

In Uncertain Times, the Kitchen Takes Stock

By ROBIN POGREBIN

Just as near-death experiences prompt people to take stock and make resolutions, so the Kitchen, the experimental performing-arts center on West 19th Street in Manhattan, has been forced to do some soul-searching of its own.

The last few years have been precarious for this experimental institution, where Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian, among many other avant-garde luminaries, had their beginnings. It is by now a familiar story for smaller arts spaces: government financing has shrunk, as have corporate contributions, while audiences are dwindling. Even a slight rise in ticket prices hasn't helped much. In the face of a mortgage of more than \$1 million on its space, the Kitchen has been frighteningly close to going under.

So now, as it embarks on its 24th season, the Kitchen has initiated a series of decidedly mainstream measures. The first was to form a joint chairmanship, to be shared by Mr. Glass, the composer and longtime Kitchen supporter, and Robert Soros, son of the philanthropist George Soros, who has been involved with the Kitchen as a board member and financial supporter for the last several years.

The hope is that Mr. Glass's name and personality, combined with Mr. Soros's business connections and expertise, will find a way not only to pay off the mortgage but also allow the Kitchen to endure as a place where artists can experiment and develop their work before supportive audiences. "Robert's primary mission is to lead the board in the fund-raising campaign and in stabilizing the institution for the next 20 to 40 years," said Lauren Amazeen, who is entering her fifth season as the Kitchen's executive director.

In addition, the Kitchen — which has an operating budget of about \$800,000 — plans to expand its board, headed by its president, Caroline Stone, from 23 members to 30, bringing in more people from the corporate and philanthropic worlds with strong contacts to potential contributors, as well as a commitment to the arts. This year, each board member has pledged to donate or raise \$5,000 to \$10,000.

The board has also started a strategic planning committee, and is prodding existing committees to more effectively address such specific concerns as fund raising and upkeep of the Kitchen's three-story building, a former 19th-century ice house in Chelsea that contains a large black box performance space and second-floor cafe theater.

To some extent, the Kitchen long ago reconciled itself to being a money loser that operates in the cultural margins. Given the kind of off-beat, untested work it presents, Ms. Amazeen said, struggle comes with the



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Caroline Stone, left, president; Philip Glass, co-chairman, and Lauren Amazeen, executive director of the Kitchen, a performing-arts center.

territory. "What we do today, people will accept tomorrow," she said. "But today — which is when we're doing it — they don't necessarily understand."

The Kitchen has taken some severe hits. There has been the loss of a \$65,000 institutional grant from the National Endowment for the Arts; a drop in state financing to \$46,500 this year from \$159,000 in 1990 and in city financing, to \$14,000 this year from an annual average of \$15,000 to \$16,000. Yet it is the very sense of the enemy closing in that has made the Kitchen's administrative team more determined to stay in the vanguard of new artistic work.

"It may be that this isn't just one moment in time," Ms. Amazeen said. "It may be that this is what the future for the arts is, that there will no longer be government funding or there will no longer be the kind of support that we take for granted. We have to do what we can to preserve this kind of work."

The Kitchen team also seems to be hoping that the highly charged political drama surrounding the role of arts financing will galvanize public support for threatened art institutions, much the same way that challenges to abortion rights tend to increase contributions to reproductive-health organizations like Planned Parenthood.

Mr. Soros said that the Kitchen managed to raise more than \$100,000 this summer, part of which he had personally matched, but that this was just a beginning. "Now comes the hard work: to keep going," he said. There are plans for an annual

drive to raise \$400,000, Mr. Soros said, through individual donations, family foundations and grants. And board members will begin to serve as hosts at more frequent, intimate fund-raising events in addition to the Kitchen's annual large-scale spring benefit. Over the last five years, ticket prices have increased from about \$8 to about \$12. And, for the first time, the Kitchen is offering subscriptions priced from \$24 to \$300.

Mr. Soros said he would also seek corporate sponsorship, which is more difficult for an experimental center to come by than it is for conventional theater spaces. "The Kitchen is a small organization with a tiny, little budget and still some reputation for being controversial," Mr. Soros said. "But if we weren't controversial, we wouldn't be doing our job."

During the 1990 debate over government arts financing, the Kitchen became a lightning rod for critics because of its presentation of performance artists like Karen Finley — known to break raw eggs and smear them over her body — and the former pornography star Annie Sprinkle. Because of this notoriety, the Kitchen might be expected to want to keep a low profile, remodel itself as more of a mainstream theater and strive for broader appeal.

Others might argue that an alternative arts center cannot afford to be high-mindedly purist when its very existence hangs in the balance. But those closely associated with the Kitchen say that changing the institution's identity as a place for emerging artists to take chances is

simply not up for consideration.

"We can't separate young work from controversial work," Mr. Glass said. "If we do that, we cut creativity off at its very root." After all, Mr. Glass pointed out, there was a time when the work of choreographers like Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham and the composer Stephen Sondheim were considered cutting edge. "Creativity, by definition, is what challenges the status quo," Mr. Glass said. "It has to. Otherwise, it's not creative."

Nevertheless, while the Kitchen says it has little interest in filling theater seats (it has only 275 anyway), Ms. Amazeen said she was interested in setting the record straight about what the Kitchen was all about: namely a wide range of dance, music, literature and electronic-media art.

"What I regretted was that the world at large wasn't aware of the Kitchen's history and wasn't aware that the Kitchen programmed more than one discipline, that it wasn't all performance art, that it wasn't all one point of view, that it wasn't all one type of artist," she said. "And that's when I became determined that we were going to start putting things into a context and put much more emphasis on public relations because it's about giving the people the opportunity to make a judgment on their own."

There are some members of the experimental art world who say that the Kitchen has not gone far enough and that it has been backing away from the fringe and betraying its mandate to promote art that may be unpopular.

By featuring the likes of well-known improvisational dancer Steve Paxton this season, some might suspect the Kitchen of playing it safe at a time of financial uncertainty. But the programming otherwise seems venturesome. This season opens on Sept. 22 with previews of the Ridge Theater's "Mathew in the School of Life," a combination of live performances, video and slide projections, directed by Bob McGrath, with a score by John Moran.

Last year, the Kitchen was the New York site of the Electronic Cafe International, a network that links artists in different countries by satellite. And the Kitchen recently started evening-long media events, called Hybrid Nights, as well as Tone, a series of experimental music presentations accompanied by visual projections.

Moreover, the Kitchen continues to rely on rotating curators, young artists in various disciplines, who bring in new work and keep the center's content current. Mr. Glass said that with its old guard aging — people like Robert Wilson, Bill T. Jones and himself — the Kitchen must be vigilant about bringing in new blood, without abandoning its origins. "Most of us are in our 50's," the composer said. "No one wants to be the end of anything. You want to see it go on."