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If the Kennedy Center's New Chief Has His Way—and He Usually Does—We Ain't Seen Nothing Yet

By BARBARA MATUSOW

IT'S FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON, AND Michael Kaiser is pacing backstage at the Kennedy Center, doing breathing exercises to calm his nerves. In an hour, the televised concert to honor victims of the September 11 attacks begins, and Lord knows what could go wrong.

First Lady Laura Bush is scheduled to join him at 5:45 to greet the headliners—about 18 in all—and he's worried that he'll forget a name, so he's certain order. Still, he keeps checking and rechecking his list.

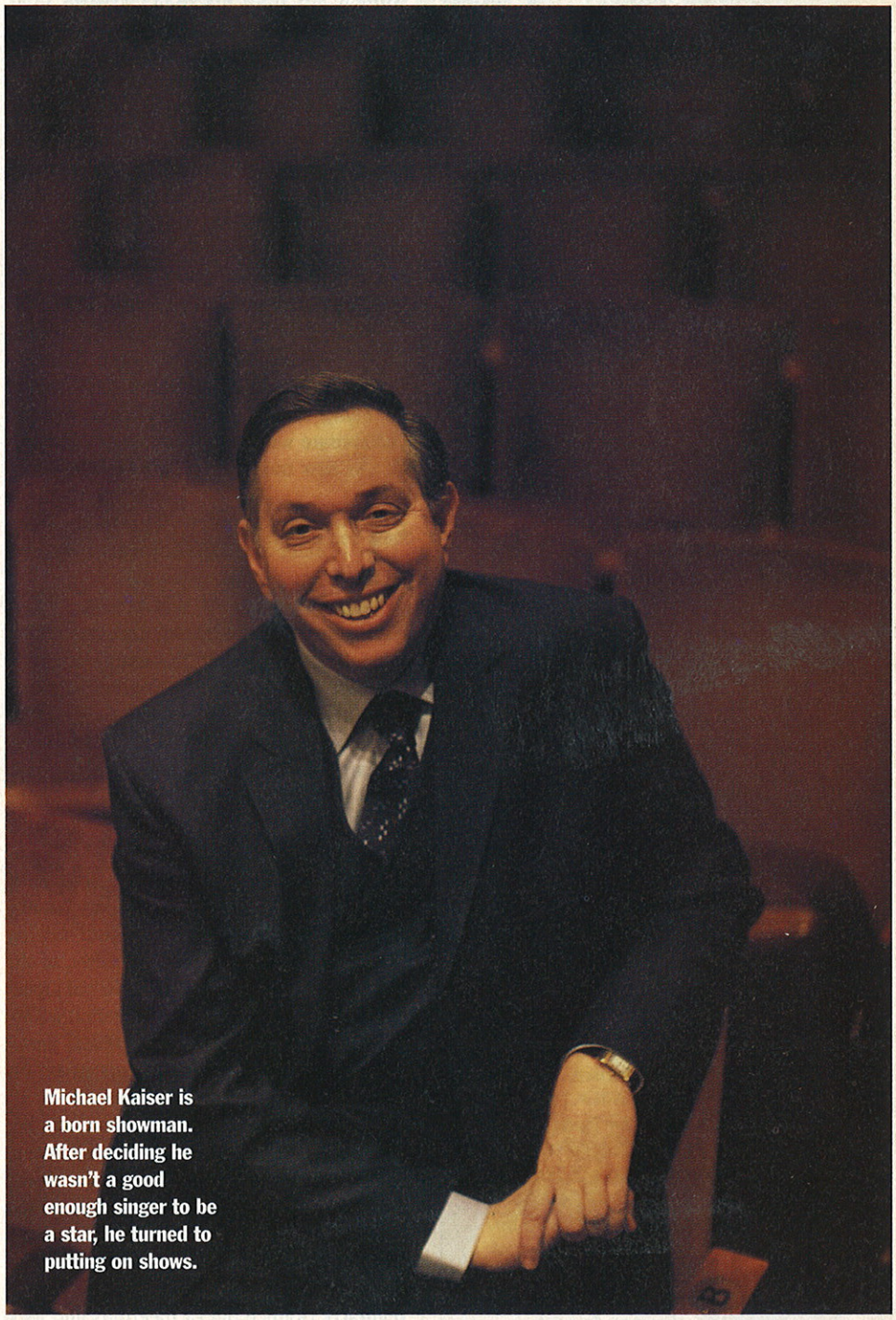
In between, he disappears into the wings to check the size of the crowd, terrified that the turnout won't be good. Staffers tread lightly around him. They know he doesn't like to be interrupted when he's worrying.

