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A BIG NIGHT FOR A BIG MUSIC HALL

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The most glamorous, fabulous, cultural social event of the season is taking place after the season, outdoors in a tent -- and it isn't even a benefit. This weekend's groundbreaking ceremony for the \$244 million Performing Arts Center of Greater Miami isn't even the official groundbreaking -- that won't happen at least until August, when a contractor is chosen and the real construction begins.

Saturday will find most of Miami's VIPs (and other cultural bigwigs from around the region) at a gala black-tie dinner, dance and show beginning at 7 p.m. Then on Sunday from 1:30 to 4 p.m., the general public can mingle with the civic types when Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas presides over the turning of the first shovels of dirt. A second 90-minute concert will take place then featuring the Miami Choral Society, Speaking Hands, Boys Choir of Miami and other groups.

Saturday's high-profile entertainment package has been assembled by impresaria Judy Drucker and Broadway producer Harold Prince. Award-winning actor Len Cariou is the co-emcee, along with Today's news anchor Ann Curry, who was snagged at midweek after a month of negotiations. They'll officiate over a wide selection of famous-name as well as regional artists. Audra McDonald, Broadway's latest darling (Tonys for Carousel, Master Class, Ragtime) will sing with the New World Symphony. **Drucker's Concert Association of Florida** will present pianist Vladimir Feltsman, violinist Yura Lee and pianist Robert Koenig. Florida Grand Opera will showcase a trio of soloists with local roots, and principal dancers of the Miami City Ballet will perform.

Since groundbreaking is a ceremonial rite in the first place, there are no qualms at the center's Foundation over the advance dedication, months before the real digging starts.

"We have to get the people when they're here," says Nancy Herstand, the Foundation's executive director (and formerly the Kravis Center's professional fund-raiser). "Our resident arts companies are gone in August, and many of our donors are gone in the summer, too."

Not to mention that it's the peak of the summer rainy, and hurricane, seasons.

The soirees are estimated at well over a million dollars in cost, including many donated services and underwritten expenses. Still, out-of-pocket cash expenses will soar past \$500,000.

"We're expecting to cover our expenses for Saturday's gala, and the Foundation will cover all the public sector costs for the whole weekend," Herstand says.

The events were never planned as a benefit because the Foundation didn't want to compete with the resident arts groups for

fund-raising at this time, Herstand says. The intention was to cover expenses. Even at that, it's a pricey weekend. Tickets for the gala are \$1,000 apiece for Gold Shovel (preferred) seating for the entire affair, and \$250 for regular attendance. The gala has been sold out since early this week, but some of the very determined have managed to squeeze in anyway. Capacity was raised from 500 to 600 and is beginning to look like it could reach 650 by the time the tent flaps open.

That, says public relations wizard Charles Cinnamon, has event planner Barton G. "tearing his hair out."

Mr. G., his public moniker shortened from Barton Gerald Weiss, has in recent years become the top regional -- and one of the hottest national -- special-event producers and engineers. Weiss arranged for the tent on the site of the complex's planned symphony hall, with the inside being decorated to resemble the interior of the center itself, including a stage and a temporary floor on the cleared lot.

He's planned the dinner and service down to the last detail, and the changing head count is causing last-minute convulsions in the logistics. But the hot events are always like that, and Mr. G. hasn't lost a battle yet.

The gala/groundbreaking package is essentially a thank-you to major donors who've given \$100,000 and up, and to the arts groups that will be the center's resident companies, Herstand says.

Maestro James Judd and concertmaster Igor Gruppman will be there representing the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra. But they'll be paired with the New World Symphony for the Meditation from Massenet's Thais because the Philharmonic will be at the Broward Center, playing for the Florida Grand Opera's La Gioconda.

Also missing from the official programming is the Broadway Series, the theatrical mainstay, and its corporate parent, the Pace Theatrical Group. Their national tours of Broadway shows will be part of the Miami center's cultural mix, but PTG isn't one of the five official Resident Companies. However, PTG has worked behind the scenes, intentionally well out of the limelight, on this weekend's events.

To avoid the animosity between the classical groups and Broadway shows that the Broward Center has endured, Miami planners geared their project to the arts companies from the beginning. The Opera, Ballet, Philharmonic, New World Symphony and Concert Association each has a seat on the ruling Performing Arts Center Trust, and the ground rules for the opera house specifically limit the Broadway Series access.

The Miami Center is expected to open in 2002. In many respects, it will work in tandem with the Broward and Kravis centers. But in one key area, Miami's project is unique in the region. The Miami Center will have a specially-designed concert hall for the Philharmonic and New World Symphony, fulfilling a dream that, for the Philharmonic at least, went unfulfilled with the arrival of the other centers.

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