

Lessons from the Field

Kansas City Ballet

Kansas City, KS

Michael M. Kaiser, 2005

In 1985 the Kansas City Ballet was on the brink of bankruptcy. By 1987 it enjoyed artistic and financial prosperity. A newcomer to arts leadership was able to create a turnaround by restructuring the board of directors, increasing public awareness, and developing innovative fundraising and programming.

Looking for a job in the arts was, perhaps, the most humbling experience of my career. While my management consulting firm, Michael M. Kaiser Associates, was not a large firm, it had far exceeded my expectations for growth and profitability. I was still only 31 years old but I was flying first class around the world talking to business leaders. While my original idea for Kaiser Associates was to work at the division level, I found that, over time, the level of my client was rising and I was frequently in the executive suite with very senior personnel of very large corporations. (My mother once suggested I write a book reviewing the many executive dining rooms in which I had eaten lunch.)

However, while my “portfolio” of skills was broad, it was not deep. I knew a good amount about financial modeling and strategic planning and a bit about managing people. I was a good presenter and not a bad salesman, and I had served on the Board of one arts organization for one year (The Washington Opera)—hardly the profile to excite search committees of major arts organizations. While I was realistic about my lack of arts management experience, I felt I had progressed far enough in my career to obtain a responsible position and was not prepared to accept work as a secretary or junior level manager.

The arts world is not an easy one to enter, however. Jobs are relatively scarce and, while they turn over rapidly, the market for job applicants is not very efficient; there are simply not enough jobs to justify the kind of recruiting services that exist for larger industries. One clearly has to “network,” particularly for higher-level jobs. Apart from a few people at the Washington Opera, however, my network was remarkably small. Ironically, it was one of my Kaiser Associates clients who helped me enter the arts management field.

In my few last weeks at Kaiser Associates, I informed each client of my plans and introduced them to my business partner, Bob Fifer. Most of my clients thought I was absolutely insane. Why would I leave the safe, profitable, glamorous world of consulting to enter the inefficient, unimportant, effete world of the arts? In their minds, and in the minds of many corporate executives, managing an arts organization, even a large one, is one step up from running the PTA bake sale.

One of my best clients was United Telecommunications in Kansas City, Missouri. I worked with several executives there including one who sat on the Board of the Kansas City Ballet, a mid-sized regional ballet company that had been through four managers in as many years of existence. The company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Would I be interested?

With no other prospects in sight, yet with absolutely no knowledge of ballet, I said yes. At my own expense (the Board leadership thought I was such an outlandish candidate that they could not justify paying for my travel), I flew to Kansas City at the end of July 1985. That trip seemed very strange at the time but I have come to realize that virtually all searches in the arts are a bit strange. Why? Because the people entrusted with hiring the senior artistic and executive managers are virtually always Board members who are almost always arts amateurs. While they may be wonderful supporters of the arts, and of that one particular arts institution, they usually have little idea about the true workings of the institution or what it takes to be a strong arts manager. They can feel when the organization is functioning smoothly but they do not truly understand what makes an arts organization run smoothly. The search committee of any board, unless it has professional executive recruitment support (and most can not afford it), usually flies blind. And the individual prejudices of the committee members and especially, of the Chair, tend to sway the decisions. All too frequently, board members who are concerned for the fiscal health of an organization and are convinced the artistic leadership does not know how to manage, seek an individual with a no-nonsense approach to management. Almost as frequently, these appointments fail.

Hiring and firing top managers is one of the absolutely key roles of the board members of a not-for-profit arts organization and yet no one bothers to teach them how to do it and what to look for. It is not a surprise, therefore, that many top executives are ousted before their second year in service.

The Kansas City Ballet Search Committee was no exception. They were a kind, supportive, interested group of amateurs—all with their own agendas. The company had a very strong artistic team but the sequence of top managers were unsophisticated and the company was in danger of extinction. It had debts of over \$125,000 and the staff regularly had to phone around to find the cash to cover the dancers' weekly payroll. The 26 dancers were only earning an average of \$350 a week so this payroll was not particularly onerous. But if you do not have any cash, and owe a good deal, any amount seems large. The company had been phoning its major supporters so often for emergency contributions that good will had eroded and the company had become something of a local joke. It was terribly unfair to the artists, but bad management always affects the artists more than it does the executives who typically have more employment options.