Worrying is Michael Kaiser's principal occupation, and tonight he has plenty to worry about. The hastily assembled cast—including opera star Frederica Von Stade, flutist Sir James Galway, and folk singer Mary Chapin Carpenter—has had almost no time to rehearse.

Six hundred family members of local victims are being bused in from the Pentagon, and two buses are missing. The Kennedy Center is crawling with Secret Service agents, who are blocking entrances and exits. And the weather report says a tornado is headed that way.

At exactly 5:45, radiant in a Champagne-colored silk-brocade suit, Laura Bush shows up to meet the artists. The 48-year-old Kaiser goes down the line with her, glancing at his list each time he announces a name. He checks it even when he gets to old friends like National Symphony Orchestra conductor Leonard Slatkin and jazz pianist Billy Taylor. Bungling somebody's name at a time like this would be unforgivable.

"I have a paranoid fear of disappointing people," he says later. "I think fear of failure motivates me more than anything else."



Michael Kaiser is a born showman. After deciding he wasn't a good enough singer to be a star, he turned to putting on shows.

BY THE END OF THE EVENING, KAISER'S worrying has paid off. The missing buses arrive, the house is filled to overflowing—2,500 people are seated in the Concert Hall; another 3,500 watch screens in the Grand Foyer—and the con-

Among the Washingtonians contributing editor Barbara Matusow has profiled over the years are Jim Lehrer, Bob Woodward, Hillary Clinton, Leonard Slatkin, and Don Graham.

Vital Statistics

BORN: 1953 at Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital in Manhattan.

CHILDHOOD NICKNAME: Mikey (he's Michael to everyone today except his father, who calls him Mike).

At this age, he was Mikey.

EDUCATION: Undergraduate degree in economics from Brandeis. Master's from MIT's Sloan School of Management.

SIBLINGS: Thomas, 54, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas; Susan, 50, the founder of a preschool.

SALARY: Reportedly $400,000 a year.

VICES: Doesn't smoke. Drinks an occasional glass of wine or Scotch.

FAVORITE RESTAURANTS: In New York, it's Daniel. In Washington, he likes the Inn at Little Washington.

Music man: J.S. Bach.

WHEELS: Doesn't own a car.

FAVORITE COMPOSER: J.S. Bach.

PERSONAL TRAINER: Kris Cates-Bristol at the Sports Club/LA.

WARDROBE: Suits and shirts from Ermenegildo Zegna. (Will need a DC tailor soon because he's dropped two sizes from exercising.)

LAST TRIP TAKEN: Greece in the summer of 2000.

LAST BOOK READ: *John Adams* by David McCullough.

SPORTS FANATIC: Lives and dies with the New York Yankees, New York Giants, and New York Knicks.

FAVORITE TV SHOW: Partial to half-hour shows of the 1950s and '60s, especially *I Love Lucy.* Can sing virtually every theme song of every sitcom ever shown.

ART COLLECTION: Owns prints and drawings by Matisse, Braque, Picasso, Chagall, and Morisot.

FAVORITE OPERA ARIA: "Come Scoglio" from *Cosí Fan Tutte.*

GREATEST BALLET EVER WRITTEN: Balanchine's *Serenade.*

He loves Lucy.

MOST COURAGEOUS ACT: Donated a kidney to his sister, which amazed her. "He hates injections, blood, anything to do with doctors," she says. "He can't even be in the same room when I test my blood sugar."

cert comes off without a hitch. The tornado veers off in another direction.

"I can't believe we pulled this off," says one dazed-looking staffer.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I could do it again anytime soon," says another.

Kaiser has been performing his kind of magic and wearing out the staff since he became president of the Kennedy Center 11 months ago. Next month, thanks to a $50-million gift from his friend Alberto Vilar, the Kirov opera and ballet will make the first of ten annual appearances at the center.

In May, Kaiser kicks off a 15-week retrospective of Stephen Sondheim's musicals. And the new Vilar Institute, which offers year-long apprenticeships in arts management, is already training the first 12 fellows.

More eye-opening, perhaps, is the fact that Kaiser is well on the way to raising some $200 million for a performing-arts museum and new administrative offices.

"What Michael has done in this short a time is so extraordinary," says Kennedy Center chairman Jim Johnson. "He's doing so many things at once. People want to collaborate with him. They want to be part of this new momentum he's building."

THE MATCH BETWEEN THE KENNEDY Center and Michael Kaiser was evident to a lot of people.

