

Party Hearty

Charity Parties Pull Out All the Stops

“Nonprofits have raised the bar. They want to outdo corporate events.”

David Adler, founder, *BizBash*

It's a sign of the times that charity parties are now big business, with an entire hierarchy of professionals, trade shows, and media catering to them.

We toast the needy with promotional flavored vodka at magazine parties for good causes in retail stores, where logo-heavy walls greet us on the way in—and logo-laced goodie bags are lavished upon us on the way out. Stuffed inside them all: product we probably don't really want—and don't really need. (Come to think of it, our household help, who ended up with the bulk of this season's swag, probably don't want Andre Agassi cologne, either.)

The party business, a \$147 billion—*billion*—annual industry at last count, has long been a force to be reckoned with. But now, all the new money pouring into the philanthropy sector has turned the staging of the classic benefit bash into an arms race: Party planners don't just have to top yesterday's parties. Nonprofits now “have to compete with corporate events,” says David Adler, founder of *BizBash*, the magazine and Web site for the party planning industry. “They've raised the bar. To attract millions, environments have to be spectacular. If someone spends \$50,000 to buy a table, they want to feel they're part of a special club.”

So, needless to say, this year's Event Style Awards at the Nokia Theatre in Times Square on March 28 was at once inspiring and just a little scary in its celebration of excess. The annual nail-biter, hosted by *BizBash*, demonstrated, Adler says, that “the level of nonprofit events has gone way up,” since he first started handing out prizes (the industry's equivalent of the Oscar Award) six years ago. Three of its coveted 18 event honors—including two of the top awards—went to nonprofits this year.

Parties commissioned by the Robin Hood Foundation, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, and the Sundance Institute certainly didn't

disappoint. But all three highlighted one crucial question: which was more attractive in the end, the context or the cause?

The Robin Hood Foundation took the top honor, for Best Overall Event Decor, beating out two corporate finalists (Conde Nast's Fashion Rocks After Party and Turner Entertainment's Upfront Event for TBS and TNT cable advertisers). Robin Hood's annual hedge-funded, anti-poverty gala has emerged in recent years as not just a great party, but



ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL WITTE

as the new Party of the Year—at least for the portion of what passes for New York Society that hasn't yet passed the age of entry into the AARP. Last year, the party raised \$48 million by attracting about 4,000 such swells to the Javits Convention Center. (This year's May 2 bash raised over \$71 million.) The group does this in large part with substance, but it also wields some mean smoke and mirrors.

Robin Hood sets have become the new gold standard. It won an award for last year's bash (created by David Stark Design & Production) that turned the Javits Center into a Manhattan cityscape decorated with street signs named for the organization's leaders (Dubin Ave. after chairman Glenn Dubin, for example) and a cocktail area bounded by 35' x 50' chalkboard drawings of Manhattan landmarks, with guests and artists dressed as construction workers invited to embellish the drawings with graffiti. Chalk was provided, of course. Five hundred cater-waiters from Glorious Food served beef filet, herb-marinated chicken, and mac and cheese to 404 tables decorated with purple and yellow linens and huge allium and crespida centerpieces. The entertainment: Jon Stewart was M.C., Tom Brokaw spoke, Jamie Niven raised \$2.5 million auctioning luxe lots like lunches with Henry Kravis, Richard Parsons and Robert Rubin; surfing lessons from Kelly Slater, and a seaplane ride with Jimmy Buffet. Jay-Z rapped with a chorus of 300 charter school students and Beyoncé closed the show with an hour-long set.

The prize for Best Nonprofit Event Concept, meanwhile, went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's annual Costume Institute benefit, which used to be the city's only Party of the Year, but now, like Avis Rent-A-Car of old, has to try a little harder. The Costume Institute has always attracted fashion royalty, and once it became known as a society party under the aegis of the late Pat (Mrs. William F.) Buckley, it attracted real royalty, too. In recent years, as reinvented by Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, it's been more about Hollywood and pop royalty. This year's benefit celebrating the museum's AngloMania exhibit of British fashion boasted the tabloid sensation Sienna Miller as a co-chair (a far cry from Mrs. Buckley) and attracted Lindsay Lohan, Drew Barrymore. Ralph Fiennes, Sarah Jessica Parker, the Olsen twins and Charlize Theron.

This year's Event Style Awards were both inspiring and unprecedented: three nonprofits won top honors for over-the-top events.

The setting, conceived by event guru David E. Monn LLC, was a big English garden for cocktails and then hedged mini-gardens at dinner, with moss, trees, wisteria, daffodils, hyacinth, and, appropriately for the fashion set, narcissus. Jamie “Naked Chef” Oliver planned the dinner of smoked salmon and lamb pie. Guests were ushered by bagpipes into the Met's Temple of Dendur afterwards for a little ballet

and a scene from *Billy Elliot*. But the night's best entertainment was provided by the former Sex Pistol, Johnny “Rotten” Lydon, who narrated the podcast tour for AngloMania. (He reminded event-planners that it's not only the décor that entertains, for better or worse: Lydon imbued the party with what was likely some unwelcome sponaneity, wandering about insulting guests and acting offended over his placement at dinner. *The New York Times* deemed his performance “oafish,” which the Johnny Rotten of old would have considered a compliment.)

In contrast, the event that won Best Tabletop Design—what sounds like *BizBash*'s version of the Miss Congeniality Award—was Sundance Institute's 25th Anniversary Party. At the event, guests entered a sort of forest, but one where the tree leaves were cut from maps of the institute and its home state, Utah. Paul Newman, Uma Thurman, Marcia Gay Harden, and Kathy Bates served hors d'oeuvres and drinks wearing T-shirts listing their first jobs and their big Sundance projects. Inside the dining room, the maps were replaced by scripts and scores of Sundance films, cut up as if by William Burroughs and reassembled as tablecloths, napkin rings, decorations, and faux flower petals. Dinner consisted of empanadas and chili accompanied by a paper bag full of corn tortillas.

Which just goes to show: Sometimes you don't have to spend that much money to raise money—you just have to spend it well. “In the end, it's about effectiveness, not glitz and glam,” says David Adler. “It's about creativity. You can serve barbeque at a black tie event as long as it works for the audience.”

Come to think of it, skip the Andre Agassi cologne next time. My doorman has yet to use up the bottle I gave him last fall. ▲

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\$570 million

What top hedge fund managers earned, on average, in 2006.

MarketWatch, April 24, 2007

\$3.2 million

The average amount of assets held by the wealthiest 10 percent of baby boomers, much of which they intend to bequeath, according to the Government Accounting Office, the congressional research arm.

U.S. News & World Report, February 26, 2007