As with most troubled organizations, the Board believed that the problem lay with the artistic management. They thought the company needed to “do more popular repertoire,” spend less money and get more efficient. I listened to their comments and only replied that if I were hired, the first thing we would do is create a plan that would detail our way forward. I was not at all experienced in dance and I had no idea why this organization was in trouble, but I certainly was not impressed with the “insights” I was hearing.

In the course of my two-day visit, I heard more about the failings of the fellow Board members than about the organization, however. I was hardly “interviewed” at all. The chair of the search committee after scanning my *résumé* simply asked, “Can’t you hold a job?” It was a fair question for I had left a variety of positions in my young career. (She should only see my *résumé* today!) But the interview, held in her Jaguar as she drove me to my hotel, went no further. A local bank executive, a good friend of my United Telecom client, was “pre-sold.”

The Treasurer of the Board was an accountant who appreciated my finance background. His primary interest was how he could be a better fundraiser. The Chairman of the Board could not understand why I would want the position at all. He could not wait to complete his term as Chairman.

The toughest questioning came from the Artistic Director, Todd Bolender. Todd, of course, had the most to gain or lose from this appointment. He had come to Kansas City in 1981. A former George Balanchine dancer and *protégée*, Todd was an important person in the ballet world. Balanchine had created major roles for him (including Phlegmatic in *The Four Temperaments*) and Todd had choreographed works for the New York City Ballet. Before coming to Kansas City, he had worked extensively in Europe. Todd expected a very high standard of quality and was able to bring a number of his notable friends to Kansas City to work with the company. In my time there, Millicent Hayden, Janet Reed, John Taras and Violette Verdy all came to Kansas City. In many respects, the Kansas City community did not understand what a treasure they had in Todd and certainly was not supporting the company well enough to justify his huge commitment.

Todd had assembled a remarkably strong artistic team in Una Kai, former ballet mistress for both Balanchine and Robert Joffrey, and Diana Adams who ran the Kansas City Ballet School. Diana, of course, had been one of the important New York City Ballet dancers of the 1950s and 1960s known for her beautiful legs and strong technique. The three of them sat in Todd's office and grilled me. They were skeptical that this "businessman" would be sensitive to their needs. They thought I would simply be a tool of the Board, telling them that they could not spend any money on dancers, new productions or the school. I spent hours trying to convince them of my passion for the arts, my desire to support their artistic goals and my independence from the Board.

It must have worked. Within a week I was offered the job and I immediately accepted even though my annual salary was less than my weekly income at Kaiser Associates. (My poor accountant still has not recovered from that shock.) By the last week of August 1985, less than two months after I had decided to leave the consulting world behind, I had left my home in Washington and had moved with my two dogs to Kansas City. I was now an arts manager.

The Kansas City Ballet was housed at the Westport Allen Center, an old public school that had been converted into a home for a variety of charities including a drug rehabilitation support group. With three studios, offices and dressing rooms, twenty-six dancers, staff, faculty and scores of students, the Ballet dominated the Center physically and spiritually. While Todd and I had our own offices, as did Kevin Amey who ran all technical areas, the remainder of the small staff shared one large room.

I used to think that this room would have made the ideal setting for an ensemble situation comedy *a la* Barney Miller. We certainly had an array of characters. Claudette Donlon, our Finance Manager, was the bedrock of the office. She was remarkably efficient and dedicated. With a Master's Degree in arts management from Boston University, Claudette was, in many ways, over-qualified for her position in this small organization. She and I have now worked together on and off for my entire arts career. I would not have had my career without her. Claudette was both the center of expertise and the spiritual leader for the others: our marketing

director, Andrea, left shortly after I arrived. We replaced her with our receptionist, Lisa, an aspiring actress who was always “off to do errands.” Lisa was replaced as receptionist by Theresa (whose husband was a judge who she followed into the legal profession) and then Holly. It was not a job that encouraged long tenures. The most colorful member of the team was Yvette, our box office manager. Yvette did a fantastic job of this routine task while keeping the rest of us smiling with her misuse of the English language, outspoken detestation of any food that had nutritional value and general good humor. This small, happy band was the administration of the Kansas City Ballet. We had a part-time fund-raiser who did not like me and quit soon after my arrival. In fact, we had no fundraising records at all.