"When we started this process," says Kennedy Center board member Tom Wheeler, who chaired the search committee, "we compiled a very impressive list of candidates, maybe 45 or 50 names. But when you would call around to people in the arts world to get ideas, the number-one, -two, and -three choice on every list was Michael Kaiser. The next thing they'd say was, 'You'll never get him.' "

Known in the art world as "the turnaround king," Kaiser had become legendary for rescuing troubled organizations and raising large sums of money. Most recently, as the executive director of London's Royal Opera House, he wiped out the organization's $30-million deficit, slashed ticket prices, jump-started an endowment fund, and staved off defections by dancers and musicians.

He should have been walking on air, but after only 18 months he was exhausted, dispirited, and homesick. The Royal Opera House, with its meddlesome board and warring artistic fiefdoms, was a punishing environment, a place "full of bitching queens and grandes dames, all of whom regularly flounce out of meetings and lock themselves, sobbing, in the loo," as one British critic described it.

As if the meddling and tantrums weren't enough, the new stage machinery kept breaking down, the weather was God-awful, and the press piled on with charges of mismanagement, elitism, and moneygrubbing.

"In England," says Kaiser, "if you ask for more government money, you're called greedy. If you try to raise money from private sources, you're called crass. If you raise ticket prices, you're called elitist. So there's no way you can win because there are no other sources of funds besides those three."

IN A NICE PIECE OF TIMING, KAISER announced his departure from London about the time the Kennedy Center started its search for a new president to replace Larry Wilker, who was stepping down after ten years. An affable man who plaed his cards close to his vest, Wilker was credited with balancing the Kennedy Center's budget and running a tight managerial ship. But he was considered less successful as the de facto artistic director, packing the schedule with events of uneven quality.

"A lot of people on the board were tired of the mediocrity of the programming," says a longtime board member. "There were too many poor-quality retreads."

The unhappiness of the board was crystallized by an article in the *New York Times* by Jane Perlez in late 1999. She wrote that Manhattan's tastemakers viewed the Kennedy Center "as a symbol of the nation's attitude toward high culture. Middlebrow, they say, and far from the cutting edge."

The following April, on the recommendation of a management-consulting firm, the trustees voted to hire an artistic director. By all accounts, the move was not meant to force Wilker out; he had too many supporters for that. But he evidently felt he was in an untenable position, because he submitted his resignation a few days later. Wilker says his decision to leave was already in the works.

At first, the board was seeking a new administrative chief. But Michael Kaiser changed the equation. He was first approached by his old friend World Bank president Jim Wolfensohn, the Kennedy Center's chairman emeritus and a member of the search committee. To Wolfensohn's delight, Kaiser was intrigued by the idea of running a national performing-arts center. Kaiser told the same thing to center chairman Jim Johnson at their first meeting over lunch in London.

"He was in no way coy," says Johnson. "He told me, 'I'd love to have the opportunity to lead the Kennedy Center if things work out right.' "

The process moved swiftly. At a meeting in Johnson's London apartment, Kaiser already was bursting with program ideas.

"He said, 'Let's just talk about the Kirov,' " recalls Tom Wheeler. 'They need a home outside of Russia, and that home ought to be the Kennedy Center.'

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He followed that up by saying 'It's going to take a lot of money, of course, but I love fundraising.'

"We were sitting there saying, 'Yes!' "

KAISER HAD A COUPLE OF CONCERNS. He wanted to make sure he had the backing of the center's board of trustees, a high-powered group that can make life hard for a chief executive. So he had a series of small get-acquainted lunches and dinners arranged, all of which went well. More important, Kaiser received assurances that he would not only run the center but also shape what went on the stage.

For Kaiser, this was key. His previous stints with arts organizations had been administrative, meaning that he had to tiptoe around the artistic directors. Yet when Jim Johnson announced Kaiser's selection in July, he glossed over the subject.

"The board didn't want to make too big a deal of it, given what had happened with Larry," says a Kennedy Center trustee. "But Michael doesn't need artistic advice. His instincts are good across the board."

Coincidentally, New York City's Lincoln Center also was in the market for a new president that spring. Overtures were made to Kaiser, but he declined to be interviewed. He knew that former chair Beverly Sills and the powerful groups that perform there—including the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, and the New York City Ballet—made the artistic decisions. When they weren't at each other's throats, that is.

"At the Kennedy Center, I felt like I was going to have much more of a role as an arts presenter and arts maker than I would have at Lincoln Center," Kaiser says. "From having lived in Washington"—he worked here for seven years as a management consultant—"I knew I would be comfortable here. And with good friends like Plácido [Domingo] and Leonard [Slatkin] to work with, it just seemed to make so much sense.

As Senator Edward Kennedy, another member of the search committee, puts it, "Kaiser was simply the right man in the right place at the right time."

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE KENNEDY CENter post appealed to Kaiser: It was in good shape financially. Having spent the previous 15 years dealing with organizations on the brink of ruin, his nerves were worn to a frazzle.

