

Global to Local: Management Strategies at New York's *Under the Radar* International Theatre Festival

Dr. Roger Ellis

Grand Valley State University
1 Campus Drive
School of Communications 290LSH
Allendale, MI 49401 USA

Abstract

This article highlights some key management practices of today's international theatre festivals, and identifies some of the daunting challenges that festival directors face. The article focuses special attention upon New York's Under the Radar Festival that has been taking place at The Public Theater for the past dozen years. The development of international theatre festivals over the past sixty years--of which Under the Radar Festival plays a part--has attracted the notice of artists, producers, critics, scholars and the general public. This article identifies methods of selecting artists and companies; strategies for building festival activities for the local community; and establishing mechanisms for sponsoring artists & commissioning new work in the future. While focusing on the Under the Radar Festival, the study relies on interviews with artists and managers, published research, and comparisons with other global theatre festivals.

Keywords: Theatre Festivals - Drama Festivals - Theatre Management - Global Festivals

Over the past half-century as international theatre festivals have established themselves and flourished on nearly every continent, artistic directors have devised a wide array of strategies to create, organize, produce and sustain their events. These hundreds of festivals have almost as many management strategies as there are festivals themselves, but the underlying challenges that artistic directors have encountered over the decades have remained constant: locating shows, securing funding, preparing and staffing venues, gathering audiences, and cultivating artists.

The Public Theatre's *Under the Radar Festival* in New York City is a small, emerging international festival. Now in its 13th iteration, it is still a "new kid on the block" by comparison with other world fests that have become household words in the global theatre community: the Avignon and Edinburgh Festivals (1947), the Paris Autumn Festival (1972), the Sydney and Singapore Festivals (1977), and others. As *Under the Radar Festival* launched its 12th season in early January 2016, its founding director, Mark Russell, reflected on the Festival's growth and where he saw it developing in the years ahead.

I. Seeking Performances

"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. *Under the Radar Festival* 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 theatre productions cannot be easily scanned or assessed by televisual media, unlike 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional flatwork and sculpture. This year at *Under the Radar*, for example, Russell and his Co-Director Meiyin 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, theatre, 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 remarks, "with things that are not so well known. Like I'm bringing in Ahamefule 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."

Thus, the different production challenges of these types of shows--*Under the Radar* hosted a modest eighteen troupes this season--need to be carefully assessed on-site by festival managers. Artistic directors receive submissions and proposals, of course, and they can review DVDs and access press and YouTube excerpts of productions by troupes seeking engagements; but 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 Mark Russell's case, 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, featuring cutting-edge experimental theatre, is one such venue that he visits regularly (<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 Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival* in northern Holland (<http://www.noorderzon.nl/en/>). "For the past three years we've met there because there's really bad cellphone reception and no one has any friends out there; and this particular festival seems to have its finger on up-and-coming artists." The *Groningen Festival* graces Russell's group of artistic directors with accommodations and show tickets for several days, while they view the work on festival stages, 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--it's a sort of 'secret society' to some extent--I call 'The Directors' Circle' that combines people from around the world who green-light products from their regions." He hopes this core group of managers will be his major asset in the future for building programs at *Under the Radar* each year--and perhaps even reduce his travel time and expenses chasing down artists worldwide and exploring new groups.

Russell's globetrotting efforts are not unique, especially when viewed against the work of artistic directors from much larger world festivals. Marie Collin, for example, the artistic director of theatre offerings at the prestigious Paris Autumn Festival, also spends a large amount of her time travelling each year. "Yes, I must travel a great deal to see the work," 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, artistic director of the annual Athens-Epidauros Festival, is also director of the Lyons Opera-Ballet; he lives for half the year in France, touring the world with his ensemble each season. He's 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, that has been 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: theatre, dance, circus, interdisciplinary live art forms, and new media. "A lot of people go to the IETM meetings to see everybody. I jump in once in awhile," Russell pointed out. "They call them informal meetings because they just pick a city and they all meet there--maybe 150 people. These are festival directors. They see work in that city and talk over issues they're facing."

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 points out. "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 around the globe. 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, theatre, 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, 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 theatre 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

II. Community Engagement

While searching worldwide each year for exciting new artists, many festival managers also wish to do more than simply showcase the world-class shows that they import; they also want to exert a positive influence upon their local artistic communities by nurturing new work, promoting cultural discussions among the public, 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 boasts of the impact his festival has had upon the local theatre 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 Italy, hosted a touring theatre 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. In 2016, for example, 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 City.⁹

Broadening the perspective of theatre artists in the United States is another goal shared by Russell and his Co-Director 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 . . . 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.

A third way in which Russell and Wang serve the local cultural community is by linking *Under the Radar* to local businesses, offering paratheatrical activities for his audiences. Many theatres, of course, link their programs to local businesses like bars and restaurants, offering theatre 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 explains. "Each artist has created a list of books that inspired them. 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 yeah, I saw that show!' And then you can see where the artist is coming from." He 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."¹⁰

Russell and Co-Director Wang have also staggered the performance times for all of the groups at *Under the Radar*, 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, performs 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 theatre complex, more than one title will be scheduled on a single day. *Escuela*, for instance, performed on one day with nine other presentations from around the world.

