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Orlando Ballet hires turnaround expert Michael Kaiser

By MATTHEW J. PALM

Dogged by financial struggles and a string of short-term executive directors, Orlando Ballet has hired a top name in arts leadership to shore up the organization.

Michael M. Kaiser, who spent 15 years as president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., began consulting with the ballet this month. He left the center in August and is chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland.



"Giselle" dress rehearsal: Orlando Ballet dancers and Orlando Philharmonic musicians prepare for the ballet opening Friday, Oct. 30, at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando. This will be the first season in which the ballet has live music for every performance. (Photo: Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda)

"Based on his track record of turning around arts organizations, and specifically ballet companies, we are confident his leadership will help us continue the momentum we have as a company and guide us toward long-term growth and success," said Sibille Pritchard, a former Orlando Ballet board chair who is leading the turnaround effort.

Facing a cash crunch before Christmas, the organization cut back on performances of "The Nutcracker" and threw the future of its much-ballyhooed live orchestral accompaniment into doubt. The ballet also severed ties with interim executive director James Cundiff, the group's sixth leader in six years.

Throughout his career, Kaiser has demonstrated that he's not afraid of a challenge. During his tenure at the Kennedy Center, Kaiser oversaw a major renovation project and created the arts-management institute.

But it's his work with struggling arts groups that will resonate with the ballet.

While serving as executive director of London's Royal Opera House in the 1990s, Kaiser erased that organization's substantial deficit, completed a redevelopment project and created an endowment fund. Kaiser has worked similar financial wizardry as head of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and

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American Ballet Theatre, both based in New York. The Chicago Tribune dubbed him “the turnaround king” after he eliminated a \$5.5 million deficit at the American Ballet Theatre in three years.

“It’s a huge coup for the Orlando Ballet,” said Flora Maria Garcia, president and CEO of United Arts of Central Florida. “Michael is considered nationally as the ‘turnaround guru’ for major cultural institutions — everyone knows his name.”

Kaiser, 62, has experience with Orlando’s cultural scene, leading a DeVos Leadership Institute series in Central Florida between 2011-12. “Our cultural groups found the series inspirational and extremely helpful,” Garcia said. “I am thrilled that Michael and his staff will be focusing their extensive skill set on rebuilding the ballet.”

A small reorganization board is now overseeing the ballet, Pritchard said, and a new board of directors and executive director will be chosen as the group finds its footing. She declined to say how much Kaiser’s institute was charging the ballet, or how it would be paid.

“The ballet is doing its best to get itself in order,” said Pritchard, who credited donors and other community supporters for keeping the company afloat. “All these people are helping, and that’s what’s going to turn this around.”

The leadership at Orlando’s Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, where the ballet performs, has been assisting the company, Pritchard said. And live music was preserved for the “The Nutcracker” thanks to a donation from Orlando’s Dr. Phillips Charities.

That popular Christmas show “did very well, the best in years,” said Pritchard, who indicated orchestral accompaniment was likely to return later in the season.

“We’re hoping to have live music for ‘Don Quixote,’” the ballet’s March production, Pritchard said. “Live music is wonderful, but it is very expensive. We have a fiduciary responsibility to make sure this ballet stays in business.”

The next performance will not feature an orchestra. The Feb. 4-6 double bill includes “Firebird,” featuring the famed Stravinsky music, and “To Familiar Spaces In Dream,” a modern work by Jessica Lang of American Ballet Theatre.

The Orlando company has a close relationship with American Ballet Theatre, where artistic director Robert Hill once performed.

“I had the privilege of working with Michael while I was a principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre,” Hill said in a statement. “I have seen his work first-hand and I am delighted to have the opportunity to work with him again here in Orlando.”