We also had no real marketing strategy, no profile in the community and no money. We had a small subscription base, but all the money for subscriptions for the season about to start had been spent the previous spring to pay off old bills. The company did three programs of shorter works (repertory programs) each year—one in October, one in February and one in May—and a run of *Nutcrackers* in December. Like most other ballet companies in the United States, without *Nutcracker*, we would have been insolvent.

Unfortunately the company had not paid the rent on the theater for *Nutcracker* the year before and we were unceremoniously informed that if we did not pay last year’s rent, there would be no *Nutcracker* this year, and, hence, no Kansas City Ballet.

Welcome to the arts, Michael Kaiser!

The practical person that I am, it appeared to me that the first thing we needed to do was to get some money. And it also seemed evident that we were not going to be able to get any money as long as people believed we were going bankrupt. We needed to attack this problem in two ways: we had to convince the major individual donors and the business community that we understood our problems and were acting in a professional way to address them and we had to convince the audience that we were an exciting and important part of the local cultural scene. In the short-term, we were much more successful achieving the first goal than the second.

Kansas City is a relatively small town. At the time I arrived, it was the smallest city in the United States to have both major league baseball and football franchises. In fact, the Kansas City Royals won the World Series shortly after I arrived, but more of that later. It appeared that changing the minds of the community leaders about the Kansas City Ballet would require communicating with only a few hundred individuals. This seemed doable. The only question was what message we would bring to them. I believed that we needed to convince these few people that the Company was of a high artistic quality, that we had a path to fiscal stability, and that the community should be proud enough of this Company to support it as we worked to achieve this stability.

Convincing people of the artistic quality of the Company was a challenge. There was the prevailing feeling in Kansas City, as in many cities, that the only really good art was created on the coasts (and, perhaps, Chicago) and that, despite the pedigrees of the artistic leadership, anything local was, by definition, simply of civic quality. But the local museum, the remarkable Nelson-Atkins Gallery, had successfully convinced everyone of its quality so I knew it could be done. Luckily all three major national dance publications (*Dance Magazine*, *Ballet Review* and,

now defunct, *Ballet News*) were in the process of writing feature stories about the Kansas City Ballet. I simply had to let people know about this, and I did so, endlessly. I also negotiated a tour to New York City, making the Kansas City Ballet the first arts organization from that town to perform in that arts capitol. This was big news.

Showing that we had a path to fiscal stability was easier. In record time (less than two months) I wrote a strategic plan for the organization and had it reviewed and approved by a Board planning committee and the full Board. While I would not recommend that a strategic plan be drafted, reviewed and approved in this rapid pace for all organizations, we had little choice. The plan suggested that we would make the Kansas City Ballet the city's chief cultural export. The New York tour was one element; building a long-term residence in St. Louis was another. A program for expanded marketing and more active fundraising was also included. The plan was "unveiled" to a group of influential business people and community leaders at a cocktail party at the home of one of our Board members. We chose his home because it was so beautiful and lavishly decorated and we knew that most people in the community would want to see it. I made a brief speech about the future of the ballet and every attendee received a copy of the plan upon leaving. It was very well received.

I have learned over my career that what makes an arts organization successful is good art, well marketed. If an arts organization consistently produces high quality offerings and can communicate the excitement of both the specific programs and of the institution as a whole, it will find the resources it needs. The Kansas City Ballet was producing high quality programming but it was not marketing itself well. We needed to find ways to get people excited about the Fall Program and about the institution as a whole. I learned about this difference between programmatic marketing (selling the Fall Program) and institutional marketing (selling the entire institution) in a dramatic and painful way.

One of my Board members appreciated the need to improve our marketing and offered to sponsor the cost of engaging a local marketing consultant who had had great success marketing a local professional soccer franchise and an annual civic festival. The consultant was young, energetic and smart. He wanted to find a way to create an image of the company as youthful and sexy. He came up with a campaign that would feature a teaser, "What are the most valuable 52 feet in Kansas City?" This line would be included in advertisements, balloons, etc. with no attribution. A large banner was to be placed on an overpass leading to downtown. He believed that everyone would assume the 52 feet referred to a parcel of land. He hoped the question would be so provocative that radio stations and newspapers would mention the campaign. After a month or so of building tension, we would answer our own question: the most valuable 52 feet in Kansas City were those belonging to the dancers of the Kansas City Ballet. I appreciated the cleverness of the idea and wanted to believe that it would lead to the coverage our consultant anticipated. (I had, please remember, no experience running an arts organization and had lived in Kansas City for three weeks at the time this campaign was created.) Claudette was deeply skeptical.

