

JUNIOR COMMITTEE

[Apply](#) [JComm Blog](#) [Member Bios](#) [About](#)

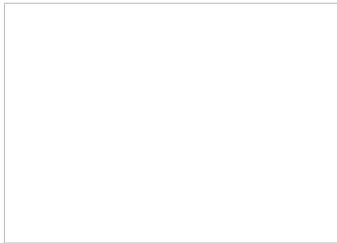
Saturday, January 1, 2011

[MEMBER BLOG] Benn: American Realness 2011, Benn Rasmussen Interview \s Ben Pryor

By bennras

[► Share](#) | [Print](#) | [Download](#)

On this first day of 2011 I wanted to post content that might launch us all into a vibrant, powerful and productive new year. With APAP in just a week, I chose to focus in on this behemoth of a festival, all of its complexities, hopes, failures and successes. I of course could have written from my viewpoint but with a somewhat limited range and perhaps over-assumptive tone, may not have done so well. Instead, I asked Ben Pryor who presents the 'American Realness' Festival a few questions about APAP, as I feel that what he is doing and the artists and their work shown, are a crucial presence as we, the young and seeking dance community push forward.



(Ben answered these questions via email, amidst his busy week.)

1. Can you tell me about the origins of both your management company and the series, "American Realness"? What your intentions are with creating it? I am curious about the impact Michael Kaiser's comment(s) [that are referenced in a lot of your press materials] have had and how you want to respond?

My mom was a manager and representative for contemporary classical composers. David Lang, Michael Gordon, Julie Wolf, the Bang on a Can world, Michael Nyman, John Corigliano. I grew up around atonal music and press kits and concerts and schmoozing. When I was young I "started" a little theater company that never produced any shows but had a great logo and letterhead.

The management thing was always there. I was also a singer, actor and dancer. My degree is in Theater Performance with a concentration in Gender Studies. So with a background in performance and performativity, coupled with growing up around a certain amount of creative and artistic risk-taking, I was lead to where I am.

When I finished college I was waiting tables.... incidentally I was working at Jerry's on Prince St. in SoHo, which is now a Michael Kors store, but was once the original SoHo diner. I waited on Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Elizabeth Streb, Stephen Petronio and many other artists on a regular basis. It was cool then, amazing to think about now. While waiting tables, I started interning at BAM, which eventually turned into a full-time job. I was in the development department, but I always wanted to work with artists, so I ended up getting connected to Chez Bushwick and worked there. That introduced me to Ivan and Pentacle and they invited me to come work for them. About that time I was also working with different artists at Abrons Art Center, and developed a decent relationship with Jay Wegman (Director of Abrons Art Center).

It was in my time at Pentacle that the idea for an *Under the Radar* for dance struck me. Why hadn't anyone done this already?!?! I feel the conditions that artists show work during APAP are insane and largely ineffective. Presenters need to see fully produced work. They want to see the show and they need to see the whole thing live.

With all of these thoughts brewing, it finally happened last year because I was working independently and we needed to do SOMETHING about Miguel's *Last Meadow*. There was NO WAY to show any of that work without full production. It just wouldn't communicate. I asked Jay specifically about doing *Last Meadow* in the playhouse for APAP 2010. He proposed I do the festival we had spoken about years before. So in six weeks time and with only one of the theaters, I pulled together some work that I had been dying for the national performing arts community to see. Abrons has 3 theaters in one building. It is perfect for a real marathon/festival format. So I started to work on this.

The name/theme *American Realness* was a reaction to the work I had programmed. And for the record it wasn't ever intended to be a reoccurring one. That just kinda happened.

Michael Kaiser's "Why I worry about Modern Dance" article was just crazy.

I mean, really it is a provocation. He is asking for it. Literally.

"Where is the current, not to mention next, generation of great modern dance companies to carry the torch?"

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-kaiser/why-i-worry-about-modern_b_260850.html

Isn't it his job to know that? I guess it is just his job to run the Kennedy Center. But one would think that in doing that, he might be more involved with the forms his institution is presenting.

I read that when I was working at CPR. That day John Jasperse was making a new work in the back studio and Miguel Gutierrez was on his way in to have a meeting with me. HELLO, MR. KAISER!!! They are right here!!!! AND they are touring all over the world!!! What are you talking about?!?! Does he REALLY not know who these people are?!?! That is crazy to me!

