

## PAUL RUSSELL | Executive Artistic Director, East County Performing Arts Center

[E Edition]

The San Diego Union - Tribune - San Diego, Calif.

Date: Jun 29, 2006

Start Page: B.13

Section: OPINION

Document Types: INTERVIEW

Text Word Count: 2761

### Document Text

*Copyright Union-Tribune Publishing Co. Jun 29, 2006*

Russell's Christian Community Theater has been operating ECPAC for the past six months under the name Art Beat Management. CCT also operated the center for about 30 months during the mid-'90s. Russell started CCT as a summer project 27 years ago. His organization now runs the largest youth theater in the nation, operating in 12 cities. CCT rents San Diego-area facilities during the summer but has lacked a winter home. Russell was interviewed June 20 by a Union-Tribune editorial writer.

East County Performing Arts Center has had a difficult history with three different operators. This is your second round so you knew what you were getting into. There was controversy when you took this over both about how the former operator was running and financing it, and that yours was the only proposal received to continue to operate it. What is your perspective?

We worked so hard on putting that proposal together. We were told that 11 applications were taken out. So we worked very hard in writing our proposal. We had no idea that we were going to be the only one. This time around, we knew we had to bring down costs. And the reason we thought we could bring down the costs versus another group is because we have so much of the infrastructure already there within our own organization. We already had a box office staff, a marketing position, a full finance department, group sales, a full costume shop, rehearsal space. So we were going to have the overhead whether we had ECPAC or not.

Explain the strong points and the challenges of this 1,162-seat theater.

It is probably the best acoustical house in Southern California. It has been deemed that by many different sources. And so it's a fantastic concert hall. So for a symphony, for a concert, rock and roll, for stand-up comedians, for speaker bureaus, for small shows with a one-unit set, it is a fabulous space. It also has one of the best sightlines of any theater in San Diego. A drawback is the way they built the fly loft, that space where you fly the scenery out. They built it about 20 feet too short. If they had just gone up another 20 feet it would allow that theater to be a house that also could do national road shows, which use standard-size scenery.

What are the main provisions of your contract with the El Cajon?

The city basically has asked us to manage the facility and to not run a deficit. They've allocated \$350,000 to run the facility for the entire year and they've also given us a budget of \$100,000 for capital improvements because the facility has constant needs. For instance, the orchestra pit has not been repaired in over 30 years. That's a \$30,000 item and our responsibility. The same with the curtains. The fire marshal inspected them and they all have to be replaced. That's another \$30,000 item. The city has requested that we make the theater available to the community at reasonable rates and also to joint venture with other sponsors to bring in various acts. They want people to use the facility. They want people in the seats.

Has the city set minimum requirements in terms of number of events or types of events or marketing?

They have requested some of those things. In our proposal we specifically said that we would only bring in -- the title is so awkward because what's a headliner to you is not a headliner to me or it's certainly not to my 20-year-old son. So they've asked us to bring in 'national acts' if we have sponsors. They've asked us to get more community groups involved and bring them in. Going after national acts was a continuing problem for the past operator. Seventy percent of the groups they brought in lost money. If a national group comes in, you have to pay a guarantee, let's say \$30,000, regardless of whether you sell enough tickets. Humphrey's, Coors, Cox Arena, Escondido Performing Arts Center all are in the same boat. Humphreys used to bring in Bill Cosby for one night at \$60,000. But a casino offered him \$120,000 for that one night. How do you compete with that? You can't. So we're taking really hard looks at what groups, what niche we can fill.

Is it a goal or a requirement to have 10 acts per year of national reputation?

That was a goal. It was pie in the sky. And so we've dabbled in it. We've brought in four different groups so far with a sponsor. And we've lost money on every single one. The City Council wants us to keep exploring that a little bit. But every one of those losses chips away at the operating budget of what keeps it going. We have to come up with another system.

What might that system be?

We're thinking of fulfilling needs by reaching out to the community. Community events bring in more people than any of the national acts. So to bring in a Las Vegas lounge act is not really serving the community if the community is not coming. When you bring in a high school, they sell out every single seat. You bring in a local dance troupe, like Jean Isaac's Dance Group that we're co-sponsoring, we're going to fill that place. CCT, for example, does 16 shows of 'Traditions of Christmas' and it sells 15,000 seats.

Until recently during your operation, the ECPAC box office was closed.

We now have it open from 11-4 or 5. We will do it for two months as a test run. It used to be that 70 percent of ticket sales was by phone and 30 percent was walk up. We are now 30 percent by computer, 60 percent phone and 10 percent walk up. So it may not be a wise financial decision to keep the ECPAC box office open when people can easily pick up the phone, get on-line or come by the CCT box office.

How do you market the productions?

