda. He's loose-lipped, he says, and doesn't want to get in trouble. "I let stuff fly," he

declares with a shrug. “And I hate reality TV.”

In an attempt to establish trust, I claim I hate reality TV, too, and blush as I think of my secret passion for “Jersey Shore” while describing what this article hopes to achieve. But Russell interjects that Under the Radar deadlines are looming, that festival books must be printed pronto and that final travel arrangements for artists need to be made ASAP. “Plus, have you seen our website?” he deadpans. (The site, as of that afternoon, still lists 2010’s info.) “We’re in deep shit.”

Russell’s sardonic, quick-witted sense of humor carries over into a brief lamentation of the life of a presenter. “Yes, it’s hard to travel to foreign countries and stay in three-star hotels,” he says with mock pain and a twinkle in his eye. He wonders how many more continental breakfasts he can withstand.

Next week he’ll meet with Universes, the Bronx-based group he has championed since his days as artistic director of P.S. 122. I mention how I’d recently had to wrangle a Universes photo for this magazine. “There’s only one good photo, right? The rest are just awful!” he exclaims, then quickly covers his mouth. “See?” he gasps. “Look what I’ve already said.”

The meeting lasts under 20 minutes.

#### ARRIVING AT NOON A FEW DAYS LATER,

I collide with half of the Universes foursome. The article with their photo has just come out and as we head up to the offices I promise Mildred Ruiz-Sapp and Steven Sapp that I’ll send them a copy. Once upstairs, Russell, not realizing that I’ve met the pair, introduces me as “Erica.” Ruiz-Sapp gently corrects the artistic director, who slaps himself on the forehead: “Now we’re really off to a great start.”

We head back down to the Public’s lobby, an airy marble space with café tables, natural sunlight and high ceilings. Russell immediately gets down to business. Universes will present *Ameriville* in repertory with *Jump*, a workshop production directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, written by David Greenspan and performed by composer Nora York. As the nitty-gritties of space-sharing get sorted, Russell dryly observes that Universes’ second performance, an afternoon showing, will be full of “vipers”—i.e., industry professionals. They bounce around ideas about how to get “real humans,” specifically students, who will appreciate hip-hop aesthetics, into the show. Russell worries that colleges won’t be back in session (this year’s UTR has its earliest start yet—Jan. 5), but Universes

recently received a New York Foundation for the Arts grant that will enable them to hire a part-time educational coordinator. At Ruiz-Sapp’s suggestion, the group also decides to reach out to *El Diario* and *El Vocero*, along with English-language weeklies such as *Time Out New York* and the *Village Voice*.

Russell wants to know what Universes’ dream is for its piece. The pair weighs the possibility of a six-month residency at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. If *Ameriville*—which has been road-tested at the Humana Festival in 2009 and more recently at Maryland’s Round House Theatre—is picked up by interested presenters, the show could tour with a different ensemble. “It would be great to do this piece about America in America,” Ruiz-Sapp emphasizes.

Russell would like to get some non-theatre people involved to enrich the post-show panel discussions. “A theme of *resistance* runs through this year’s festival,” he says, adding that he’s usually terrible at articulating festival themes. On the resistance forefront will be Belarus’s Free Theater, which did *Generation Jeans* at UTR in 2008 and regularly gets shut down when it performs on its home turf. “The

story of their oppression is one thing,” says Russell. “But they’re also making amazing work.” He is excited they will return with *Being Harold Pinter*. Ruiz-Sapp assures Russell that she knows some “very resisting people” who will make for good panel candidates.

Wang reminds Universes that they need to send over more photos for promotional materials and a lively debate ensues. A photo the group dislikes haunts them. “That photo follows you around because it’s the best fucking one!” Russell interjects good naturedly.