In the event, it poured the day we launched the campaign, the banner on the overpass fell off after two soggy hours, and no one seemed to notice or care about the small advertisements we could afford to place. What was worse, we used up most of our marketing budget for the Fall Program on the campaign. We had only enough money for a few ads about these performances.

The program would be a “hard sell” in any event. It had only one work new to the company, a staging of Todd ‘s *Miraculous Mandarin*, a very dark and difficult ballet. All of the other works were already familiar to the audience. Todd wanted to use as the central publicity shot a picture of himself as the Mandarin taken when he created the work for the New York City Ballet. It was meaningful only to a few dance cognoscenti and made no impact on the casual dancegoer, another lesson learned. As mentioned above, the Kansas City Royals made it to the World Series in 1985, and eventually won a thrilling seven-game series against cross-state rivals the St. Louis Cardinals on my birthday, October 27. The entire city was riveted. Unfortunately, our Fall Season was scheduled to begin four days after the final game, on Halloween no less.

Whether it was the World Series, Halloween, the difficult program, the lack of marketing or the choice of photos, the fall season had the worst attendance in Kansas City Ballet history. My debut as an arts manager was not exactly a smash hit. The actual performances went well and the reviews were fine. I was a nervous wreck on opening night, frightened that there was something the executive was supposed to do that I was too inexperienced to have done. I also feared that at the climactic moment in the *Miraculous Mandarin*, when the Mandarin is hanged, the noose would break and our star dancer, James Jordan, would be strangled to death. I need not have worried; Kevin and his staff were thorough professionals.

But there were lessons to be learned. While our marketing consultant was correct in his belief that we had to raise the institutional profile of the Company, we could not afford to expend much money to do so. While Todd certainly had to create the programs that he felt met his artistic goals, I needed to have some input about the marketing profile for each program. The selection of images used to market a season had to appeal to our marginal ticket buyers (those who may or may not choose to come), not to the die-hard fan who would come anyway. And we needed to find a way to fill up large numbers of empty seats in the theater. No marketing program we could afford would, in the short-term, increase the percentage of seats sold at full price to an acceptable number.

I decided to mount a full-scale effort to build the community’s appreciation for Todd and his dancers. I went on local radio and television constantly. Most local stations were looking for content and there I was happily talking about Todd, Una and Diana, the three national publications and the tour to New York. I was a regular guest on a very early morning television interview show that was watched by a large segment of the business community. For this audience, I stressed the improving fiscal health of the organization. On daytime television and radio I focused on the impending production of *Sleeping Beauty Act III* that was certain to be a highlight of the Winter Program and of a forthcoming collaboration with Alvin Ailey. Alvin was giving his ballet, *The River*, to the Kansas City Ballet for the Spring Program. He was going to coach it himself. This certainly suggested that the company had achieved a certain artistic stature.

It must be obvious that the Kansas City Ballet was a classroom for me. I had no real idea what I was doing and worked from intuition. As helpful as Kevin and Claudette were, neither of them had ever run an arts organization either and we simply did the best we could.

There were signs that we were winning. Fundraising revenue was increasing, the sense in the community was that we were doing interesting things and the Board was relaxing. Luckily, the

Nutcracker season went well and the weather cooperated. Except for a few buttons that were misprinted “Nutracker” instead of “Nutcracker” things went without a hitch and the infusion of ticket money eased cash flow concerns for a few weeks.

We were approached by the major dance presenter in St. Louis, Dance St. Louis, about the possibility of establishing a permanent relationship that would bring the Kansas City Ballet to St. Louis on a regular basis. As a presenter, Dance St. Louis brought dance companies from around the nation and the world to St. Louis. It did not have a dance company of its own, but raised money so that high quality dance could be enjoyed in St. Louis. It also mounted educational programs in the areas public schools. Dance St. Louis, like all dance presenters and all touring dance companies, had been adversely affected by the elimination of the NEA dance touring program. The National Endowment for the Arts, in a cost cutting move, eliminated subsidies it had previously given to support the touring of dance companies. This had a devastating impact on the entire dance economy. It was to initiate the problems suffered by the Joffrey Ballet, ABT and all other touring ballet companies.