The same way everybody else does. Our biggest way is direct mail. Our Web site is [ecpaclive.com](http://ecpaclive.com).

When another group books the facility, they do it through you?

Right. We show them what they get for their rental fees as far as staffing. And there's a lot of other options they can choose. If they want help with marketing, or more stage craft or lighting design, sound reinforcement.

So it's very much in your self-interest to have a number of successful events there because you benefit financially?

Oh absolutely. And then they will come back the next year and the next year.

You've been operating the theater for six months. What is the proper yardstick to measure your performance? Number of days booked?

We were shooting for close to 200 in calendar 2006. That's about two-thirds. We probably won't reach that goal.

What have been the successes so far?

Dr. Laura Schlessinger was a huge success. She was self-promoted and sold out two performances. A tribute to the Beatles, one of those B acts, only lost about \$3,000. We just brought in the tribute to the Eagles, which is a national act, but that did not do well for us.

What about the future?

We've booked the Glenn Miller Band. We're looking at a night of comedy. We've talked about maybe a speakers bureau where we bring in different speakers from around the country and maybe that could be our niche. We are considering a series of jazz. We want to work closer with the Grossmont Community Concert Association. They rent a facility and they bring in eight or nine shows a year. And it's more like a membership where you buy the series. We're working closer now with the Grossmont Symphony Orchestra.

So you're realizing that national headliners who peaked 20 years ago aren't necessarily the answer and instead you're turning to local community acts?

A new model. And they're actually discovering this across the country. The cost of national acts is prohibitive, and truly your profits are coming from your community. And that headliner market is so competitive in San Diego. It's not like it was 20 years ago.

Can you team up with Escondido, Vista or Poway to rotate a road show through the county?

The problem is that most areas have a no-compete restriction of a 100-mile radius.

What do you have scheduled for this summer and this fall?

This summer we have Tommy Emmanuel. He's self-promoting his group. Diane's School of Dance is doing a week's run. And they will sell the place out. And so everybody's happy because we receive rental money, they've had a successful run and they sold out all the seats. And the community's happy because there's a location for them to be able to perform. James Darren, who is an older act. We're promoting that. And of course we have our own show coming in October. We're doing a two-week run of 'My Fair Lady.'

What is the difference between your producing a show and someone else running it?

We take the entire risk. So it's not only booking the act, but dealing with what is called a 'rider' as to their requirements. On top of their fee they want so many hotel rooms, this kind of limo, this kind of food. It's crazy some of the riders they come up with. They list what they want and then you negotiate. And then you have the huge job of promoting the

performance. You spend hours and hours coming up with a marketing plan that isn't going to kill your budget. And then you're trying to find sponsors. And you do all of that work for a one-night gig that may or may not break even. That's why we were very upfront with the City Council that we can't take that kind of risk unless the city wants to joint venture with us.

Have you done any productions of your own so far this year?

Only our children's theater programs, 'Schoolhouse Rock' and 'Wizard of Oz.'

The city has granted an exclusive negotiating agreement to a group that would like to acquire a Hampton Inn franchise and build a hotel next to ECPAC and use the facility at times for meetings. Have you been involved in the discussions?

We have met with one developer who has shared with us the idea. We think it's incredible because that's exactly what we believe it needs. It could be a mini convention center. We've hosted some conventions there. Vons did their employee convention workshops for a couple of days. But the problem now is that there are no breakout rooms, no banquet hall, no rehearsal spaces, no meeting rooms other than the lobby and the theater. And so with that kind of hotel facility available, we could actually book mini conventions or business functions with 1,000 or under. And all their hotel rooms would be right there. Also, nice restaurants are across the street and in the area.

Escondido is pretty far along with the idea of a hotel next to their performing arts center, the same synergistic relationship.

And they want to build upscale condominiums across the street. The city still kicks in close to \$3 million a year to keep the center going.

The public needs to be aware that arts bring something other than money into a community.

Right. As we do with our sports programs, as we do with our county parks and our city parks. You can't put a price on that. We don't pay to go push our kids on the swing set. But we do pay it through taxes. Well, when we want our kids to graduate from high school and we want them to have a performing arts space for their choir and there isn't one, how sad is that? We need to provide that for their dance troupes or for their plays or whatever it is.

Some merchants are unhappy about the lack of dates or their not seeing as much foot traffic as they hoped.

Actually, we've produced more foot traffic and increased the bodies in the seats more than the previous Art Center Foundation or the last year when the city was running it. The arts foundation at their max brought in 15 acts.

What can the public expect to see more of in six or nine months?