I do think he is also talking about the business model of the "Modern Dance Company" which IS dying. But then he isn't even acknowledging that people aren't trying to work that way anymore. In line with Mr. Kaiser's search for the future, there are a lot of presenters in the US who are not presenting (or even really concerned with) adventurous work. To a certain extent that is fine. People have different tastes. But the performing arts field is also this weird market. It is really complicated, but it is a market. I am trying to stir that market up a bit, question its definitions and ideas, and call attention to good work that should be seen and shown again.

2. In selecting an artist to present, what do you look for? In some ways I see this group of artists as friends of yours, ours, but also as important artists whose work speaks boldly, clearly, and honestly about the current situation of making dance. But more importantly, what for you are shared traits among the artists? Now in its second year, what has shifted in selecting last years artists with this years? I see most of the same folks, Miguel, Ann Liv, Luciana, Trajal, etc. But you are adding in Tarek and Jen Rosenblit, and also Ishmael's piece? Can you tell me about these decisions?

American Realness is a really complicated puzzle. At the moment it is a self-produced endeavor for all parties involved. Meaning this is not a festival where I am buying work to show. There is no funding but our pockets. I am putting up some money and the artists are putting up some money. We sell tickets and hopefully make our investments back plus maybe a little something to take home. SO PLEASE BUY TICKETS AND SEE MORE THAN ONE SHOW!!! But it's APAP. It is all a big commercial and hardly anyone but the crew is getting paid.

Programming the festival is a really complicated equation. I invite artists who I work with regularly and then I invite other artists whose work I am interested supporting. This year Jay let me use both the Playhouse and the Experimental Theater, so we are closer to the original festival idea. I worked with my production manager Natalie Robin to come up with a schedule using these two of Abrons three spaces so that you can come and see 3-7 shows in one day. The festival is more than twice as big this year. I am still hoping it all actually works.

All of the work is made by American artists or within the US systems of support for the creation of new work. I am interested in work that deals with performativity, presence and perception within the theatrical moment; work that is reflexive of itself and the world in which it exists. Its gotta be REAL! I shout the realness and also the American in the name because I want the festival to be a platform for reshaping the identity of American dance and performance. For so long "Modern Dance" has been the definition of American Dance. *American Realness* is an attempt to shift that. It is a wake-up call/call to action.

Ultimately, there is an interest in supporting works that can and should tour. There is also an interest in showing a larger reflection of this moment in the contemporary American practice of dance and performance. That means old, new, in-between, just strong artistic voices.

3. To some New York based choreographers/performance artists, APAP and the presenting cycle is a broken system. A system that continually keeps those that have been in for awhile 'in', and those that are out, 'out'. I wonder if you can talk about the ways in which you navigate this supposed "terrain of conventional defaults". Are presenters interested, able, wanting to show work that is younger, more provocative, challenging, enjoyable in the way that I think the artists in *American Realness* are? Basically, is it worth it? and if artists are making work, beyond the main NY spaces to show and self-produce, do you see a desolate dust bowl or a fruitful garden of eden out there?

AHH this question is so so much! There isn't one answer. There are always a lot of reasons why things do and don't work. I think showing fully produced work is more effective than anything else at selling it. People have to see the work and when they do, they want it.

Last Meadow is having an incredibly successful international touring life as a result of the performances at *American Realness* 2010, and of course the fact that it is an amazing work. But we booked four gigs with presenters who saw the work last January and there are at least three more upcoming gigs that were encouraged by the buzz from the *American Realness* performances, and of course the fact that it is an amazing work. Ann Liv also booked gigs through last years performances and I know Zoe|Juniper confirmed a bunch of support for their current project. I had never had such a fruitful APAP.

It is also probably true and worth noting that most of the engagements procured through *American Realness* 2010 were international.

We will see what happens this year.

Last year was effective enough for us to want to do it again.

Yes, presenters are interested in this work BUT there are really only a handful of national presenters who are showing super contemporary work. Those that do show these works are largely interdisciplinary so they are showing all forms. There are some opportunities, but the competition is steep. Not everything will go everywhere. *American Realness* at least pushes that opportunity for the work it supports. It is a moment for presenters to see the work and engage with the artists. That is really the only way to build these relationships.

American Realness has also made an impact internationally where there are more opportunities and a deeper interest in presenting new, risky and adventurous work. There are a lot of people coming from all over who seem impressed by the program. I just hope they take to the work.

American Realness is at the Abrons Art Center, January 6-10, 2011. For more information go to:

http://tbspmgmt.com/tbspMGMT_.html