Numerous curtain times, innovative discussions and artistic panels, unusual theatrical environments--these kinds of activities make global theatre festivals today more than simply high-impact stages for showcasing world-class productions. In fact, strategies fostering public engagement at international theatre 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. 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.¹¹ 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 theatre disciplines . . . I made fantastic new contacts, met interesting young artists and had incredible group experiences."¹²

Mark Russell at The Public 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 slip in for a dozen shows, and a lot of people don't have that experience."

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 no easy 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 five or seven days, but we keep the festival rolling on a sort of repertory basis so there are many different starting times."

Of course, tight budgets limit not only the amount of *time* that Russell can host his artists in New York, but they also affect the *choice* of artists that a manager can engage. For example, he points out that it took him the better part of two years to raise the artistic fees required to bring in this year's production of *Gertrude*, one of Europe's most talked-about productions since its Avignon debut in 2013. And many small festival producers face this same challenge because many artists depend on the opportunity to earn additional income and generate international publicity for their work through global touring. As a result, they charge hefty fees for appearances.

Some of these artists, in fact, never perform for any "local" community at all, preferring to generate work only in their studios and then present it for cosmopolitan audiences found at festival venues. "Romeo Castellucci works almost exclusively for festivals, and I believe he produces most of his own work," comments Kiara Pipino of the small Valle Christi festival. "And famous companies tend to insanely increase their summer fees," she points out. Her solution, of course, is to aim at younger artists where fees are more reasonable. Or to locate more famous ensembles who are already on tour near 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')."

Building opportunities for festival dialogue the way that Russell does at *Under the Radar*--dialogue among the artists themselves and between artists and the public--is no easy task, yet it seems to be a crucial feature of the most successful global theatre festivals today.

III. Future Development of the Festival

Mark Russell is also interested in nurturing the work of American artists, particularly emerging artists in the New York theatre community. "I'm trying to build the muscles of another generation of artists, and I consider theatre-making as a direction to move in. I'm digging deep into the local . . ." Russell has integrated The Public Theatre's "Devised Theater Initiative" into his *Under the Radar Festival* to help achieve this. The "Initiative" invites a select group of talented theater-makers at all stage of their careers to make their artistic home at the public for a year: a project "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."¹³ He calls this part of his program "The Incoming Series."

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 describe 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 *Under the Radar Festival* will repeat this project that nourishes American artists. "We take those folks that are usually earlier in the process. 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. But they get to do their shows twice here at The Public. It's an easy kind of theatre to do, because . . . we can say, 'Here's the keys, take two months and here you go.'"

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 laments:

"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 something before they get here. We're again modeled on that European system where two or three festivals will get around an artist and commission their work. Maybe build it in one of the venues, and then maybe run it around and they all decide to do it blindly. It's part of the whole process. So we're trying to get to that place but I just haven't found that big batch of money yet."

He'd like to "run around" more 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 hanging out in Texas, so to see this field more--the different ways of making theatre." Heeven 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.

IV. Conclusions

International theatre festivals are now in their third iteration, since they first emerged in the immediate post-WWII period. During "Phase I," these global fests mainly provided much needed, high-visibility performance opportunities after the war for outstanding theatre artists. The Avignon or Edinburgh Festivals, both launched in 1947 are typical examples. During "Phase II," however, international fests served their audiences more broadly by starting to celebrate national and regional artistic achievement on their stages; and by including other media (art exhibitions, music concerts, film screenings) alongside the main theatre 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, interdisciplinary experiences, interactive events, community engagement, educational opportunities, and many other activities for very diverse and cosmopolitan audiences.

Under the Radar is certainly reflective of what is happening among this growing number of international theatre festivals and their programs. Solidly established in its niche of experimental, interdisciplinary, contemporary theatre, *Under the Radar* is serving "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.¹⁵

Under the leadership of Artistic Co-Directors Mark Russell and Meiyin Wang, groups are selected each year from carefully selected world festival stages, and recommended by a special group of global managers and producers who know the work at *Under the Radar*. Considerable effort is exerted not just to showcase the stage productions, but also to engage the public with "satellite" activities and to nurture the exchange of ideas among the artists themselves. *Under the Radar* also helps cultivate new theatre artists and advance their careers by sponsoring their work at The Public Theatre. And the 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 done over the past half-century.

Footnotes

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

² The global "festival universe" today is quite large, numbering in my count more than 200+ in the area of theatre 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 international theatre festivals each year; and the European Festival Association (EFA) boasts more than 150 member festivals in music, theatre and dance in Europe alone. In fact, the number of global theatre 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 Personal communication 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 Theatre 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 Personal communication 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 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.

¹¹ "You've got to have meat-on-a-stick, too," asserts Russell, noting the family-friendly approach of many festivals that he visits.

¹² Comment posted on the "Testimonials from Participants" section of the 2016 website of the Festival TransAmériques: <http://fta.ca/en/our-initiatives/international-rendezvous/>.

¹³ Official program of the 2016 *Under the Radar Festival*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 5.

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