

CHARITY

# GIVING IT UP

Glitzy, star-filled and fiercely competitive, the American charity scene might not be for the faint-hearted, but it works, generating big bucks which put British philanthropy to shame

REPORT JEFFREY PODOLSKY PHOTOGRAPHS DAFYDD JONES



"Hi, beautiful!" gushes Sharon Young to a new arrival at the Two by Two for Aids and Art benefit in Dallas. "That's the same dress I tried on!" Young, co-chair of tonight's gala, and dressed in vintage Galanos, is welcoming guests, some of whom paid as much as \$25,000 for a table at the annual blowout, hosted by Cindy and Howard Rachofsky in their Richard Meier, 10,000sq ft white minimalist cube of a palace in a fashionable Dallas suburb.

Rachofsky, one of America's leading collectors of contemporary art, has opened his home-cum-museum to benefit The American Foundation for Aids research (amfAR) and the Dallas Museum of Art. He has emptied its four floors of his own priceless art, save for a few stray pieces of Le Corbusier furniture, to auction off dozens of works by the likes of Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman and Ross Bleckner, most donated by the artists and their galleries. Tout Dallas society - dressed in "creative" black-tie more suggestive of Oscars night than the traditional dinner jacket - is there, marvelling at this awe-inspiring Rachofsky-Meier



collaboration. But so far the showstopper has been the choir of more than 200 gay men by the entrance.

"Everybody just loves 'em," Young whispers to Rachofsky in the receiving line, as the Turtle Creek Chorale sings Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*. And the choir just loves it when a limo pulls up and out pops Liza Minnelli and her pooch, Emmalina. "I'm just trying to grasp all this," says Kenneth Cole, fashion designer and amfAR board member. "The choir, the home, the welcome. It's all so uncharacteristic of what we do in New York. We don't see much of this."

Well, not exactly. Compared with Dallas, New York is no lovefest. Still, weeks later, more than 1,000 guests, 20 of whom paid \$100,000 for a table (including David Koch, the billionaire who bought Jackie O's Fifth Avenue pad) are enjoying the performance of another gay icon at a far less intimate benefit at Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria ballroom - former junk-bond king Michael Milken's annual bash for the Prostate Cancer Foundation. (The Milken family has given some \$750 million to philanthropic causes.) The scene couldn't be more different from Dallas, a night which even Rachofsky admitted had "sort of an innocence" to it.

At the New York event, Cher performs a mini-concert of her never-ending Farewell Tour. Though she gives it her all (five

costume changes in 45 minutes), the New York crowd continues to network, barring a few exceptions, such as Manhattan charity princess Muffy Potter Aston, who is gyrating energetically to *If I Could Turn Back Time*. The majority of the crowd, characteristically blasé, manages to ignore the scantily clad 57-year-old singer, priming themselves for the exit as they eye their Rolexes.

Liza Minnelli (seated, centre) poses for photographers at the Two by Two for Aids and Art benefit in Dallas

Welcome to the wonderful world of philanthropy, American-style. "New York and Dallas are like the Yin and Yang of America," says Dallas socialite Linda Herrmann, who bought five pieces at the Dallas event - a Robert Mapplethorpe, a Bruce Nauman, a Donald Moffett, and "two others - I can't pronounce their names". Breathless with the thrill of it all, she adds, "We're very verbose and friendly here in Dallas. We're the sophisticated South."

But sophistication isn't the name of the game when it comes to raising funds for good causes in America. The bottom line is money, and lots of it, as charities compete to outdo one another with lavish parties that provide a crucial share of their overall revenue. The Prostate Cancer Foundation, which has netted more than \$200 million since its inception in 1993, raked in some \$4 million that evening at the Waldorf (compared with \$1.2 million at the

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« Rachofskys), culminating in a live auction in which one couple gamely swapped \$200,000 for a day on the set of *Ocean's 12*, complete with a speaking role in the film, lunch with George Clooney and Matt Damon and tickets to the premiere. In Dallas, a walk-on part in *Six Feet Under* garnered only \$10,000 (clearly, being surrounded by corpses can't compete with noshing with Mr Clooney).

"People in New York take philanthropy very seriously," says socialite Susan Fales-Hill, who serves on the boards of the East Side Settlement House (even New York's Upper East Side has a homeless shelter) and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and has been a junior chair of American Ballet and New Yorkers for Children. "It's not a little game to dabble in, nor is it for the faint of heart."