The advantages for the Kansas City Ballet of establishing a permanent residence in St. Louis, of course, were more performing opportunities, greater claim on state funds, prestige that would lead to additional touring, and the opportunity to fund-raise in St. Louis. It is probably useful to explain that in virtually all American dance companies, dancers are only paid for the weeks they work, plus some vacation payment in larger companies. In many companies, dancers are paid less for weeks of rehearsal than for performance weeks. If you do not dance, you do not get paid. Unionized companies typically have a guaranteed number of weeks of work per year, with something between 36 and 40 being standard, although there are exceptions. For those companies with guaranteed weeks of work, a central challenge is to fill an appropriate proportion with performance dates since there is no income generated during rehearsal weeks. This was the biggest single challenge at American Ballet Theatre (ABT) later in my career.

For the non-unionized Kansas City dancers, there were no guaranteed weeks of work. While the artistic leadership required a certain amount of time to rehearse, if we did not have performing opportunities (for which a fee was paid by a presenter if on tour, or for which we received ticket revenue if performing at home), we could not employ the dancers. We wanted to find more weeks of work so that we could give our dancers a decent wage, attract better dancers to the company (dancers are not typically going to move to Kansas City if they are only paid a small salary for a few weeks each year), improve the quality of performance and build the image of the company.

The Kansas City Ballet did not have an active touring program; every year we would have a few dates in smaller cities in Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas and Nebraska. While we had performed with Dance St. Louis in the past, the possibility of several *guaranteed* visits each year to St. Louis was extremely attractive.

Negotiating the deal was another matter. Dance St. Louis had its own financial challenges and certainly was not in position to pay us huge fees or to allow us to steal its donors. We decided on a reasonable fee for two visits each year, a run of *Nutcrackers* and one repertory program in the spring. We also agreed to mount a summer dance school in St. Louis.

While we did not have great difficulty establishing a fee, the Board of Dance St. Louis had one requirement that was very problematic: they insisted the company change its name to reflect its new state-wide role. The Kansas City Ballet Board members were not pleased but they appreciated the potential of this relationship. The question was: what name? Obviously “Missouri” should be in there somewhere. But the surrounding words created a bitter controversy that raged for weeks and weeks and polarized the Board and staff in Kansas City.

Todd, with a background in European dance, wanted the word “State” in the name. I think he hoped that the Missouri government would offer the same support that European governments provide to their state companies. That seemed unlikely to the rest of us.

One of our major donors wanted to name the company the Royal Ballet of Missouri. Thankfully, she was not taken seriously. (This same donor created a stir in our office one day when she sent back her subscription renewal form for the following season with words on it “please improve my seats from last year.” Yvette, our box office manager, was perplexed: the donor had the best seats in the house. When she called the donor’s secretary to ask what she should do, the secretary laughed and said “Oh she has never been in those seats. She gives them to me. She just writes that on all her ticket requests!”)

Another Board member, who had established our Guild and created the annual Ballet Ball, insisted the name should be Ballet Missouri. She felt this was simple, accurate and somewhat “trendy.” She was an imperious woman but she was also one of the most devoted to the organization. She ruffled a lot of feathers but I liked her and respected her energy and commitment.

The most popular choice, however, was Missouri Ballet. It was simple if not euphonious. Forces lined up on all sides of this issue. (I only realize in hindsight how much progress we had made in a few months time; rather than arguing about how we should slash the budget we were arguing over a name!)

And then Todd issued an ultimatum. If the new name were not “State Ballet of Missouri,” he would resign. For me, that settled the issue. Todd had been responsible for taking a semi-professional company and building a strong attractive group of dancers. He had built an artistic team that any dance company would admire and envy. He simply could not leave.

After a great deal of anger, recriminations and frustration, the Board acquiesced. And that was how the Kansas City Ballet got the awkward name, State Ballet of Missouri, or S-BOM to the dancers. In truth, no one liked the name. No one could remember it. Most people took to calling it the State of Missouri Ballet. But there it was. (Only in the year 2000 did the company change its name back to Kansas City Ballet after the relationship with Dance St. Louis was allowed to wither and die).

While this discussion was underway, we mounted our Winter Repertory Program. This included George Balanchine’s *Serenade*, Jerome Robbins’ *Afternoon of a Faun*, a whimsical ballet by Todd, *Creation of the World*, and *Sleeping Beauty* Act III. It was a very long and diverse program.

