

A good time was had by all

SO long as there is still a little friendship and a desire to help each other ... that is sufficient for a man's short span of life," says the Israeli writer **Nathan Bistritzky**.

"I'VE HAD a heckuva good time lately. **Liza Minnelli** came back from rehab, and she and **David Gest** and I went to see "Nine." (I had seen it opening night from far back in the theater — wonderful and very glamorous! This time I was down front and the experience was just as good, but different, more intimate.)

We went backstage after to pick up our pal **Chita Rivera** for supper and the entire cast crowded into the dressing room to see Liza, who was looking mighty good. Here's the photo to prove it!

The other man in the picture is the leading actor **Antonio Banderas**, who is wonderfully compelling in this musical about a Fellini-esque Casanova.

Monday, I had my 80th birthday celebrated — again — at the New York State Theater where Literacy Partners did its annual authors' readings. Mayor **Michael Bloomberg**, **Barry Diller**, **Diane von Furstenberg** and **Howard Stringer** sat onstage with me and sang my praises. We had terrific readers — **Susan Orlean** of "The Orchid Thief"/"Adaptation" fame, super-popular U.S. poet laureate **Billy Collins** and fabulous novelist **E. Lynn Harris** ... And we had a star-studded crowd that included "Sesame Street's"

Joan Ganz Cooney, who gave Literacy lots of money on the terms that she could stay offstage ... **Barbara Walters**, who also gave a lot of money ... **Mary Higgins Clark**, ditto ... Verizon's **Mary Beth Bardin** likewise ... Miramax's **Eve** and **Harvey Weinstein** also ... plus a heady group from Condé Nast, **Martha Stewart**, Oprah's top gun **Gayle King**, **Jamie Niven**, columnists **Richard Cohen** and **John Leo**, their ladies **Mona**

Akerman and **Jackie Leo**, **Shirley Lord**, **Sharon King Hoge**, **Marty Singerman**, the Hearsts, **Glenda Bailey**, **Ellen Levine**, **Dominick Dunne**, **Duane Hampton**, **Pat Patterson**, **Cynthia McFadden**, **Arlene Dahl**, **Nicole** and **Joel Stein**, **Linda** and **Mort Janklow**, **Avery** and **Judy Cornman**, **Joel** and **Nicole Klein**, **Henry** and

Louise Grunwald, et al. "Sex and the City's" **Kim Cattrall** danced the night away to **Bob Hardwick's** merry men and was a bombshell. (Like the rest of us, she developed a crush on poet **Billy Collins**.)

My fabulous birthday cake, made as a gift from **Sylvia Weinstock**, caught fire. Maybe it was trying to tell me something — 80 candles! Enough is enough! Special thanks to **Arnold Scaasi** and **Parker Ladd** for making everything look so great, including me. My birthday revels now are ended — thank heaven!

Literacy Partners dragged in \$1.5 million, our largest sum to date. So birthdays may be good for something. The fact that 1 million New Yorkers can't read or write



Liz Smith



THE GANG'S ALL HERE: (Clockwise, front) Liz, David Gest, Liza Minnelli, Chita Rivera and Antonio Banderas.

at the fifth-grade level while we have tax write-offs for the rich continues to be a national disgrace.

THE DUTCH TREAT CLUB gave me a gold medal at the University Club the other eve, so I join my old pals **Mike Wallace** and **Norman Mailer** and a host of other worthies in posterity. But mainly the Dutchies, or the Treaters, as they might be called, exist to have fun. After all, they consist mainly of journalists and the arts community.

I was royally entertained by the fabled **Ann Hampton Callaway** and **Mark Nadler** doing songs about me to the tunes of Cole Porter. Young singer-pianist **Carlos Alberto Ibay** also blew us out of our seats. Mark ran through "Natural Blonde" and produced a better "book"

than the memoir itself. Tony-winner **Ann** asked the audience to suggest things about me which she then turned into a song. (**Mike Nichols** and **Elaine May** used to do clever stuff like this. It takes a genius to pull it off.)

That gent from Life magazine, **Ralph Graves**, suggested to the assembled that my efforts to raise dough for the city via the mayor's Private/Public Initiative should go on past my birthday and the piddling \$225,000 raised to date. So the Dutch Treaters gave

me a big check to go with my gold medal.

When I started collecting money for the city, I hoped each person would send a dollar. That would make \$8 million from New Yorkers. Send what you can afford to 160 E. 38th St., New York, NY 10016, made out to PPI.

It isn't the fault of the mayor or his citizens that 9/11 made us a disaster area.

THE THEATRE Development Fund Astaire Awards will be hosted by **Tom Wopat** Thursday at the Hudson Theatre. **Susan Stroman**, **Graciela Daniele** and **Scott Wise** will present. **Chita Rivera** gets a Lifetime Achievement Award. Best female dancer nominees are "Hair-spray's" **Marissa Jaret Winokur**, plus "Movin' Out's" **Ashley Tuttle** and **Elizabeth Parkinson**.