As the meeting winds down, Russell and Wang have an exchange that shows their simpatico-sarcastico working relationship:

**RUSSELL:** We’re already working on next year’s line-up...

**WANG:** And we’re already over-booked.

**RUSSELL:** But it’s all full of 40-year-old white men! That’s where we start.

**WANG:** Good thing the office is 50 percent diverse.

**RUSSELL:** Oh, you don’t count!

Adjourning to their pied-à-terre of an office, Wang says, looking at her e-mail,

A promotional poster for the Chicago Theatre Capital of America 2011. The poster features a white background with purple and pink text. At the top right, it says "MAY 18-22 2011" in large purple letters. Below that, "CHICAGO THEATRE CAPITAL OF AMERICA\*" is written in black, followed by the tagline "Past. Present. Future." in purple. The main title "A SCHOLARLY SYMPOSIUM" is in large pink letters, with "HOSTED BY THE THEATRE DEPARTMENT OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO" in black below it. A quote from Michael Billington of The Guardian (2004) is featured in white text on a purple background. At the bottom, the Columbia College Chicago logo is on the left, and the website "colum.edu/TheatreSymposium" and email "cdiffraction@spokanejournal.com" are on the right. A pink circular graphic on the right side contains the text "create... change".

“That meeting stressed me out a bit, because we’ve got to do that for 18 shows.” Opening his e-mail too, Russell sighs. “I know.”

**JOHANNA KLASS FROM POLAND'S** Adam Mickiewicz Institute greets Russell and Wang in their office. She’s so jet-lagged, she says, she’s forgotten to bring the snow globe she intended to give them as a gift.

Russell and Klass relocate to the lobby and Klass launches into a spirited description of *Small Narration*, a one-man show by emerging talent Wojtek Ziemilski. When Klass pronounces the name, Russell jokes, “You’ll write that down for me.” *Small Narration* is about Ziemilski’s intellectual grandfather who was persecuted by the National Memory Institute, a nationalistic political organization. The show involves just a laptop and Ziemilski’s artful ponderings and recollections. “It’s about the nature of truth and dealing with the past. It is so engaging,” she says, adding, “Plus, it’s only 50 minutes. And it’s cheap to make.” Russell wonders how much Americans will need to be informed about Poland’s political situation and reminds Klass he’s booked up for this year. Still, he’s potentially interested

in bringing it over next year. He muses regretfully, “It would be hard to bring it to Radar L.A., since that has a Pacific Rim focus.”

They catch up about colleagues and friends, and Klass describes a festival she wants Russell to attend in the spring. They do a quick date check. Russell may have to come a couple days late, so as not to miss his seven-year-old son’s birthday. “No problem,” Klass assures him. “I’ll make sure all the good programming is in the second half.”

Wang joins the group and Russell begins to tell her about *Small Narration*.

“Mark—we’ve seen that show,” says Wang. “On DVD. It was great.”

“Did we like it?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Klass and Russell share a laugh and Klass reassures him that she too has “junior moments.” She zips off for another meeting, Wang goes back to the office and at last Russell and I sit down for a chat.

**ELIZA BENT:** Tell me about Radar L.A.

**MARK RUSSELL:** I was appalled by some of my first theatre conferences, where people didn’t see shows. I had to realize it was because they

usually just *read* shows and then do their own versions. But as a presenter, my perspective is that you *go and see stuff*. That’s where the original UTR impulse came from. Timing another festival with TCG’s June conference in L.A. seemed like a good plan.

The Radar L.A. project started because Olga Garay, the head of Cultural Affairs in Los Angeles, gave money to start a West Coast version of UTR with a Pacific Rim focus. We’re doing it at REDCAT and Los Angeles Theatre Center, which is basically L.A.’s version of the Public Theater. It’s an old bank and has a beautiful lobby with six different theatres and rehearsal space—pretty juicy. It’s different working at this distance. People keep asking where they’re going to park.

**How did you come to theatre?**

I did a lot of time in Texas and moved around the Midwest with my family. I ended up in the University of Texas at Austin’s theatre department—which wasn’t hard to do! And I had some really great directors. One of my mentors was Polish, and she set up a trip to Poland. Back in the ’70s there were two paths—*A Chorus Line* and Grotowski. I took

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the brooding path! Poland transformed me. I was there for four weeks in 1977 and spent eight days with Grotowski as a guinea pig doing para-theatrical things. We went off to a castle and worked with Ryszard Cieslak. We were running through the woods.

**That seems to happen a lot in Poland.**

It does! When I came to New York I found theatre didn't adapt well to the politics I was interested in. Theatre was very straight-down, very male-run. So I hung out with dancers and performance artists. I sold advertising for a magazine called *Other Stages*, which eventually folded. Three weeks later I was running P.S. 122. They told me my pay would be \$7,000 for the year, including unemployment. So I'd hire and fire myself. Everyone at 122 worked that way for a long time. Then I appointed myself artistic director, and flipped our rental model to a producing/presenting one, which helped us get more grants and united our fractured audiences. I used to say I was a theatre director directing a theatre.