For most Americans, including New York's reigning charity star, Blaine Trump, the act of giving couldn't be less fainthearted. "It's part of my heart and soul, what can I tell you," says Trump, who has raised millions for God's Love We Deliver, a food-delivery service for Aids patients and the indigent. Trump embodies (albeit on a grand scale) the deep-rooted culture of American giving, whether it's a few dollars to the local church or millions to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

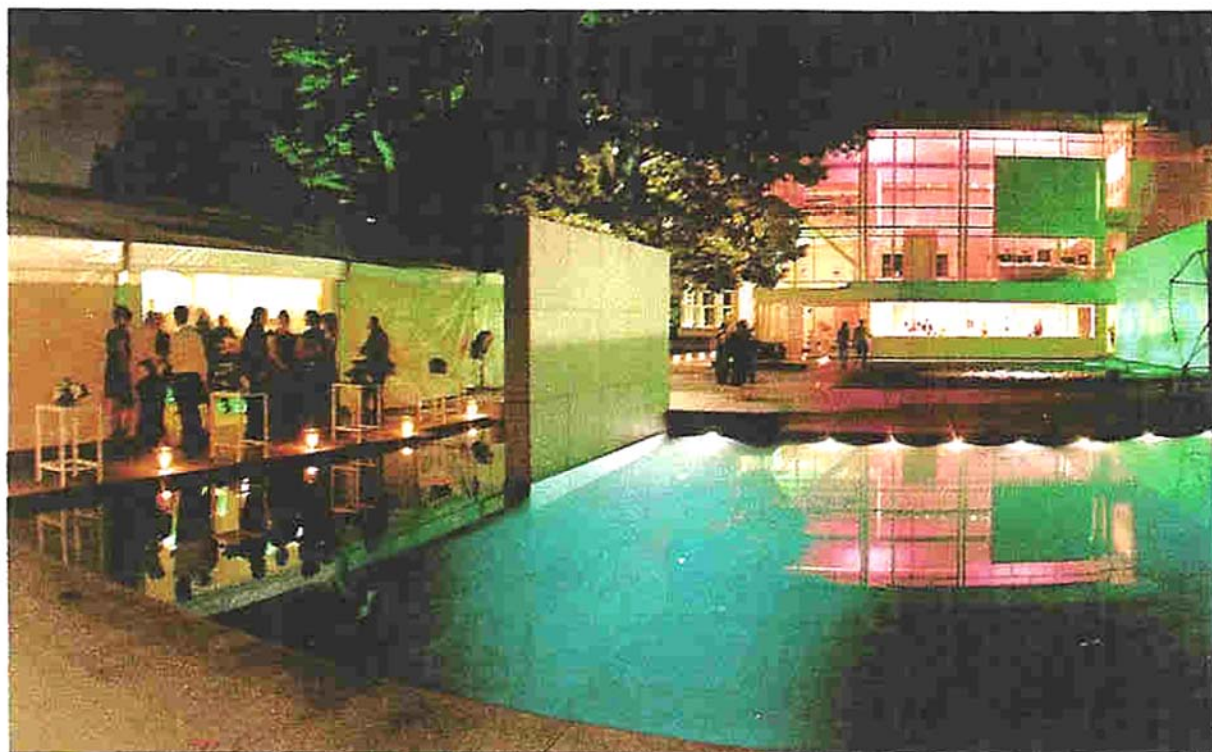
"The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced," declared the 19th-century steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie. Although contributions to the nation's largest charities fell 1.2 per cent last year because of the flagging economy, Americans still coughed up \$241 billion nationwide, according to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. And as well as the high-end, high-profile bashes for the super-rich, there are

innumerable smaller, less glitzy benefits aimed at the middle-classes. In New York alone, there are some 27,000 charitable organisations, of which the largest 9,000 employ approximately 528,000 people (about one in seven New Yorkers, more than the financial, insurance, and real-estate sectors combined) and account for \$5.2 billion in annual expenditures, according to a report published last year by the New York City Non-Profits Project.

The philanthropic high ground that holds sway in the United States is a far cry from the relatively parsimonious mindset in the UK, where the statistics suggest that Brits give considerably less to charity – about 40 per cent per capita of what Americans give. As a British editor who has worked in New York recalls, "There's simply not the same culture of charity in the UK. In New York I'd have to go to something like two benefits every month. It just goes with the territory. In London, that's simply not the case."

