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The time is right for show to grow

PICA's Time-Based Art festival sharpens its focus

By JOSEPH GALLIVAN Issue date: Tue, Mar 14, 2006
The Tribune

It's six months until the next Time-Based Art festival, that 10-day spell that sees Portland aesthetes either hunched over their gridlike schedule of performances or pedaling furiously from warehouse to theater.

The new director of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art festival, Mark Russell, is already well into curating the show.

"We've got a pretty solid handshake with Laurie Anderson to be our lead artist," Russell says on one of his monthly visits from New York.

Anderson is a pioneer performance artist who, over an impressive 40-year career, has managed to survive both brushes with pop fame and the decline of the serious avant garde.

"I'm looking for that master artist to help focus the nature of time-based art, and getting people's attention," Russell says. He believes such a headliner will draw in people who then will go on to discover acts he hopes to bring to Portland for the first time, such as Bebe Miller and Pavol Liska and his group the Nature Theater of Oklahoma.

Russell, 54, comes with a solid pedigree, having been executive/artistic director for 21 years at New York's PS (Performance Space) 122, a former public school that has become a multidisciplinary art venue.

The festival, Sept. 7 to Sept. 17, will be held for the first time on both sides of the Willamette River, and PICA is looking at locations in the central east-side industrial area. The Works, an after-hours entertainment event in which artists and audience freely mix, this year will be held at the music center AudioCinema under the east end of Hawthorne Bridge.

"The east side is where a lot of our audience is anyway," Russell says. Of course, money is tight: "The Pearl (PICA's neighborhood) used to be full of empty warehouses; now it's not."

Russell has noticed that the three-year-old festival already has a good reputation. "I was in Leeds and Glasgow recently, and people were coming up to me asking, 'When is it? We want to come, we're looking for funding. ...' The only hard part is I don't pay well. If I were doing this in New York it'd cost \$1 million plus. At least \$700,000 of that would be artist fees. Here it's more like \$200,000."

The festival is popular with artists because they are treated well. And that doesn't just mean proper hotel beds rather than sleeping bags on volunteers' floors.

"There aren't many American festivals where there's a serious dialogue about the work, and a catalog that treats the work seriously. They see other artists' work, they do seminars during the day, and they know they can sit opposite someone (at the Works) after a show and someone will tell them what they really think. Often the artists are off in



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their own tent.”

Russell wants the artists to become Portlanders for a week.

A sight for more eyes

This year visual arts will be included for the first time, but Russell says time will remain a factor, with shows lasting as long as 10 days and as short as 20 minutes — “one-on-one, you on a computer talking to someone at home.”

From his work programming the Under the Radar festival in New York, he has noticed that theater is hot again.

“Artists are using theater as a platform, the way dance was the major platform for change or interest 10 or 15 years ago. You know, back then we’d say, ‘American theater is pretty moribund, but you’ve got to see Steve Paxton. ...’ ”

The festival’s theme, derived from the east-west divide, is crossings. It includes the obligatory genre-bending. Another “act” Russell is bringing here is John King, the music director for choreographer Merce Cunningham. (King may be 52, but he has a presence on the Web site MySpace.)

“He’s a composer in his own right, and he makes pieces in the community, often with kids, using laptops and guitars,” Russell says. “With (Apple’s software) GarageBand, you can throw files back and forth and construct these things long distance.”

Russell likes the Brooklyn-based storytelling forum called the Moth and would like to try something similar here. Higher on his hit list is the young Frenchman Phillippe Quesne, whose show “The Itching of the Wings” is about man’s impulse to fly. It’s billed as a “lighthearted but altogether serious polyphony of music, movement, text and image that is a history of the history of art and ideas.”

City has its say

Russell had to go back to the drawing board on many of his original acts because of money or availability. Often, too, the Portlanders he consulted had been there, done that.

“In some ways the city is telling me what to program,” he says.

He had to resist the temptation of bringing in the Under the Radar crowd. “Knowing this is a different audience, I didn’t want to be, like, Mark just opening up a can —” he mimes inverting and slapping a can of food on the table — “Here’s the Mark Russell festival, and of course these people are part of it. ...”

Russell expects the festival’s free opening event to be include 50-plus guitarists. He wants TBA 2006 to have a broader appeal than in years past. This means appealing to — shock! — suburbia.

“I want soccer moms and kids to participate as well as art aficionados. A lot of people wouldn’t be caught dead at a dance performance or experimental theater performance because they think it won’t speak to them, it’s a waste of time. I’m saying if you’ve got an open mind you can get this stuff, if you don’t mind a few challenging ideas, some of it may make you uncomfortable but there’s a lot of joy and beauty in this.”

And how does he aim to rope in the minivan set?

“I’ve got my ways,” he chuckles. “Especially if their kids can play



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