

Benefit Hell

Blinging in the booty has never been so tough

Do you put down your fork or party on like a good Roman? I chose the latter course.

Depending upon how you look at it, September is either the kindest or the cruelest month on the philanthropic calendar. And that goes quadruple here, in the financial and charitable center of the world.

On any given night, hundreds, hell, thousands of apparently generous New Yorkers buzz around Manhattan, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to do good, most certainly, but also to drink, dine, dance, network, preen, pose, posture, position themselves, bid, buy raffle tickets, do business, have another drink, pick up a couple of goodie bags, and (in at least some

brought on by listening, as I did that same night at the annual New Yorkers For Children gala, to Diane Sawyer speak about children with roaches living in their ears while all around, swells nibble poached Maine lobster with haricots vert.

Do you put down your fork or party on like a good Roman? I chose the latter course. But I'd signed on for a week in benefit Hell—a week when big-cause Goliaths like the Metropolitan Opera, upstart Davids like New Yorkers for Children, and (in the minds of the glitterati, at least) minor-leaguers like the 21-year-old Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis all took the field in a philanthropic free-for-all.

It wasn't always pretty. As more and more charities elbow onto the scene (some 800,000 new ones in the last five years, says the IRS), the competition for donor dollars has grown so fierce, it's time to wonder if the goose that laid the golden eggs is a victim of its own procreative prowess. Everyone wants the benefits of benefits. But they're also attaching more strings to their checks, demanding more bang for the buck.

Boards that don't put up (with the best party designers, the best food, the best entertainment, the best guests, the most glamour) must fear being shut out of the competition. Even low-profile charities are bringing in big-name MCs and topping their invitations with ever-more marquee names. (Big names can draw, but it's risky business: At a St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center bash I attended, the two top celebrities among

the honorary chairmen, Whoopi Goldberg and Mary-Louise Parker, were both AWOL. Jean Kennedy Smith, a tireless advocate for the disabled, filled the vacuum but grimaced when I suggested that she was the night's top draw.)

Even high-profile charities have to work harder. To put on a really big show, they are selling special honors to the highest bidders and sponsorships to big cor-



cases) try to buy their way into Heaven after (sorry, but someone's got to say it) spending their days earning a spot in Hell.

Cognitive dissonance is a recreational hazard. It can be brought on by watching a benefit-a-night socialite work her dress for the photographers for half an hour in the entrance of one event—and then leave for another before the speeches begin. Or it can be

ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL WITTE

porate players with global resources. Cash and the ability to draw a crowd are what give you cachet today: Increasingly, the traditional locomotives of philanthropy are sidetracked.

Does society mean anything anymore? Not as much as it used to, asserts David Adler, founder of bizbash.com, which tracks the event business nationwide. "There are pockets of influence and money that you've never heard of, that have nothing to do with the social world," he says. Once, new cohorts of yearning-to-be-swells would have slipped naturally, if slowly, into their seats at Le Cirque and the opera, earning entrée by throwing new money around. Now, more and more, they couldn't care less. They don't need no stinking socialites. They can fill the Waldorf all on their own—and have a better time doing it. "Charity doesn't have to be chic," observes Roberta Caplan of the John O'Donnell Company, which consults for nonprofits like St. Vincent's.

Still not convinced? Consider the Buoniconti Fund's Sports Legend dinner. After an auction of autographed memorabilia and other gewgaws (a Sinatra signature went for \$5,200), the testosterone-charged, almost all-male crowd filed into the Grand Ballroom for a rousing welcome from Tom Brokaw and appearances by award winners General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Lance Armstrong, Patrick Ewing, Emmitt Smith, and Wade Boggs, among others. And they were thrilled to be there, tearing into iceberg lettuce, tournedos of beef, and warm chocolate cake with gusto. After the national anthem was sung, more than a few spontaneously shouted, "Play ball!"

That sort of thing doesn't happen at upper-crust affairs for traditional top-drawer causes like Memorial Sloan-Kettering, the Metropolitan Opera, and the Museum of the City of New York. They attract a crowd that considers itself more refined. But even they are being forced to loosen up in the face of stiff competition from hedge-funded upstarts like the Robin Hood Foundation. Its annual gala is consistently rated the hottest ticket in town—and this year drew 4,000 guests and raised \$48 million in a heartbeat.

For now, anyway, with the hordes at the gate, the self-appointed leaders of society are turning a blind eye, sequestering themselves at a handful of head ta-

bles while the development directors of their favored institutions throw open once-exclusive parties and market to the masses. The Costume Institute's annual "Party of the Year" fundraising dinner at the Metropolitan Museum began as a fashion-industry event in the 1940s and in the mid-1960s evolved into a high-society soiree. But in the last few years, the last generation of social locomotives lost their steam, and control of the party has reverted to the frockmeisters, who've turned it into an East Coast Oscars, a celebrity fashion parade.

Even the Metropolitan Opera this year joined the fray, with a dinner party and premiere performance where Hollywood and rock types outshined the free-spending honorees Sid and Mercedes Bass and social regulars Annette de la Renta and Jayne Wrightsman. "The opera is trying to appeal to the great unwashed," thinks *New York Social Diary* editor David Patrick Columbia. "They went with the popular idea that if you get Sienna Miller and Jude Law, the whole world will follow. They got what they wanted—major publicity."

There's still nothing better than a good cause, an open bar, and a committee that can attract people who know and like each other. That was clearly the case at one of the season's best fetes of all, the Fete de Swifty. The Swifty's party is a reinvention of the Fete de Famille AIDS benefit run under the aegis of the late Glenn Birnbaum, proprietor of Mortimer's, an old society restaurant. When he died, his key aides opened Swifty's, named after Birnbaum's pug, and relaunched his block-party-under-a-tent as a benefit for the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City.

Sure, Swifty's serves up food and drink, a silent auction, circus performers on stilts, and this year, wax figures of Marilyn Monroe and Samuel L. Jackson, but for the most part, it's about the crowd attracted by a dedicated and enthusiastic committee, a decidedly unwaxlike bunch that ranged from Mortimer's types like Judy and Sam Peabody to what WWD calls the PYTs. Mayor Mike Bloomberg stayed so long shaking hands that his staffers just rolled their eyes and tossed out his schedule. I had such a good time, I forgot to take notes. That's my kind of party. ▲

\$100 million:

The total donations that New York City charities are likely to bring in from benefits held between September and December of this year, which would be a record.

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1,500:

The number of charity fundraising benefits scheduled in New York between September and December of 2006.

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