True, Americans receive a generous incentive from the Government for their largesse, up to a 50 per cent tax deduction on all charitable contributions for top earners. Although the Inland Revenue makes similar provisions in the UK, until recently this was "very poorly promoted", according to Polly Wood, chairman of special events for Cancer Research UK. "Individuals are definitely giving more today," Wood believes, "compared with a few years ago." But we still have a long way to go: 95 per cent of all gifts in the States are from individuals, compared with just 5 per cent in Britain, a statistic which would suggest that the root cause of the British shortfall is cultural rather than fiscal.

**Clockwise, from below: the pool at the Rachofskys' house; Howard Rachofsky and his wife, Cindy; the auction in progress; goodie bags for the guests**



Yet, according to Jacob Rothschild, the art of giving is "coming back with a vengeance". Rothschild is one of a small number of generous UK-based philanthropists, along with Sir Eiton John, Sting, golfer Nick Faldo, and investor Peter Lample of the Sutton Trust. But Lample has argued that Britain is still ten to 20 years behind the US in its generosity, presumably a legacy of the postwar welfare state. Rothschild, the third most generous philanthropist in Britain, with annual contributions of £33 million, wouldn't even make the top ten in the US, according to *Business Week*, while, at £45.3 million a year, the Sainsbury family's charitable donations look like chicken feed set against Bill Gates's annual billion-dollar giveaway.

As someone who tried, unsuccessfully, to establish a London branch of the US breast cancer charity, Gilda's Club, Kate Carr has first-hand experience of the US-UK charity divide. "New York board members – the trustees – have a straightforward attitude to money," she observes. "They're expected to give and solicit a lot of money and don't seem to want anything in return. In Britain, trustees have different responsibilities. Donors are more cautious – and seem to want their name over the door for quite a modest donation."

Today, New York board members are generally expected to donate anything between \$25,000 and \$100,000 to help defray a non-profit-making organisation's operational costs – and that doesn't necessarily earn them the right to have a building named after them. At some of the most prestigious museums, a board member will ante up \$1 million for the privilege of serving as a trustee.

"The board of the Metropolitan Museum is like a who's who of New York society and business," one committee chairwoman opines. "Henry Kravis has so much power that when he asks,

people give. Harvey Weinstein could fund a new wing of a building – or, rather, he'd have to beg to fund a wing – and he still wouldn't have a shot at getting on that board."

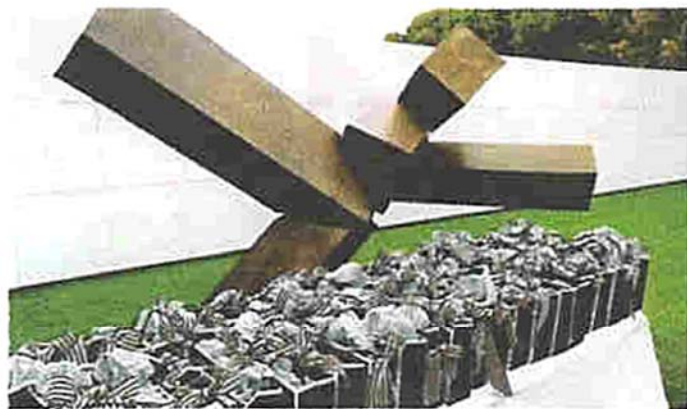
"Who will give \$50,000 to hear Liza Minnelli sing?" asks Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of contemporary art at Sotheby's. Minnelli gulps visibly at the unexpected request, remembering, perhaps, that moments earlier she had crowded to the crowd, "I can feel the generosity in this room!" She belts out a few undistinguishable, off-key bars before leaving. But despite her brief appearance, the audience is brimming with excitement. After all, Minnelli had taken time off from her tabloid divorce to come to their benefit. Could there be a better testimony to the fact that this is the grandest soirée in Dallas, second to none, including the Cattle Barons' Ball?

"I'm a native New Yorker," says Dr Thomas Pullano, who bought a Ross Bleckner photograph at the bargain price of \$2,700. "Dallas is much more genteel. It isn't all so upfront." Two years ago, Sharon Stone sat on his lap, coaxing him to bid higher and higher for a Bleckner painting. "It was a great incentive," says Pullano, who bought a Mapplethorpe last year for \$15,000, prompting Howard Rachofsky to tell him that he got the steal of the evening. "It's both philanthropy and a good buy," Pullano adds.

