



# Russell Markert

Father of Radio City's Rockettes BY RACHEL STRAUS

Since 1933, theatergoers of all ages have been dazzled by the Radio City Rockettes' *Christmas Spectacular*. These audiences have choreographer Russell Markert (1899–1990) to thank for the beloved holiday production.

For 39 years, Markert's penchant for uniformity—the bedrock of his choreographic vision—happily consumed his life. It led him to create musically diverse and visually stunning shows that transformed the Rockettes into dance icons and set the model for how to choreograph on gargantuan stages. The high-kicking, leggy ladies took center stage in his sexy, sharp and short vaudevillian pieces, where miraculously appearing elevators, turning stages, huge set pieces and gorgeous costumes fêted their presence. Through the

Rockettes, Markert offered a dancing correlative to American optimism, and his ability to project a highly skilled, innovative and uncomplicated America through the spirited unison of 36 young women was masterful.

The Jersey City, New Jersey, native had no relationship to show business, but he showed signs of being from that world by age 3. On a daytrip to the beach, Markert slipped away from his mother and was found dancing alongside a jazz band. “When you hear the music, you have to dance,” he said to his frantic mother. At home Markert created soft-shoe numbers and designed a floor-length tutu (made out of torn newspapers) for his sister. Around his 14th birthday, his parents separated. Apart from Army duty in France during World War I, where he briefly performed in military theatricals,

he lived the rest of his life with his mother and sister.

Upon leaving the Army, he pursued a career in finance with the goal of securing his family's financial stability. But the theater bug bit him again. Markert took his first dance and acrobatic classes with a local Brooklyn teacher named Thelma Entwistle, who said, “My God, you're too much for me,” in response to his nascent talent. Then in 1922 he saw the Ziegfeld Follies. Markert found the Follies short and lacking in choreographic versatility, but he marveled at their “wondrous precision” and vowed to one day “get 16 American girls—taller—kicking higher and doing lots of tap dancing.” And in just a few years, he got his chance.

After dancing on Broadway, serving as dance director assistant for *Earl*



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Cheryl Burke photographed  
 by Marty Sohl

## history

*Carroll's Vanities* (1923) and choreographing an all-female show for the Cotton Club in 1924, Markert formed the Missouri Rockets, a Ziegfeld Follies-style group, in St. Louis. This female dance troupe later relocated to NYC and underwent two name changes (the American Rockets and Roxyettes), before permanently moving into the new 6,200-seat Radio City Music Hall in Rockefeller Center in 1932. Two years later, the leggy ladies became forever known as the Rockettes.

In the early years, Markert made a new show three or four times a month. The dancers performed four times a day. Rehearsals began at 7:00 a.m. sharp, and the pace was relentless. Nevertheless he became known for his paternal instincts, treating "his girls" like daughters. Once accepted into the troupe, the young women earned a good living and were given chaperoned dormitory lodging catty-corner to the seven-story theater. Markert encouraged them to seek out his advice and he made them into American success stories. Because his goal was visual uniformity and his style required shoulder-to-shoulder teamwork, the dancers formed "a unique sisterhood," says former Rockette Corliss Whitney. There was absolutely no star system.

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By the time Markert retired in 1971, he had trained 3,000 dancers and won the Grand Prix with the Rockettes at the 1937 Paris Exposition. But Radio City had been losing money since the 1960s, making cuts to its orchestra, ballet troupe and a number of performances, and an aging Markert could no longer produce the grand spectacles he had

grown accustomed to. His bequest was a formula that revolutionized American theatrical dance and his *Christmas Spectacular* has become a holiday family entertainment tradition, still performed at Radio City and across the United States. **DT**

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## Additional Resources

### ARTICLES:

"A Little Respect, Please, for a High-Kicking New York Institution," by Gia Kourlas, *The New York Times*, December 24, 2005

"Hide Your Daughters, Here Comes Russ Markert," by Robert Roman, *Dance Magazine*, September 1969

"Music: Rockettes to Paris," *Time*, June 21, 1937

### BOOKS:

*International Encyclopedia of Dance*, "Radio City Music Hall," by Robert Moulton, Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1998, 2005

*The Radio City Music Hall*, by Charles Francisco, New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1979

### FILM:

*The King of Jazz*, directed by John Murray Anderson, with choreography by Russell Markert, Universal Studios, 1930

*Moulin Rouge*, directed by Sidney Lanfeld, with choreography by Russell Markert, Twentieth Century Pictures, 1934

*Radio City Christmas Spectacular*, directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller, with choreography by Russell Markert, Hewitt Group, 2007