At the American Ballet Theater, where in the mid-1990s he faced a deficit of $5 million, the situation was so dire he had every second light bulb taken out to save on electric bills.

"We were in such bad shape that nobody would give us any more credit," re-

calls Claudette Donlon, ABT's finance director at the time. "We couldn't even buy toe shoes. I remember one shoe vendor who wouldn't leave the premises until he got paid. Michael wrote him out a personal check."

Donlon, one of Kaiser's closest friends, now is the Kennedy Center's senior vice president.

At one point, Kaiser lent ABT nearly all the money he had, and although he got it back, he admits the experience scared him. He also had lent money to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, where he served as executive director.

At the Kennedy Center, there would be no need to take such risks. The deficit, which had been running close to $9 million a year in the early 1990s, had been wiped out thanks to better management and more aggressive fundraising.

The trustees were contributing more money. Previous problems with the board's giving went back to the way members are picked: Forty percent are government officials appointed by statute; the other 60 percent are presidential appointees chosen not for their interest in the arts but for the largesse of their political contributions. When it came to giving to the center, they tended to be much less generous.

The situation got so outrageous that Jim Johnson finally decided to pay a visit to Bill Clinton, telling him in essence not to send them any more deadbeats. The message got through. Most of the presidentially appointed trustees now give $50,000 or more annually.

Says one trustee: "He persuaded the President that future nominees had to view a seat on the board not as reward for past giving but a challenge to step up to something new."

WITHOUT THE WOLF AT THE DOOR, Kaiser would be able to focus on creating more excitement about going to the Kennedy Center.

"One of the things that surprised me in the beginning was how poorly we marketed ourselves," he says. "We commission more ballets, more symphonic music, chamber music, and theater works than any organization in the world, yet no one knows it. When I first accepted the job, I called up some of my friends who run foundations outside of Washington to get their impression of the Kennedy Center, and it was shocking—even people who work in the field. They knew about the Kennedy Center Honors. They knew we had Broadway musicals, and they knew the National Symphony. But that's about it."

In his view, the Kennedy Center was making the same mistake most arts organizations do, which is to focus on selling tickets night by night instead of on building its institutional image.

Here Kaiser schmoozes with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, stars of Athol Fugard's play *The Island* and old friends of Kaiser's from a consulting stint in South Africa.

"People go to London's Royal Shakespeare Theatre whether or not they're showing *Richard III* or *Hamlet* because they've done such a good job of creating an institutional image," he says. "That's what we have to do here."

Kaiser's recipe for success—the one he's used at every organization he's run—boils down to a simple formula: great art, well marketed.

Publicity is a key component of the strategy, and he has the staff working hard to create buzz around Kennedy Center family members like Leonard Slatkin and ballet choreographer Suzanne Farrell. Kaiser himself has been the subject of profiles by the likes of the *New York Times* and *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer,* and he is increasingly quoted in articles about the arts—attention he cultivates.

"It's all part of the strategy, " he says. "You don't just market the institution, but you market the people who work there, too. I'm doing this not to make Michael famous or not to make Michael feel good. It's because now, when I go out fundraising, people are actually excited to talk to me and meet me. That's what I mean by institutional marketing."

MICHAEL KAISER IS AN UNLIKELY celebrity. As a child growing up in the suburbs of New York City, he was so self-effacing that people sometimes forgot he was in the room.

"He was always very easy, very kind," says his mother, Marion Kaiser. "I now think I shouldn't have made him be so kind—because his sister was so temperamental, everyone was always paying attention to her. And I would tell him, 'Mike, be nice.' He was very obliging until one day, at age 13, he announced, 'I don't have to be nice anymore.' "

Kaiser seemed like a pretty normal kid—he belonged to the Cub Scouts and played well with classmates. But he was also a perfectionist who came undone if he thought he fell short in some way.

"He always had to be first in his class," recalls his mother. Michael and sister Susan were so intense about their studies that their father once offered them $5 for every F they got on their report cards.

"I felt they should relax a little," says Harold Kaiser. "But nobody ever collected."

It was a case of the apple not falling far from the tree: Harold himself is an inveterate worrywart who leaves nothing to chance.

"I worry about things that will happen the year after next," he jokes. Robust-looking at 80, with a shock of white hair, he seems to regret holding his children to such high standards.

"I always taught them if you do something, you do it well. But I guess I went too far. I remember Tom [Michael's older brother] got a model airplane, and I helped him build it so it would be right instead of letting him make his own mistakes."

