

INSIDE ARTS Q&A

Our Glass

Since moving to New York City earlier this year, Ira Glass has been consumed by more than three major projects, including his weekly radio show. Still, the host of *This American Life* signed up to deliver a keynote address at the annual members conference in January. Make that four major projects.

INTERVIEW BY ALICIA ANSTEAD



IRA GLASS IS NEW TO NEW YORK CITY. But not to New Yorkers. Or to the rest of us, for that matter. His award-winning public radio show *This American Life* airs on 500 stations to more than 1.7 million listeners each week. Others catch it online at www.thisamericanlife.com. “We do these stories that are like movies for radio. There are people in dramatic situations where things happen to them,” says Glass, who has been working in public radio for more than two decades. This year, Glass and his staff moved from Chicago to New York City to work on a TV adaptation of *This American Life* airing on Showtime next year. Glass is also co-writing a screenplay based on Ethan Watters book *Urban Tribes*. In other words, he’s busy. But he isn’t too busy to be a keynote speaker at the annual Arts Presenters conference in January. He also took time out from producing, writing and fundraising—not to mention adjusting to the New York state of mind—to chat. Here are excerpts from our conversation. If you’ve listened to *This American Life*, then you can imagine Glass’s cadences and accent. If you haven’t listened to the show, it’s probably airing right now on your local affiliate.

ALICIA ANSTEAD: One of the big reasons you moved to New York was to make the television adaptation of *This American Life*. How does that work? I’m trying to imagine the format.

IRA GLASS: We’re working with filmmakers who designed a look for it so that it mimics the feeling of the radio show

but has pictures. They took it as their mandate that the TV show should not sound like other shows. So they designed a look for it that's really cinematic. It's very contemporary looking. The camera is very still—in contrast to the way you shoot a reality show.

ANSTEAD: How do you think moving from Chicago to New York will affect the radio show?

GLASS: I don't think it will affect it at all. What's affected the show more is the fact that we've been in television production for six months. It's not the kind of show you can do halfway. So we've been producing fewer shows and doing more reruns.

ANSTEAD: Sleeping?

GLASS: Very, very minimally.

ANSTEAD: You've called your mission "goony and idealistic" and "giving voice to something outside the mainstream." Arts presenters often struggle with the idea of taking risks. Why take a risk?

GLASS: Doing any kind of job in the arts is never going to pay that well, so you might as well enjoy it. You need to be programming partly for your own pleasure, and obviously you have to dole out your risks and spend your money care-

cool things. It helps your brand. It helps who you are in the community. So that's a secondary reason to do it. But you know, for me, the primary reason is for your own amusement. Life's too short, and we all got into arts jobs because we like stuff, and we have taste. It's not fun to do promotions. It's not fun to try to fill a house or do all the various jobs to put something on. It's fun if you believe in the product, so you have to keep product in there that you believe in.

ANSTEAD: You're known as a major team player when it comes to promoting and fundraising.

GLASS: I do a tremendous amount of fundraising. I work for a public radio station, and we do three pledge drives a year now. Five hundred radio stations run our show, and I want them all to make a ton of money off our show so they will keep us on the air. Part of our business plan from the very beginning is that we would do killer pledge drive materials, killer fundraising materials so that everybody makes a ton of money. The more idealistic you are, the more airtight your business plan has to be so nobody can sink you, and you have the space to exercise your idealism.

ANSTEAD: Arts presenters are always faced with being the

“Life's too short, and we all got into arts jobs because we like stuff, and we have taste.”

fully. That's as true for us as for someone running a theater. But you want to keep things interesting for yourself. Also, you want the audience to feel good about the fact they're getting something new. There's this thing on public radio where we'll put on a show that we'll heavily promote that we know most of the audience for public radio won't care for. A couple of years ago we did a four-night play done by Heather Woodbury. It turned out to be a nine-hour play with 150 characters, 12 major characters, all of which she played herself. We coordinated a thing with the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago . . . we knew there would be a 1,000 people in our combined audiences that would be into this. And we just felt like for that 1,000 people, it's going to be really cool. And for us as presenters, it's going to be really cool. We threw promos on like crazy because we felt like people who listen to the public radio station are mostly listening to news, but when they hear the promo say: *Hey, we're trying this cool thing that nobody has ever tried before. It's four nights of theater and you can go to the theater or you can listen to it on the radio*, most people are just not going to do that, but they are going to feel good that it's happening and that somebody is doing it. It makes them feel the radio station is cool, and that they're at a place where something cool is happening and people are trying

interpreters or arbiters of good taste in the arts. How do you know when something is good?

GLASS: We have a freedom I think your presenters don't in that we go in and re-edit the work. So anybody who's going to be in our show knows we're the bosses. The show is edited within an inch of its life. That's really, really different than looking at a bunch of artists and basically saying yes, no, yes, no, yes, no.

