

A promotional banner for Mother's Day Deals. On the left is the FTD logo featuring a yellow figure. In the center, the text reads "MOTHER'S DAY DEALS" in large, bold, black letters. To the right, it says "STARTING AT \$19.99" with the price in a large, stylized font. Further right is a "SHOP NOW" button with a right-pointing arrow, set against a background of pink and white roses.

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MICHAEL KAISER

## Arts Organizations on the Brink Are Turning to Him for Advice

By WILLIAM TRIPLETT

*Washington*

Within 24 hours of announcing a free consulting program for any troubled arts organizations in the country, Michael Kaiser, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, received 110 emailed pleas from 31 states.

"We even got one from Iceland," he says. "Unfortunately, we don't deal with Iceland."

Fortunately for Mr. Kaiser, in his spacious aerie of an office on one of the Kennedy Center's upper floors, he has a large conference table: The printed emails, many of them in piles, cover every square inch of its surface.

"Some break your heart," he says. "One group wrote saying they need money to keep their copying machine going."

Yet, despite the multiple ills reported in many of these first pleas from organizations of all sizes and budgets, Mr. Kaiser says he has seen it all before. Over the course of almost three decades, he has specialized in resuscitating arts outfits once on life-support, including Harlem's Alvin Ailey Dance Theater, the Kansas City Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre and London's Royal Opera House.

He's even written a how-to book based on these experiences -- "The Art of the Turnaround: Creating and Maintaining Healthy Arts Organizations," essentially a 183-page prescription, published last fall by Brandeis University Press.

"There are a substantial number of organizations that are not well run or realistically run because very little investment is made in this country in training people to run arts organizations," says Mr. Kaiser in a voice not much louder than gently running tap water. In his dark suit, white shirt and striped tie along with his graying hair, he could pass for a board member of General Motors.

"We spend disproportionate amounts to train artists -- performers, choreographers, oboe players -- and we spend almost nothing to train people who would employ them. So arts organizations always operate very close to the edge," Mr. Kaiser notes. "But add the problems of the economy and a crisis becomes absolutely clear. I've never seen anything on this scale."

The nonprofit advocacy group Americans for the Arts estimates "conservatively," according to a spokeswoman, that the recession could kill off at least 10,000 arts organizations in 2009. Whether Mr. Kaiser's aid program can save them all -- and whether all should be saved -- are different matters.

"Arts in Crisis: A Kennedy Center Initiative," which Mr. Kaiser unveiled on Feb. 3, is essentially an online hotline ([www.artsincrisis.org](http://www.artsincrisis.org)) for troubled groups. With the help of 12 Kennedy Center staffers, all of whom still have regular duties and responsibilities, and an as-yet-undetermined number of qualified arts managers (called "mentors") who can volunteer relevant expertise, Mr. Kaiser is confident solutions to most problems can be found.

"It'll differ by organization," he says. "Some just have questions -- 'How do I talk to my board about planning?' 'How do I recoup ticket sales for this particular performance?' That's really just a simple conversation between them and my development staff."

Others have more complicated troubles -- "the kind you can't answer in a simple phone call," he says. On-site visits may be necessary.

The initiative is a natural outgrowth of arts management education that the Kennedy Center has been offering in the eight years since Mr. Kaiser's arrival. It's also fundamentally driven by a passion to end a self-defeating phenomenon he has witnessed throughout his career.

"When there are economic challenges, the first things that staffs and boards cut are programming and marketing, and that's the worst thing you can do," he says. "You're guaranteeing yourself you'll have less revenue next year, and that's how sick organizations get really sick. That's why I'm so nervous right now and why I'm doing this."

Cutting budget is obviously necessary, "but where you cut is crucial," he continues. "I cut the free coffee for staff here. It saved us \$30,000 a year. I've also cut back on staff travel, including my own. I've never met a budget I couldn't cut, in any organization, no matter how small. But if you start by cutting the programming, rather than everything in the back of the house, you're signing a warrant that everything will just get worse, worse, worse."

Another motive for Mr. Kaiser's initiative: As a national arts institution -- with a \$20 million cash reserve, to boot -- the Kennedy Center has a responsibility to provide leadership and help to other arts organizations, Mr. Kaiser believes.

"We're very fortunate in that we have a very strong donor base and a strong audience base, so if everybody else is going to suffer, I and my staff need to pitch in as well," he says.

But how much can he really do? A blog entry on [ArtsJournal.com](http://ArtsJournal.com) praised and welcomed the effort but also posited that "neither the Kennedy Center nor Michael Kaiser has the capacity (or full range of insight) to engage the tidal wave of cultural leaders who need help."

"That's true," Mr. Kaiser responds without hesitation. "That's why we solicited mentors, and we've had more than 50 sign up already and expect more. Still, it's true -- in the end, even with mentors, we can't handle everything. I would never say we could. But we can start. And that's what we're doing."

Should all arts organizations be saved, though? Shouldn't any poorly managed business -- artistic or not -- be subject to the Darwinian forces of the marketplace?

"That's a sad thing to think about," says Mr. Kaiser, his soft voice suddenly turning softer. "I've taken over some organizations that were poorly run, but the world would be a poorer place without them. A lot of them have a lot to contribute to their communities, and it's a shame that one or two bad managers should be the reason an organization goes away."

"But it is true that there is a life and death to arts organizations and not every one should survive forever, or will survive forever," he acknowledges. "The fact is, from a financial standpoint, the difference between sickness and health is typically so slim that it's probably not the financials that should determine whether they should survive or not."

Ultimately, the determining factor may well be whether organizations embrace Mr. Kaiser's oft-repeated mantra of "great art well-marketed" -- the underlying principle of his book and his entire arts management philosophy. The deteriorating economy has only affirmed the importance of this principle, he says.

"Each organization I went to help, the marketing person was always depressed, because the board was always saying, 'No you can't do that, or that.' And I'd say, 'OK, let's save every penny we have and put it on the stage. And let's be really creative about how to create awareness.' So often in a troubled organization, there's so much focus on 'what happened, what went wrong, who did what, whose fault was it?' But turn that around and focus on 'what do we do next year?' and the energy from that is amazing."

***Mr. Triplett was the head of the Washington bureau of Variety from 2005 to the end of 2008.***

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