KAISER'S PARENTS ARE HOLOCAUST survivors—German Jews who fled Germany as teenagers in 1938. Marion was 14 when she came over with her upper-class family; she had less trouble adjusting than Harold, who landed in New York as a friendless, penniless 17-year-old desperate to get his mother out of Germany. His father, an ardent German nationalist, refused to leave.

Working at a succession of menial jobs, Harold was able to send for her in 1941.

"Mother traveled on a sealed train through France to Spain," Harold recalls. "She sailed to Havana on the next-to-last passenger ship to leave Europe." He never again saw his father, who died at Terezin.

As part-owner of a lumber business, Harold had his ups and downs. But he made enough money to move the family to a nice house on a leafy street in New Rochelle. There Michael was brought up in a cultured environment where books and music counted for more than sports.

Young Mikey was something of a mystery to his family.

"He was a lot of fun to play with," says his sister Susan. "But he was more internal than external. You never knew what was going on in his mind."

Nobody knew Michael could sing, for

example, because he never sang at home. In third grade, when the family went to see him play the captain in Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore,* they were astonished to see how he lit up when he was on stage. His parents still have the little black blazer he wore, with the homemade gold epaulets sewn on by his father

"The only time my shyness evaporated was when I was performing," says Kaiser. "I came alive on stage. I remember my parents were horrified when a photographer for the local newspaper showed up to take a picture of the cast and I pushed a little girl in the chorus out of the way, telling her, 'Principals only.' "

SEEING *THE MUSIC MAN* ON BROADWAY when he was four struck Kaiser like a lightning bolt, he says. He lived for the family's holiday trips to Manhattan to see the latest musical. He also went to concerts and rehearsals at the New York Philharmonic, thanks to his step-grandfather, who played the violin with the orchestra.

But singing was Michael's main outlet. He rehearsed doggedly for big choral solos and lead roles in high-school musicals. Usually he got them. Then he fell in love with opera. He worked after school to pay for music lessons in the city; some of his teachers, including the noted soprano Phyllis Curtin, encouraged him to become a professional. But his parents thought it was too risky and discouraged him from enrolling in a music conservatory.

After a year at MIT, where his father says Michael "majored in Gilbert and Sullivan," he wanted to switch to music school. He had been accepted at several of the country's top academies, but when the Manhattan School of Music, his first choice, turned him down, he was devastated.

Family members recall how he went up to his room and stayed there for a long time. When he finally came down, he announced that if he wasn't good enough to be accepted at Manhattan, he was giving up singing.

"There's a difference between being high-school good and being really good," says Kaiser. "Although I was crushed, it was a life lesson. It didn't paralyze me, but it was very, very hurtful."

He threw himself into business and marketing at Brandeis. Out in the world as a management consultant, he was a quick success, doubling, tripling, then quadrupling his salary. But he remained his father's son. His first year out, when he earned $10,000, he banked $6,000 of it.

In 1978 his career brought him to Washington, where he eventually set up his own firm, Michael M. Kaiser Associates. Operating out of his townhouse in Georgetown, the 27-year-old was soon attracting corporate clients.

"At first it was just him and his dog, but he made a ton of money over the next four years," says Harold Kaiser. "Then he didn't want to do it anymore."

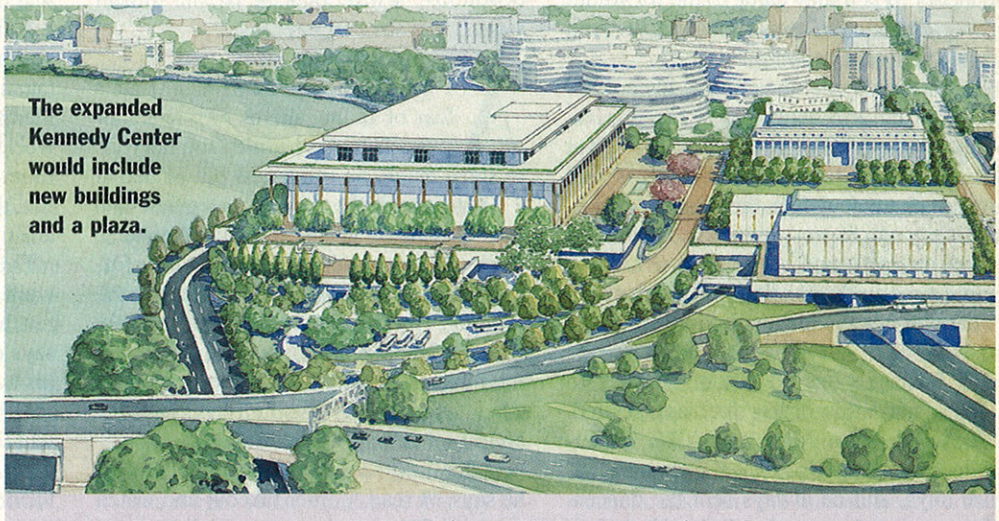
Kaiser was working so hard and traveling so much that he collapsed one day in the Detroit airport. That's when he decided he needed to find another outlet for his energies. He volunteered with the Washington Opera and produced a strategic plan for the organization. The more he got involved in the opera and the longer he served on the board, the less fulfilling he found his consulting work. He decided to sell his interest in his firm and look for a full-time job in the arts.