Tamara Mellon and the fashion duo behind Proenza Schouler couldn't be more pleased by this splendour in their midst. Mellon had customised individual Jimmy Choo shoes for gals who'd bought \$25,000 tables or were longtime supporters. "They spend money here, there's no doubt about it," says Mellon, clearly amused by the bevy of society youngbloods queuing up to meet her. "A Dallas



## BRITS GIVE MUCH LESS TO CHARITY— ABOUT 40 PER CENT PER CAPITA OF WHAT AMERICANS GIVE



◀ woman will buy ten pairs of shoes, whereas elsewhere we'll sell two or three to a customer."

When it comes to philanthropy, however, "New York is the city," insists Lynn Wyatt, international socialite and Houston resident. "You can't compare Texas charities to New York charities. In New York there are three major charity events every night. No one can go to them all." Some women do try, though, and they've even been known to change outfits in the back of their limo. The pace becomes particularly frenetic during the autumn and spring seasons, with such highlights as the Top Dog Gala (to aid, yes, pets); The Municipal Art Society bash (a preservation group that happened to be Jackie O's favourite cause); The Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering's antiques show; New Yorkers for Young Children (which has picked up steam since Anna Wintour joined); and, in the spring, the Wildlife Conservation Gala at the Central Park Zoo, the Central Park Conservancy luncheon, and the New York Botanical Garden's spring soirée in the Bronx.

The success of these charitable functions rests on an elite, dogged coterie of well-connected women who serve on the tight-knit committees which host the galas. "Well-bred, well-educated young ladies in New York are trained to do public service from the word go," says society watcher and publicist R. Couri Hay, who notes that organisers begin planning a year in advance – right down to the smallest detail, even the climate. Wildlife Conservation Society gala chair Allison Stern arranged for the mist to be turned off in Central Park Zoo's Tropic Zone so that the ladies' hairdos didn't collapse.

**Well-heeled guests at the Rachofskys (below); guests are entertained by a synchronised swimming display (below right)**

"It's like the opening of a Broadway show," Hay says. "Lights, camera, action, and everybody's there reviewing." It all comes down to the chairwoman – high-octane women such as "goddess of good works" Muffy Potter Aston, whose husband, Sherrell, is one of the most sought-after plastic surgeons in town. She chaired American Ballet's opening night and Princess Yasmin Aga Kahn's Rita Hayworth Alzheimer's gala, and she will oversee the upcoming New York Botanical Gardens spring garden party. "There's nothing more frustrating than having dead weight on a committee," Aston asserts.

"If you're the chairwoman, you better darn well raise the money. You just shut up and do it, because ultimately, it's you that's on the line."

First and foremost, a committee member must have deep pockets, buying at least a \$25,000 table herself (a \$10,000 table will land you "in Siberia", says Daisy Soros), and be able to live up to a quid-pro-quo mentality, when she is later approached by women whom she has beseeched for money. "You shouldn't join a committee if you're not interested in giving money, shaking the cup and relentlessly calling people," says Susan Faies-Hill, who, like Kathy Chenault (wife of Amex head Ken Chenault) is – crass as it may seem – particularly coveted by committee members because she's black. Soros, who serves on various committees, and on the boards of Lincoln Center and the New York Philharmonic, adds: "People look at me and say, 'Leave me alone!' Someone accused me of chairing a new hospital for cockroaches!"

Whether it's for hospitals, cultural institutions or social services (the least sexy of the three and therefore the hardest to raise



funds for), becoming active on the charity circuit – the backbone of the New York society scene – is the surest entrée to membership in the Social Registry. “Of course, people do it for social reasons,” says Chanel CEO Arie Kopelman, who serves on the boards of the New York City Ballet, the Municipal Arts Society and the East Side Settlement House, and whose wife, Coco, is chairwoman of The Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering, one of the leading cancer centres in the world. “It’s all about the social cachet of being on a prestigious committee. That’s always the way it’s going to be.”