For marketing purposes we focused on *Sleeping Beauty*. We knew that there would be demand for this classic. But we also knew we had never sold more than 60% of our seats for any repertory program and that was simply not enough. I decided that we needed to find a large group to fill seats and through discussion and negotiation we found the group that should be the best friend of every ballet company: the Girl Scouts of America. We brought thousands of young girls at reduced prices to the Winter Program. In fact, we sold over 90% of our seats and the final performance, a Sunday *matinee*, was completely sold out.

I will always remember with some pride one Board member running up to me in the lobby of the Lyric Theatre and asking, loudly, why she could not buy a ticket to the performance. After I explained that things were changing at the Ballet and that in the future people would have to buy in advance, she stormed out hurling invectives. But I know she was secretly as pleased as I was. My euphoria was a bit tempered by Todd's reaction to the filled houses. "Too much noise," he sniffed.

Immediately following the Winter Performance we had the "Ballet Ball," our major fundraising event of the year. The Ball was run by the Kansas City Ballet Guild, the major support group of the Ballet. The Guild was going to keep its name after we became the SBOM the following summer. This indicated the lack of commitment to exploiting fully the new residency for fundraising purposes that would, eventually, lead to its demise.

The Guild was a group of women who had great energy and commitment and spent huge amounts of time on the Ball. Jo Ellen Leifer, the Ball Chairman of that year, became a good friend; she was lovely and lively and determined to earn more than the previous Ball had—music to the ears of an arts manager facing weekly cash flow crises.

Kansas City was very different from the northeastern cities to which I had been accustomed. Virtually every donor supported the Ballet as well as every other major cultural organization in town: the Kansas City Symphony, the Missouri Repertory Theater, the Kansas City Lyric Opera and, of course, the Nelson-Atkins Gallery. With the same relatively small group of wealthy patrons and corporate executives supporting all of the arts organizations, the competition to be the best, sexiest and most successful was intense.

This competition was experienced in all aspects of revenue generation and, certainly, in the annual fundraising event. Each of the organizations had a fund-raiser and the same group of patrons came to each event. There was only one hotel ballroom large enough to house these events at that time and so every event was held in the same space with the same catering. How to differentiate? Several years before, our Guild had found a way. They had arranged for all the visual merchandisers of the city's major department stores to work together to design the decor of the Ballet Ball. Each year, in rotation, a different store's visual merchandiser (when I arrived in Kansas City I only knew of them as window dressers) was the chair of the committee and took a leadership role.

In 1986, the designers had outdone themselves; the ballroom of the Alameda Plaza Hotel (now the Ritz) had several huge pianos flying from the ceiling. It was astonishing. The ballet company did a small performance on a smaller stage, everyone danced and ate and, mostly, drank and a record amount was raised for the Ballet Company.

The Ballet Ball, the increase in ticket sales, the sharp increase in fundraising resulting from the focus on positive publicity in the local media, the forthcoming tour to New York, and the national press attention all were having an impact. The Ballet Company was certainly the “hot—organization in town and there was even sentiment that the Kansas City Ballet could be more than a strong local company, that it could have a regional or even a national role. The result was increased support from corporate and private donors alike.

The major donors: the Hall Family Foundation and Hallmark, the Bloch Family Foundation, United Telecom and several wealthy individuals were all happy with our progress and ready to support us. Of these, I must single out one donor who never wished to be named. She was an elderly single woman who appreciated what Todd had brought to Kansas City. She was our largest private contributor at that time. At our regular dinners, she would consistently pronounce that Todd and the company were “top cream” and asked what she could do to help. She has since passed away but her role in the history of the Kansas City Ballet must be remembered, albeit anonymously.

By March 1986, it seemed that with a strong finish to the season, we actually enjoyed the definite possibility of paying off the entire accumulated deficit of the Kansas City Ballet. The elation that the donors, the dancers and the entire Kansas City Ballet family began to feel cannot be overestimated. The energy released when a chronically-troubled arts organization begins to establish financial stability is enormous and potent. Success begets success in most ventures and certainly in those that rely upon charitable contributions.