WHEN KAISER SIGNED ON AS THE general manager of the Kansas City Ballet in 1985, no one could figure out why he wanted to run a bankrupt ballet company in the boondocks, earning less money in a year than he made in a week at Kaiser Associates. To him it was simple. He was—and is—in love with the arts.

"I love the excitement of the curtain going up," he says. "I love watching the audience watch. Typically I sit in the last row, where I can see people's body language. Or I stand backstage. I enjoyed the milieu so much, I wanted to be a part of it."

He was in his element last spring when the American Ballet Theatre was performing at the Kennedy Center. All his "babies," as he calls them—the dancers, the stagehands, the company managers who used to work for him—came up to kiss or hug him and tell him how much they missed him.

"Hi, honey," he greets the beautiful Paloma Herrera, one of the company's principle dancers, whose parents live in



The expanded Kennedy Center would include new buildings and a plaza.

Livening Up the Kennedy Center

TEN YEARS FROM NOW, THE KENNEDY CENTER may be much more approachable, whether by car, foot, bicycle, or boat. On the west side of the building, overlooking the Potomac River, a grand staircase may descend from the terrace to a promenade below, making it possible to walk to and from Georgetown. Or you might take a ferryboat. On the east front, an 11-acre plaza may be built, allowing people to walk from the Mall to the Kennedy Center without risking life and limb.

The improvements have been talked about for some time, and the Department of Transportation had just concluded a $500,000 feasibility study when Michael Kaiser came aboard. The new Kennedy Center president, who has more than a little P.T. Barnum in him, saw a way to give the $269-million federally funded project more pizzazz. He proposed two privately funded buildings flanking either end of the plaza. One would house a national museum of the performing arts. The other would provide office and rehearsal space. The plaza itself would be a gathering place with free open-air shows and giant screens showing productions under way indoors. The price tag for the two buildings: another $225 million.

Kaiser sees the performing-arts museum furthering his goal of making the Kennedy Center a truly national arts center, while the activity on the plaza would make the center a magnet for both locals and tourists.

the DC area. "Will Mommy and Daddy be coming tonight?"

"No," she says, "they're coming tomorrow night."

"So tonight you'll dance for me," he says.

"You've got to come tomorrow night," a young man tells him. "I really want you to see me dance."

"I'll be here," replies Kaiser. "I wouldn't miss it," and he strikes a dancer's pose. He does this from time to time—a holdover from studying ballet in Kansas City.

It must have taken guts for a pudgy, unathletic guy to don tights and a T-shirt and try to execute a grand jeté—he once crashed into a piano—but he saw the experience as both a way to enter the dancer's world and a management tool.

"Of course I was terrible, but I felt it was important to understand what dancers go through physically and mentally," he says. "I had played the violin, so I knew a little about how that felt. I had been an opera singer, I had acted, but I needed a sense of what life was like for dancers. When they came to me for something, I needed to know: Was this demand important or legitimate?"

"So many times, the attitude towards us is 'Shut up and dance,' says Jim Jordan, ballet master at Kansas City. "But Michael gets to know the dancers and makes them feel like they have a voice, that they can express opinions. He used to come in early and stay late just to have more time in the studio with the dancers. That was always his inspiration."

KAISER GOES TO GREAT LENGTHS to make his artists feel appreciated. At Alvin Ailey and ABT, he seldom missed a performance, even on matinee days, and he always sent the dancers flowers, jewelry, or other little gifts before major engagements. At the Royal Opera House he made tea every afternoon for a temperamental visiting conductor.

"As an arts administrator, you get the best performances when you make the artists feel supported, loved, and cared for," he says. "Under those conditions, they will feel more comfortable taking risks onstage, and they're much more able do their best work."

In Kansas City he had a strong artistic team and talented dancers to promote, which made selling tickets and attracting donors a lot easier. In little more than a year he put the organization on sound financial footing, established a touring schedule, and transformed the company's image.

Applying the same mantra—great art, well marketed—he went on to even bigger successes at the Pierpont Morgan Library, Alvin Ailey, ABT, and the Royal Opera House in London, in each case leaving behind a revitalized, energized organization.