The same avenues don’t necessarily apply in the UK. “Our class system is more complicated,” says Kate Carr. “You can do a bit of social climbing on the charity circuit, but it doesn’t have the same cachet as in the States.” That’s not to imply that anyone can waltz into, say, The Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering, arguably the most prestigious committee in town, regardless of pedigree. “It’s still very much a closed circle – unless you’ve got loads of money to spend,” says one society maven. But in this day and age, when contributions from both philanthropists and corporations have taken their cue from an ambivalent stock market, any money is welcome, even if it’s from some overly ambitious arriviste. “They’ve got to start somewhere,” says veteran fundraiser Nan Kempner. “I’m not against social climbing. Believe me, if the money comes my way, I don’t care. Everybody’s money is green.”

Such newly minted greenery can keep a gala’s costs down: if the net isn’t at least 80 per cent of the gross, the chairwoman has failed miserably. A strong chairwoman will ensure that a centre-piece of daisies or wheatgrass looks as breathtaking as a swanky arrangement from Pulbrook & Gould, or that her organisation is



**'IN THE US, CHARITY IS ALL ABOUT THE SOCIAL CACHET OF BEING ON A PRESTIGIOUS COMMITTEE'**

among the select few that Tiffany honours with its elaborately engraved invites, which can save a charity up to \$30,000. The Prostate Cancer Foundation spent \$500,000 to net \$4.5 million by asking, for example, that the evening’s emcee, Whoopi Goldberg, and Cher donate their appearances; Cher was flown in on a donor’s private jet, and her accommodation at the Waldorf-Astoria was gratis, thanks to the Hilton hotel chain.

“I don’t want to walk into an event and see great décor,” says Blaine Trump, who Nan Kempner stresses is “not the Barbie doll” some people assume she is. In fact, Trump was a pretty formidable co-chair, along with Caroline Kennedy, of American Ballet’s spring opening night, which made more than \$2 million at a cost of about \$200,000. The evening must be a tour de force, but a tour de force that bespeaks a deft touch. Kempner insists that, “you’ve got to have a gimmick. If you don’t have something to give people, you don’t have a gimmick. And nobody likes something for free more than the rich,” she adds, referring to the all-important goodie bag (which, in the case of the Prostate Cancer Foundation was a collection of DVDs and a luggage tag, as opposed to, say, last spring’s Wildlife Conservation Society gala at Central Park Zoo, where a Burberry tote boasted, among other things, a cellular repair cream which retails for \$165 a jar).

As for their British counterparts, let’s just say that they’re beginning to get into the swing of things. “We’re catching on,” observes *Tatler* editor Geordie Greig, formerly *The Sunday Times*’s man in New York. As proof, he cites the recent Sargent Cancer Care for Children benefit at Fortnum & Mason, in which cakes decorated by Jade Jagger, Fergie and Cherie Blair were auctioned. “It’s no longer just dull hunt balls. People use all sorts of stunts learnt from America.”

In New York, where the stakes are so high, there are bound to be intimations of “cheating”. Of late, ladies have been carping about “junior” committee members who make dubious claims to being younger than 40, so that they can still claim the cheaper, \$500 tickets and then – *quel nerve!* – their photographs end up glutting the fashion magazines. “There are a lot of juniors who don’t want to step up to the plate to buy the more expensive tickets,” the no-nonsense Aston says. “These days, we need more than just pretty pictures. We need worker bees who can contribute to the bottom line.” But can the new hive of *jeunesse dorée* help it if they’ve managed to maintain runway-size figures, and designers (notably Valentino) want to lend them \$30,000 gowns for the evening? “If you’re one of those girls who are photographed all the time, there’s a huge amount of pressure to be seen in something fabulous,” says one of their defenders. “Do you know how much trouble it is to borrow a dress? You’ve got to drag yourself in, have it fitted, drag it back, not eat, and not spill anything on it at the event. It’s a huge responsibility!”

It is this kind of approach to charity which makes philanthropist Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, cringe. “It’s definitely a name game for most people,” Gund says. “They’re giving to pet things or to things that will give them big names.” Even Gund, who has contributed millions to non-profits in New York, has trouble soliciting big-name donors to the small charity that she created, Studio in a School, which brings artists into classrooms. She depends on philanthropists such as Lewis Cullman, who plans to donate his entire fortune – some \$500 million from the sale of his privately owned calendar company – to charity. He and wife Dorothy’s foundation have already pledged more than \$100 million to virtually every cultural institution in New York, including his own charity, Chess in the Schools, which teaches chess to thousands of economically disadvantaged children. “I just love giving money away,” Cullman confesses. Andrew Carnegie would be proud. ■