**Now you're directing a festival.**

I'm using the same set of skills in a dif-

ferent way. My theatre directing skills are pretty rusty. Every once in a while I try to do something creative just to remind myself how fucking hard it is! I had to give up that directing urge in order to have a clear view of the work itself and not just think about my entry into it. I often think that's what I'll do when I retire. Sometimes I think it'd be fun to do a pistachio—no, a *pastiche*—a corny piece about all my influences, from Meredith Monk and Pina Bausch to Richard Foreman.

**Tell me more about your time at P.S. 122.**

I was there for 21 years. It became an identity. After Sept. 11, I didn't really see eye-to-eye with the board and I left in March of 2004. But when I hit one of those crises I work harder. You know, sleep when I'm dead.

**That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So how did UTR come about?**

It started from the question over why the producing and presenting worlds don't intersect more. Places like the Walker Art Center, Wexner Center for the Arts and On the Boards are rare. Groups like the Builders Association and the Wooster Group

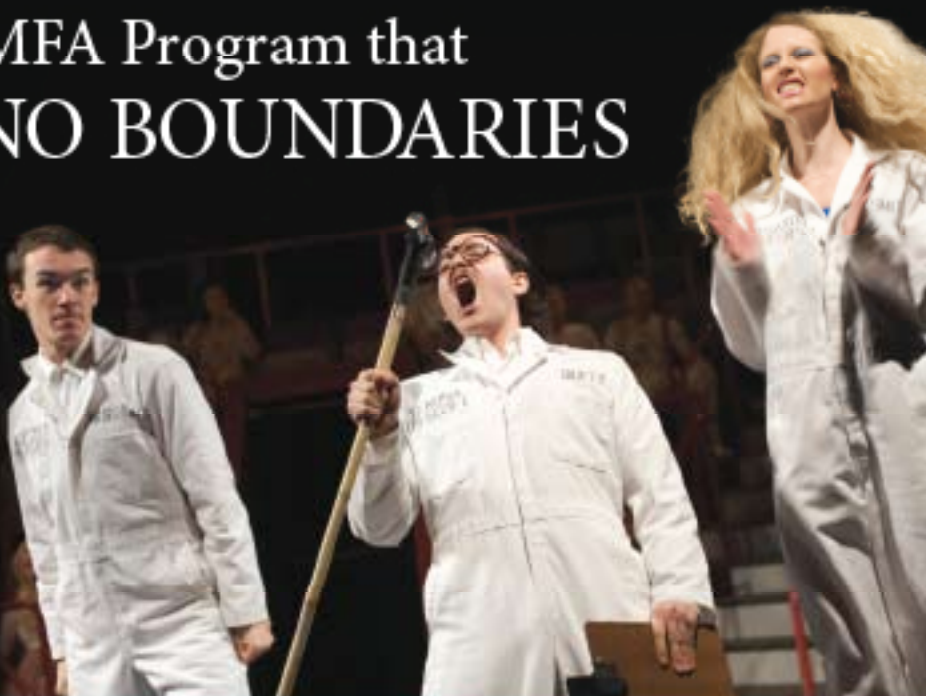
wouldn't exist without them. We'd been doing conferences about new work and there were people who'd say, "I do new work. I do readings every weekend." But we were talking about something else: We were talking about *producing*.

The Doris Duke Foundation gave me money through APAP to have another conference at which we'd *see the work*. Participants would have to wake up early. We still work with APAP—we'll never lose our connection to it—though the Public has taken on producing and fundraising UTR. The Public has been a great place to work. Oskar Eustis has been so generous to let me go crazy in his theatre each year. I think I am the only one he lets program something he doesn't know. That takes a lot of trust. We're setting up the Devised Theater Initiative at the Public, a new pilot project supported by the Mellon Foundation, which will deal with devised work year round, not just during UTR. Primarily presenters come to UTR, but slowly we're getting producers and regional theatres as well. Part of what I'm trying to do is raise awareness of the U.S. artists I'm putting beside well-known European artists. That

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way, European presenters will consider them to be of the same caliber. There's a 90-percent success rate of people getting other gigs after they've been at UTR. It's been very effective; still, UTR isn't going to solve your career!