Not surprisingly, Kaiser got some bruises along the way. At the Alvin Ailey company, sources say, the formidable Judith Jamison used to slap him down every time she thought he was venturing into her territory as artistic director. His stint at ABT was more fulfilling once the company got out of debt. But Kaiser never stayed long in any one spot. All too often, as he confesses in an unpublished memoir, he left behind colleagues who had worked their hearts out for him and who felt betrayed by his departure.

"For years I felt that I simply got too frightened to stay, that the turnaround was 'lucky' and that the truth would be found out if I stuck around," he writes. "There is perhaps a grain of truth in this, but I believe the larger truth is that turnarounds are exhausting. They take a huge investment in energy, emotion, and time. While it's fun and gratifying, in retrospect, to look at the steps one took to solve serious problems, while one is in the initial stages, it is very frightening."

AT THE KENNEDY CENTER, KAISER'S fear of failure drives him to maintain a hectic schedule. Too nervous to sleep much, he often gets out of bed at 2 AM to check the next day's reviews on line. He usually gets to the office before 7, works all day, and then attends a performance or a work-related social event in the evening. His day got even longer recently when he began working out at a gym every morning—a first for him. The only time he takes off with any regularity is Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

"I don't do very much outside of work," he says. "I read. I order takeout and watch a lot of TV, mostly sports, politics, and current events, and old sitcoms. I'm really very boring because I truly need that rest time and alone time. To me, there's nothing more glorious than a night when I can go home and do absolutely zero."

Kaiser, who has never married, lives by himself in a penthouse apartment not far from the Kennedy Center. He used to have two miniature dachshunds on whom he doted, baking them chicken breasts every day and sending them to doggie daycare. But he felt guilty about leaving them alone so much.

"When they died, it broke my heart," he says. "I'm not sure I want to go through that again." He used to find time to play bridge and cook for friends. People still talk about the Thanksgiving dinners for 12 he whipped up in his tiny New York kitchen, traditionally baking seven different elaborate cakes. These days, he says, he's lucky if he can steal time to go to the dry cleaner.

The Kennedy Center is his obsession. He watches sales figures like a hawk and can tell you down to the last decimal point what the box office is for an event that's two or three months off. Walking to work, he literally rehearses his lines for each of the meetings on his schedule. By 7:30 he'll have dashed off 40 or 50 queries to staff, checking on the status of items on his list.

"I am absolutely not a miracle worker," he says. "What I am is very disciplined and very focused about what makes an organization work. I don't let much push me off course, and I can be ruthless about it if I need to be. I also devote my entire being to whatever arts organization I'm running at the time. I would die for my organization."

KAISER'S INTENSITY TAKES ITS TOLL. Twice in his career he has collapsed from overwork and stress. He still sets the bar so high, he teeters between despair and elation: "The way I work, there's very little margin for error. I seem to like that in my life. I guess I'm crazy."

Kaiser expects an equal measure of devotion from staffers. Prospective hires are taken aback to learn that they might find themselves working with no days off for weeks at a time if need be, with no overtime and no comp time. "His work is his life, and he expects it to be yours too," says a former Alvin Ailey colleague.

Even so, his subordinates are ready to walk off a cliff for him. "He cares so much, nobody can bear to disappoint him," says one. Others point to his accessibility, his honesty, and his selflessness.

"It's never about Michael—it's always what's good for the organization" is a refrain heard over and over from current and former colleagues.

At his initial meeting with the Kennedy Center's stagehands and their union representative, he said, "I'm not here to ask you to tighten your belts or warn that cutbacks are coming. I'm here to raise as much money as I can to make sure everybody keeps right on working."

The union rep was so impressed that later, when Kaiser asked the stagehands to work for free at the memorial concert—something they can't do contractually—the union arranged to have their salaries donated back to the center.

"When Michael asks everybody to roll up their sleeves and give, they do," says Mickey Berra, a 30-year veteran of the Kennedy Center who is director of production. "Everybody loves the guy."

The touchy-feely type, Kaiser forms particularly close bonds with his senior staff, turning them into a kind of surrogate family. Still, nobody forgets for a second

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KAISER FAMILY

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who is boss. Staffers dread his icy look if they're late for a meeting or forget to tell him they'll be out of the office. He's also a bear when it comes to the budget.

