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Scene Last Night: Dinan, McQuade, Sundheim, Shleifer, Kasparov

By Amanda Gordon

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As the end of May approaches, it's time to send the tuxedo to the dry cleaners and look back on some of the better nights of recent gala-vanting.

Goldman Sachs Group Inc. President Gary Cohn, as honoree at the NYU Langone Medical Center Violet Ball, made sure the evening ended at 8:44 p.m.

The 92nd Street Y managed to raise \$4.4 million with the band Counting Crows performing at its gala -- and two gala chairmen, Daniel Sundheim, of Viking Global Investors, and Scott Shleifer of Tiger Global Management, who were in college in the late '90s when the band had its first hits. Sundheim said his favorite is "Long December" and his favorite part of the Y is -- you guessed it -- the nursery school.

I enjoyed the lesson I got in the colleges -- and their boat club blazers and gowns -- from alumni of Oxford and Cambridge universities at a dinner in honor of the schools' famed boat race.

Lots of interesting, creative people to have dinner with were around at a fundraiser for the MacDowell Colony, which last year provided a residency to 300 artists on its campus in Peterborough, New Hampshire (and daily picnic lunches delivered to their cabin door). Filmmaker Ira Sachs brought Marisa Tomei, who stars in his latest film "Love is Strange," in which she plays a writer "who definitely needs a week at MacDowell."

And I'm still thinking about the coat-check stand and the guest check-in desk designed for the Edible Schoolyard NYC gala by Bronson Van Wyck. They were made of clear acrylic boxes filled with dirt, turnips, lettuces and flowers -- a nod to the organization's mission to create vegetable gardens at area schools, and made to last for one night only.

Slowing Down

Something about the slowing-down of the social season opens up the calendar for intellectual events. Jamie Dinan of York Capital Management last night introduced a discussion about New York as a “capital of capital.”

Shanghai is strong competition, said Youssef Cassis, a professor of economic history at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

The event marked the publication of “Capital of Capital: Money, Banking + Power in New York City, 1784-2012.”

“One of the interesting things I found when reading the book is just the cycle of things we’ve seen in 200 years of products or financial services that work for a time, then didn’t work and banks either retracted themselves from them or we went into some kind of economic distress period,” said Gene McQuade, a vice chairman at Citigroup Inc. “These economic cycles have gone on and will continue to go on. Bankers have to listen, politicians have to listen and consumers have to make sure they’re disciplined as well.”

Museum Exhibition

The book is a companion to an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York two years ago. Both were supported by Citigroup. Dinan is chairman of the museum.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian research organization that billionaire industrialist David Koch helped found, held a dinner last night filling the Waldorf Astoria Hotel’s ballroom.

In his keynote, Garry Kasparov said he’s working on a book about “the shift away from traditional American values of liberty, risk-taking and sacrifice.”

The title of the project -- which he noted, he never has time to finish -- is “Un-American.”

“In my opinion, there’s much about America in 2014 that fits this description all too well,” the Russian former chess world champion and human rights activist said at the lectern.

Kasparov criticized Americans’ favoring comfort over sacrifice.

American Dream

“We have forgotten that the American dream is not simply to get rich. Immigrants came to America to give their children a better life. If they got rich, that was OK.”

He took aim at hyper-partisanship and an over-focus on limiting the size of government rather than the powers of government. He praised Ronald Reagan for having “principles and credibility that only principles can provide.”

As for the way forward, he called for America to “rediscover the values of big challenges, of doing things because they are hard. It is undemocratic to expect government or an employer to take care of you beyond security and a level playing field.”

The event also included the presentation of the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, named for the Nobel laureate economist and University of Chicago professor who championed free markets and individual responsibility. The biennial prize of \$250,000 went to Leszek Balcerowicz, former deputy prime minister and finance minister of Poland whose “shock therapy” helped build a free-market-based economy after Communism fell in Europe.

“Thanks to him, Poland has become a success story that gives Putin nightmares,” Kasparov said.