**Certainly not for the other 10 percent.**

**Does UTR have a mission?**

Yes, but I can't repeat it. I wrote it down once late at night. (*Laughter*) If there's a mission, it's to provide a platform for this type of work on a global scale.

**"Type of work...?"**

Well, how do you say it? I've been struggling with it for seven years now. (*He grabs the promotional materials and reads*) "Catch the next big thing?" I'm always trying to work "masters" in. We forget the whole world doesn't know the SITI Company. So yeah, it's hardly fuckin' Under the Radar. For Radar L.A., another name I liked was the "X Factor." What is it that makes *good* theatre? What makes a piece strong?

**Why do you pick what you pick?**

I'm more of a gut curator than an intellectual

one. I lean toward "programmer." With visual art it's easier to be a curator, but in theatre it falls apart so fast. I'd love to do all the *Antigones* I find interesting, and have one from Ariane Mnouchkine, one from the Wooster Group—but I can't do that! I try to survey the field and find the most interesting things that rub up against each other. I ask, "Does this show need to be seen by presenters, producers and audiences in New York City?"

**What's your take on the subset of festivals blossoming around UTR?**

It's a good thing. I was trying to wrap a string around the whole world and umbrella things I didn't need to. Now presenters know they'll be in this land of a thousand festivals!

At one point we were going to make it a citywide festival with a brand. Like UTRJazz, UTR Global Fest, UTR Dance. Maybe I'll regret not having gone that super-scope way. But right now I feel—maybe with hubris—that we're a flagship festival. We aren't going wider, we are going deeper. We need to make our own festival strong and sometimes that means limiting its range. Our motto

in the office this year was "Just Say No."

**Good words to live by. Is all Under the Radar work "finished"?**

We have a few premieres this year. The Gate, from Ireland, is doing a condensation of Beckett's novel *Watt*, but doesn't want reviews. What makes that piece UTR? Its excellence, and the fact that it's directed by a young director, Tom Creed. It's his first piece at the Gate. It's maybe the most mainstream thing I'm doing. But I need groups like that, or like SITI, that are portals into the festival for the uninitiated. Then we can stretch the audiences so they go across the street and see something with no actors in it at all.

**Which show is that?**

*Bonanza*, by a Belgian group called Berlin. They went to Bonanza, Colo., and made a five-channel installation about the town. It rolls like a documentary but it's got a set. There's this question: Is it theatre? They're taking what the Civilians do with investigative theatre and taking it the next step into film.

**Have you seen every show you select?**

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Hell no! Some I've seen live and some have just been from DVDs. I do a lot of triangulation. If I can't see something live, I check with all my various sources and spies before taking that leap.

Tell me about working with Meiyin.

I am so lucky to have someone who gets it. I'm constantly trying to figure out ways to challenge her so she doesn't get bored. She's a director herself, so I try to support that. I think that Meiyin is the future of this field—she is a rock star and it is a privilege to work with her.

What's next for UTR down the road?

I want to work on gathering other alternative festivals—like TBA in Portland, Ore., Fusebox in Austin and Philly Live Arts—and see if there's anything to share and talk about. I'm gonna wait on that, though. I didn't need another project this year.

### IT'S THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, AND WE'VE

agreed to meet for a show at the Incubator Arts Project: Karinne Keithley's *Montgomery Park, or Opulence*, a challenging combination of poetry and performance. Russell inquires what the running time is and then whispers, "Set the attention span!" The space is split into two distinct sections. After putting down coats and bags in the theatre area, ticket-holders are instructed to walk around the interactive museum area and read posted text, listen to recordings and watch video installations. The second half includes dance, radio, paper cutouts and creepily harmonized songs. Late in the show there are references to a duck speaking French. Russell and I leave baffled, but not entirely beaten down.

"I can't say I hated it!" he enthuses as we march over to a bar for a ginger fizz. "There's a lot of artists out there in the wake of Richard Foreman, and, I don't know, sometimes their minds aren't as interesting. Her mind was interesting, though! I can't say I got it, but she's up to something."

As we hash out our views on other artists whose work interests us, it occurs to me I should get Russell's inside take on international festivals I should try to visit. I take out a pencil and try to keep up with his rapid-fire opinions and ever-candid descriptions. I've heard of most festivals he mentions, but one, in Italy, doesn't ring any bells.

"Now *that* one is under the radar," he jokes. "They're up in the mountains. They don't even have a website!" ☒



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