"The budget is the budget is the budget," says a department head. "He's very chop-chop about that. If you want to do something, he'll say, 'Is that in the budget? If not, you can't do it. If you want to cut something else out, okay. But don't ask me for the money.' "

"His approach permits no bullshit, no whining," says ABT conductor Charles Barker, who also worked with Kaiser at Kansas City. "With him, it's 'Cut the deal, make it happen artistically, and let's go on to the next project.' "

KAISER IS AN ANOMOLY among WASHington's often-swaggering power-players. Soft-spoken and unassuming, he doesn't try to hide his vulnerabilities. Yet he's a terrific schmoozer—a charmer who can talk to anyone about anything. He radiates confidence and enthusiasm when the conversation turns to his plans for the Kennedy Center.

"He is so engaging and so convinced about the future of the Kennedy Center that I know a lot of people who have really caught the fire through him," says Otto Ruesch, a businessman who is heading up a new international fundraising initiative for the center.

Kaiser gets excited when he talks about the programs he has up his sleeve, like the Tchaikovsky festival set for 2003, which will feature the NSO, the Kirov, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, song recitals, chamber music, and films. "People will have a chance to understand this composer from so many dimensions, he says. "As well as having resonance around the country, it will serve as a symbol that the arts are alive and well in Washington."

He rhapsodizes about the day when Washington becomes an internationally recognized destination for arts lovers, the way New York, London, and Paris are now. At the heart of his vision for the city is the Kennedy Center, which he hopes will bring people here to see a concert or a play, visit the performing-arts museum planned for the expanded Kennedy Center complex, or take in a free show on the huge plaza to be built over the freeway.

The other subject that fires him up is the need for more professional arts managers. He designed the curriculum for the Vilar Institute, where a dozen promising arts managers are rotated in and out of various departments at the Kennedy Center for a year.

"There's no shortage of artistic talent in this world," he says. "But there's a real shortage of people who know how to create a good environment for those artists to work in. The field is so young, there's a lot to learn and a lot of dissemination that needs to be done. That's what the Vilar Institute is all about. But it's also what my career is about."

KAISER, WHO DIRECTS THE INSTITUTE, is operating on so many fronts that some people worry he's taken on too much. Aside from wall-to-wall meetings with donors, agents, musicians, theater directors, members of Congress, and board members, he is often called in to advise groups like the Bolshoi Ballet or the Toronto Symphony, which he does free of charge.

The Kaiser family in the 1950s. Michael is second from left, next to his brother, Thomas. Across the table are mother Marion, father Harold, and sister Susan.

Was it ego, some wondered, that lay behind his decision to host a radio program at WQXR in New York?

"It's a marketing tool," he responds. "We're trying to build audiences and donors there."

Others expressed unhappiness when he stepped in as acting president of the National Symphony in August.

"It smacks of megalomania," says a disaffected member of the Symphony board.

Kaiser, who doesn't see himself relinquishing the post anytime soon, says he did it at the request of Leonard Slatkin and symphony chairman Michael Brewer.

"We have underinvested, undersupported, and underloved the National Symphony," says Kaiser. "But we are planning big things—bringing in the right guest artists, for example, and making sure Leonard feels properly highlighted by the organization. I predict people are going to feel very differently about the orchestra over next three years."

At the same time, sources say, Kaiser is insisting that Slatkin give orchestra members more time to rehearse unfamiliar music in order to eliminate the raggedness that crops up in performances from time to time.

Kaiser has other delicate waters to navigate. One is striking the right balance between satisfying the locals, who buy most of the tickets, and mounting the kind of cutting-edge programs that attract national and international attention.

"As the central performing-arts center for the Washington area," he says, "we are obligated to present a very wide range of art and education—the kind of thing for which we are often criticized. At the same time, we have to be a leader nationally, which means we have to figure out what are the things we can do that are truly different, distinctive, and important. You can't lead in everything. The Vilar Institute is a national leadership program. Our Web site for teachers is a national leadership program. So is the Sondheim festival, which is a good example of the kind of large-scale artistic project we should be embarking on and risking."

BIG, SPLASHY PROJECTS COST MONEY, and the effects of the September 11 tragedy could cause Kaiser to scale back some of his grander schemes. In particular, the loss of revenue from the comedy *Shear Madness,* a perennial tourist favorite, could hurt the bottom line. Further souring of the economy could really give him something to worry about.

To date, Kaiser hasn't lost his touch with donors. Last month he got another huge gift: $10 million from arts enthusiast Catherine Reynolds.

In the end, of course, Kaiser will be judged not just by how much money he raises but by the quality of art he puts on the stage. On both scores, most observers sound optimistic.

"Speaking for my family and myself," says Ted Kennedy, "I think Michael Kaiser has the ability to attract the very best artists and the financial backup to make it possible for them to come here. With him in charge, I feel the center's best days are still to come."

Mickey Berra, the guy who makes sure the lights go down when the curtain goes up, puts it more succinctly.

"Right now, I feel that Michael is the right horse for the course." □