And the best was yet to come that season. The season concluded with two remarkable programs. Our Spring Program featured two works from the repertory, a lovely new ballet by Todd set to piano music by Chopin and Alvin Ailey’s *The River*. *The River* had been created for American Ballet Theatre (to a commissioned score by Duke Ellington) some 15 year before, originally featuring the great ABT dancers of that time including Cynthia Gregory and Natalia Makarova. Alvin had allowed several ballet companies to do the work in the intervening years and had offered it to Todd. Alvin also agreed to come before we opened to lead the final rehearsals.

The piece, in several sections, suggests several phases of a river’s journey, including Spring, Meander, Giggling Rapids, etc. Before William Carter came to set the ballet, he had discussed with Todd and Una the kinds of dancers who would work best in each section. At first Todd thought Oliver Kovach, a short, muscular Ukrainian-American dancer would do best in the opening section; then he changed his mind and cast James Jordan. Una did not completely erase Oliver’s name from the casting sheet, leaving the letters “Oli” attached to Section 1. Kevin Amey, when typing up the rehearsal schedule assumed that Oli was the name of the first section. So, naturally, everyone in the company began to call the section Oli. It was only after many moments of great confusion between Una, Todd, Bill Carter and James that it all became clear what had transpired. But to many of us, the first section remained Oli and does so to this day.

Alvin came to town to plan future residencies by his company (he and I did several fundraising calls together to raise the money necessary to re-stage his work, *Caverna Magica*) and to coach the Kansas City dancers in *The River*. He liked the dancers and they liked him. He got great work from James, the company’s *danseur noble*, Brian Staihr, a strong consistent dancer who eventually got his PhD in Economics and became an economist for the Federal Reserve Bank

and for Sprint (Alvin would say of Brian, “He must be the strongest man in the world” as he hoisted one of our larger female dancers in the air), Louise Nadeau, a gorgeous dancer now a principal with the Pacific-Northwest Ballet, Suie Lewis, who was all legs and could stretch for days, and Corinne Giddings, a strong determined dancer who plowed through the big female solo, “Vortex,” with ease. It was a triumph and sold well even without the Girl Scouts.

Alvin’s choreography fit the dancers beautifully and I thought the Company looked magnificent in the work. He must have as well. Over the next few years, the company performed more works by Alvin than any company other than the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This was not completely coincidental. The Ailey company had built a large and loyal audience in Kansas City. A group of local citizens, both black and white, believed that the Ailey company could help heal the rift between the two communities and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey was formed. This remarkable group brings the Ailey company to Kansas City each year, supports new productions and mounts educational programs. (They also created Ailey Camp, now a flagship of the Ailey organization’s outreach efforts). It is one of the most unusual and consistent support groups I have ever observed in my career. They worshipped Alvin and he repaid their adulation with a generosity of spirit that was awesome to behold.

While the Spring Program represented the happy end to the Kansas City Ballet’s season, we had one more project to complete. In an effort to raise money, Todd and I had organized a special performance for early summer. We wanted to do something very special to mark the last performance before we changed the name of the company, to celebrate our new success and to raise money for the following season. We decided to invite great dancers from several major companies to perform in a gala concert along with the dancers from the Kansas City Ballet.

The program was remarkable. Martine van Hamel and Patrick Bissell from ABT danced the “White Swan” *pas de deux* from *Swan Lake* and the *Sylvia pas de deux*. Evelyn Cisneros from the San Francisco Ballet and Mark Silver of the Royal Ballet danced the *Fille Mal Gardee pas de deux* and the *Sleeping Beauty pas de deux*, Sean Lavery and Kyra Nichols of the New York City Ballet danced the *pas de deux* a from Jerome Robbins’ *In G Major* and the *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* and Donna Wood of the Ailey company danced *Cry*. The program was hosted by Judith Jamison who read a script I had written and Jacques d’Amboise who mostly improvised. Judith stood backstage and cheered on Donna Wood as she performed *Cry*, a lengthy solo Alvin originally created for Judith. It was a scene I was to see repeated many times in my later years with the Ailey company.

The evening was a remarkable artistic success. My opening speech, which chronicled the company’s new-found success, both artistically and financially, was interrupted twice by spontaneous audience applause. (The video shows my shocked reaction, I simply did not know what to do.) The dancers were remarkable and the audience went home elated. I will never forget the euphoria. We had worked extremely hard to put the event together; I believed we had created a unique performance of true merit. It was a good way to end the season. (The gala was to be, in retrospect, a macabre affair. Sean Lavery was soon diagnosed with a tumor on his spine and retired. Donna Wood retired soon after to become a marketing executive at Philip Morris. Patrick Bissell was to die the following year of an alleged drug overdose.)