The finest in our local entertainment. Some of the things that we're exploring -- and we met with Cox -- is to do an all-city teen idol show, the best of San Diego. And then it could possibly be on Cox. We'll showcase our best CCT musical theater talent. We're looking at a battle of San Diego's best bands, teaming with some radio stations. We're hoping to put together a senior follies. Again, it's involving the community and then the community says we want to support that, we want to see Grandpa up on stage, we want to see Grandma on stage. And we get some synergism by getting the community back into the theater, not just in the seats but up on stage. So we'll have a kids' program, we'll have middle-age programs and we'll have senior programs. We're reaching out to community groups and trying to woo them back. How can we get Peter Pan Junior Theater back in here? How can we get Grossmont College Dance Department back because they have been out for five or six years? How can we get the Sweet Adelines back? We will woo those people by saying we're going to serve you so well and we're going to keep the rent so reasonable. California Ballet is coming back, they have been away for seven years.

How would you respond to criticism that you are not taking any artistic risks or trying to push the envelope a little bit?

That's a great question. I think it's the same argument that you'd have with La Jolla Playhouse. They do push the envelope in bringing in new works but they have a home. Starlight has a home. The Globe has a home. San Diego Rep has a home. And yet they are all city properties. Starlight is owned by the city of San Diego. The Globe, that property that they sit on and the buildings that are there are owned by the city of San Diego. So we want ECPAC to be the home of Christian Community Theater because we do put on the finest community productions in San Diego County. We've got a population of 3 million people. We've got unbelievable talent. We're really proud that we are a showcase of the best of children's stuff, too. One of our kids, Michelle Williams, was just up for an Academy Award. We've got kids who are touring around the country. They got their start here. That's what we're supposed to do as a community, build up our kids, send them out, make a difference and be dynamic in the field that they have been trained in.

We are going to do some risk-taking with producing some of our own shows. We have to get our financial feet planted first. We want to do some original works. We want to experiment and see if we can take other works to a higher level. There's always going to be critics.

But as a municipal facility, isn't there an expectation that there should be something besides youth theater, that there should be some risk-taking and original work?

Much of the children's works are original. We do have a play, a work in progress right now, on Bach and Mendelssohn

and how those two lives have joined together even though they lived a hundred years apart. And it was how Mendelssohn found Bach's works in a fish market. It was the wrapping paper of his fish. And most of Bach's works would have been lost if it weren't for Mendelssohn finding them. We have a couple playwrights working on that right now and combining the music of Bach and Mendelssohn. We want to do that with a full choir and full orchestra and the stage presentation. And we'd like to see that show have a life beyond ECPAC. But again, we just need to be financially a little more stable before we take that risk. We've got to make it a calculated risk, not just roll the dice.

#### **[Illustration]**

1 PIC; Caption: (Paul Russell); Credit: Nelvin Cepeda / Union-Tribune

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

[Paul Russell]'s Christian Community Theater has been operating ECPAC for the past six months under the name Art Beat Management. CCT also operated the center for about 30 months during the mid-90s. Russell started CCT as a summer project 27 years ago. His organization now runs the largest youth theater in the nation, operating in 12 cities. CCT rents San Diego-area facilities during the summer but has lacked a winter home. Russell was interviewed June 20 by a Union-Tribune editorial writer.

They have requested some of those things. In our proposal we specifically said that we would only bring in -- the title is so awkward because what's a headliner to you is not a headliner to me or it's certainly not to my 20-year-old son. So they've asked us to bring in 'national acts' if we have sponsors. They've asked us to get more community groups involved and bring them in. Going after national acts was a continuing problem for the past operator. Seventy percent of the groups they brought in lost money. If a national group comes in, you have to pay a guarantee, let's say \$30,000, regardless of whether you sell enough tickets. Humphrey's, Coors, Cox Arena, Escondido Performing Arts Center all are in the same boat. Humphreys used to bring in Bill Cosby for one night at \$60,000. But a casino offered him \$120,000 for that one night. How do you compete with that? You can't. So we're taking really hard looks at what groups, what niche we can fill.

The finest in our local entertainment. Some of the things that we're exploring -- and we met with Cox -- is to do an all-city teen idol show, the best of San Diego. And then it could possibly be on Cox. We'll showcase our best CCT musical theater talent. We're looking at a battle of San Diego's best bands, teaming with some radio stations. We're hoping to put together a senior follies. Again, it's involving the community and then the community says we want to support that, we want to see Grandpa up on stage, we want to see Grandma on stage. And we get some synergism by getting the community back into the theater, not just in the seats but up on stage. So we'll have a kids' program, we'll have middle-age programs and we'll have senior programs. We're reaching out to community groups and trying to woo them back. How can we get Peter Pan Junior Theater back in here? How can we get Grossmont College Dance Department back because they have been out for five or six years? How can we get the Sweet Adelines back? We will woo those people by saying we're going to serve you so well and we're going to keep the rent so reasonable. California Ballet is coming back, they have been away for seven years.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.