ANSTEAD: Unless you're commissioning.

GLASS: Unless you're commissioning. But commissioning is rarer, right?

ANSTEAD: It's pretty rare.

GLASS: What we're looking for for our show, the aesthetics of our show, is that we need for it be surprising. It's just about everyday people. There's no news peg or reason to listen. So it's got to be surprising. We like stuff that is funny in places, emotional in places, with surprising turns, with characters you relate to. There's an entire world of documentary stories, which make fun of people in the stories or say look how weird these people are. We don't do that.

ANSTEAD: When you were growing up in Baltimore, did you go to theater and concerts and ballet? Were the arts a part of your family life?

GLASS: Not ballet. But I grew up in a Jewish family on the

East Coast. So the music around the house was not rock but Broadway show tunes because that's what Jews listened to in the '60s. My mom would take us to shows all over Baltimore. Basically, I've seen more musical theater than any straight man I've ever met. When I was in high school, there was a theater downtown in Baltimore called Center-Stage, which is still there, but at that point was pretty new. My friends and I would usher there to see the shows for free.

ANSTEAD: I've been thinking about the role of the arts in the United States. Can we think of art as really changing the world any more? What do you think?

GLASS: I think there are certain contexts where probably it can. Think of Vaclav Havel coming to power and what he represented. Clearly, there was a sensibility that was fundamentally artistic, that was fundamentally a writer's sensibility in him and that made people love him and bring him to power. Here in America, I think it's harder to make the case. It's hard to imagine a work of art changing the world. The ones that do tend to be big pop things, like *Roots* on TV, which gives people a new way to think about their own story.

ANSTEAD: One critic said listening to your radio show was like reading a good novel. What novel would you like it to be if that were true?

GLASS: [*The Amazing Adventures of*] *Kavalier and Clay* [by Michael Chabon] probably. There are a lot of books that talk about experiences that are closer to my experience. *Kavalier and Clay* does this thing that one so wants to do when you're putting something together, which is that he makes some choices about the world the characters are in and the way the story is told. A fourth of the way into the book you get this feeling that it's just so *pleasing*. Those characters and the world they're in and the things they're thinking about—the music of it is so deeply pleasurable. If you make things for a living or present things for a living, you can talk about why this one is better than this one. You can talk about virtuosity, the way the plot turns out and all of that. But what makes a lot of work so good is the melody of it. You hear it, and you think: *Wow, that was really great*. It's true in narrative as well. If you think of the job of the arts presenter, that job is to simply find the stuff where that music is happening. It's the simplest thing in the world and the most profound for the arts presenter or for someone who makes stuff.

ANSTEAD: I never know how to describe that feeling, when you just know something is hitting on every note.

GLASS: When we talk about *here's why I'm going to choose this thing and not that thing*, usually we talk just about technical stuff. To talk about it having an overall feeling that just gets to you—it's the hardest to talk about.

ANSTEAD: *This American Life* attracts listeners of all ages. How do you appeal to all those generations?

GLASS: It's not something that I think about at all. We produce to our own taste, in the most straightforward possible way. We don't try to guess what the audience will like. We simply put on what we like. We're all suburban kids. We feel we have the most normal tastes in the world. We think: If we like it, other people will like it. The material we're working is very simple material. It's out to entertain, and it's designed to be easy to relate to. And we're constantly pointing that out in the stories: *Here's the funny part, and*

here's how you can relate to it. We can stop in the middle—which you can't do with opera—and say: *Here's the good part*. If you can't get it across to people using those techniques, there is no hope.

ANSTEAD: Your cousin, composer Philip Glass, is very well known to our membership. Have you seen him since moving to New York?

GLASS: I have him and I have my Aunt Hortense in New York. I've

called neither of them. They don't even know I'm here actually. That's exactly the kind of life I'm living. Where there isn't—well, there just isn't.

ANSTEAD: You majored in semiotics at Brown University. What meaning does it have for you to be speaking at the Arts Presenters during its 50th anniversary? Why did you want say yes to this gig?

GLASS: I said yes for a combination of curiosity and business reasons. It seemed like people I should know. And it also seemed like it would be a group of like-minded people who would be fun to meet.

ANSTEAD: You're 47. Arts Presenters is coming up on 50. What do you expect to happen when you turn 50?

GLASS: Nothing happened when I turned 30 or 40. *Nothing*. I expect nothing to happen when I turn 50. If I could pick what would happen, it would be something that a woman said to me that has haunted me for 15 years. She was in her 60s. It was this woman Vivian Paley, and she was a MacArthur "genius" grant recipient who did this incredibly wonderful work in kindergartens. She told me when she turned 50 she didn't give a damn what people thought, and that's what opened up the world for her. I, like every adult, would like to have that feeling. **IA**