Unfortunately, the evening was not a success financially. The Kansas City community simply did not understand the wealth of talent that was going to be on stage. We failed in our marketing efforts to make the case and our Board was less than helpful in selling seats. We ended up selling many seats for less than we had hoped. The house was full but the coffers were not.

Despite the gala's "failure," however, it soon became apparent that we had, indeed, paid off the entire historic accumulated deficit. This was good news and marked an important moment in the company's history. But we were not yet out of the woods. Having no deficit is not the same thing as having reserves upon which to fall back or having a surplus for new investment.

But we were soon faced with this prospect when the National Arts Stabilization Fund (NASF) came to town. NASF was an offshoot of the Ford Foundation. Created by a dynamic and visionary woman, Marcia Thompson, NASF aimed to help entire communities establish more healthy arts environments by providing the support, both consulting and financial, needed to establish stability. NASF was working in Boston and Seattle at the time and had entered into a partnership with the Hallmark people to do the same in Kansas City.

The concept was highly attractive to all of us in the arts community, but we were concerned about the impact of this large program on the annual funding we all relied upon from Hallmark. The program was announced at a large press conference one summer Sunday. I can recall one less than interested city official watching the final round of a golf tournament on a palm-sized television as Marcia explained the program.

Each organization in the program would be required to meet a series of criteria set by the NASF before becoming eligible for funding. Once funding was offered, the organization would have one fiscal year to eliminate half of its net current liabilities position (current liabilities less current assets). If it accomplished this task, it would receive a grant equal to the remaining half of the net current position. If the organization maintained balance for four more years, it would receive a second substantial grant for endowment or a cash reserve. It all made sense to me.

The problems, however, only emerged over time. Hallmark, contrary to its promise, did suspend annual funding of the arts organizations included. You can imagine our horror at losing our major annual funder just as we established fiscal equilibrium. I was livid and complained to the NASF staff. But I soon learned I had made a major tactical mistake. The criteria one had to achieve before being offered initial funding were never specified. "The consultant will know when the time is right," we were told. By complaining about the loss of Hallmark funding, I had demonstrated that I was not fully supportive of the program and this indicated that we were not ready for funding. I reminded the NASF consultant that we had paid off the entire accumulated deficit in one year. Did this not indicate that we were serious about stabilization and were ready for funding? "No," said the NASF. We had completed our strategic plan too quickly we were told. Unless we did a new plan (regardless of the fact that the old one was working quite well, thank you) we would not be funded. And, by the way, I had complained about the lack of Board support for the gala; unless the Board demonstrated more support, we would not be funded.

In other words, we had to pretend that all was well before we got funded. I came to believe that mixing grants making with consulting was counter-productive. One wants to tell a consultant everything, warts and all, in order to get assistance. Yet funders want to feel comfortable about

the organization. When you are fighting for a company's economic survival, the pressure to ingratiate yourself with funders always wins and the consultative process becomes a sham. As presented to me at that time, the NASF program did not make sense. (The NASF people were not simply unhappy with me. Despite three more years of balanced budgets during the tenure of my successor, the Company still did not get funded. In fact NASF funding came only nine years later!)

But I was not going to stick around to play this game. I had come to realize that I had done all I could do in Kansas City and I wanted to return home to the East Coast. I also wanted to work in a larger organization. So I announced my resignation to the Board and to Todd and suggested that they make Claudette my successor. Fortunately they took this suggestion and Claudette ran the company brilliantly for three years. Claudette had different ideas about the potential of the NASF program and was more of a team player. In fact, after leaving the State Ballet of Missouri she went to work for NASF in New York.

As I prepared to leave Kansas City, I was given the opportunity by Todd to play the Grandfather in *Nutcracker*. It was a wonderful experience to perform with my great friends, the dancers. Over the year and a half I lived in Kansas City, I had formed deep friendships with so many of them that survive to this day.

I said a final goodbye to my staff and dancers on the tour to New York that had done so much to transform the image of the company. I traveled with the company to New York and stayed behind after they left. I felt as if I had lost my family.