

KOCH THEATER ❖ VACANCY ❖ SIGN BECKONS TOP DANCE TROUPES

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By ROBIN POGREBIN

Wanted: One intrepid cultural organization to share the cost of operating a Lincoln Center theater that recently lost one of its tenants to financial difficulties. Must be able to balance a budget and attract large audiences with programming dynamic enough to fill 2,600 seats.

Financially healthy, reliably popular performing arts organizations are not so easy to come by these days, as the David H. Koch Theater goes searching for a major tenant to replace New York City Opera, which is expected to move out of its longtime home.

The opera company decided several months ago that it could no longer afford to operate at Lincoln Center and would instead become a roving troupe, leaving the country's largest performing arts complex with one less cultural anchor.

City Opera had shared the Koch Theater — formerly known as the New York State Theater — with the New York City Ballet for more than 40 years.

Major dance companies have already begun to express interest in performing on the Koch Theater's storied stage — once the province of the choreographer George Balanchine — particularly since the hall was recently renovated. But as a matter of stability, officials said, they are seeking long-term commitments from a company or companies that would perform there regularly.

Peter Martins, the ballet company's ballet master in chief, has long talked of making the theater a world destination for dance. When City Opera looked to build a new home elsewhere a few years ago, he suggested replacing it with a modern-dance company. Could this be the moment?

Another potential anchor tenant could be Lincoln Center Inc. itself, the parent organization that coordinates matters on the performing arts campus for 12 constituent organizations. It has always had to schedule its events — like Great Performers and Mostly Mozart — around the regular seasons of its constituents.

There has also been persistent speculation that American Ballet Theater, which now performs nearby at the Metropolitan Opera House, would take over the space if City Opera left. Were it to move, Ballet Theater would no longer have overlapping seasons with City Ballet. But even if City Ballet agreed to coexist with what many consider a competitor, such a move would only transfer the vacancy from the Koch Theater to the opera house.

All of these options are under discussion, according to Lincoln Center and City Ballet officials.

"Though we are saddened by the departure of City Opera, the newly available dates at the Koch Theater provide a great opportunity for companies of all kinds, from all over the world, to perform here," said Katherine Brown, City Ballet's executive director, "including many who have been interested in the past but not able to secure workable dates."

One company that has already stepped forward is the Joyce Theater, which presents dance in Chelsea and is planning to build a new home at the World Trade Center site. Linda Shelton, the theater's executive director, said the Koch could serve as an additional space, not a replacement for the ground zero site.

The Koch Theater is managed by the City Center of Music and Drama (no connection with New York City Center), a nonprofit organization with a separate board. It already rents out the theater for dates not taken by either the ballet or the opera.

Alair Townsend, the chief executive of the organization, said it was premature for her to discuss groups that are pursuing a place at the theater. "Everyone out there knows there is space and time available," she said.

Given the Koch's capacity, orchestra pit and fly space, the stage is coveted by major companies.

"It is considered one of the best and certainly the largest spaces in the city for dance," said Amy Fitterer, the executive director of Dance USA, a national service organization. Among the likely candidates to fill regular slots are the San Francisco Ballet, the Boston Ballet, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and several international companies, like the Royal Danish Ballet, the Stuttgart Ballet and the Royal Ballet in London.

Barry C. Hughson, the executive director of the Boston Ballet, said he would like to bring his company to the Koch Theater in the 2013-14 season as part of the company's 50th anniversary tour and then have a regular rotation there "every other year or every third year."

Sharon Gersten Luckman, executive director of the Ailey company, said it was premature to discuss whether Ailey — which performs at City Center — might be interested in the Koch. In 2004, when it looked as if City Opera might leave Lincoln Center to build its own home elsewhere, Ms. Luckman expressed an interest in having "a second season" at Lincoln Center.

Still unclear is whether, going forward, the building will be managed by City Ballet, City Center of Music and Drama or by Lincoln Center Inc.

Certainly it would be simpler for City Ballet to have the run of the place, since sharing it with the opera hasn't always been easy. It was City Opera, for example, that pushed for a renovation of the theater after complaining for years about the hall's acoustics. (The ballet company was largely satisfied with the theater since it was designed for dance.) But the renovations forced the opera largely to shut down for a season and lose revenue, leaving the company unable to pay its full share of the building's operating costs for the next two years.

City Ballet, though, may be loath to take on more financial responsibility and the headache of booking groups to fill its off-season. The

company is under the same economic strain plaguing arts organizations all over the country and faces a \$6 million deficit this year.

Lincoln Center is in a strong financial position to take over City Opera's share, having balanced its budget – currently about \$97 million – every year for the past decade.

"Lincoln Center is eager to be helpful to the New York City Ballet and to a thriving Koch Theater in any way we can," said Reynold Levy, Lincoln Center's president.

Complicating matters are the continuing ties between the theater and City Opera: the company has a management agreement at the Koch Theater that runs through spring 2014.

The ballet and opera are in discussions about resolving the opera's outstanding financial obligations.

If the Koch were to become a place that presents dance year-round, it could eat into audiences now attending dance at places like City Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Karen Brooks Hopkins, the academy's president, said she expected her audiences to remain loyal, in part because her institution has a specific point of view and develops productions. "There is a big difference between a venture that books things and a venture that curates things," she said.

Many in the dance world are concerned that the Koch could become a glorified rental house, rather than a stage with a clear master and mission. "There should be someone with a vision to create that place," said Sergei Danilian, an arts manager who for 17 years has presented dance at City Center, adding, "It should become the world center for dance."

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