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"AMELIA" by Noel Suarez
MIAMI BEACH FIRST NIGHT 2000 CELEBRATION
CREATED BY NOEL & COMMISSIONED BY THE CITY OF MIAMI BEACH

FIRST NIGHT MIAMI BEACH BRINGS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGH ARTS, CULTURE, AND DIVERSITY

BY CARL ZABLOTNY

Among all the celebrations and parties that are taking place on South Beach this weekend, one stands out as being quite different than the rest. That's First Night Miami Beach. First Night was originally started in Boston in 1975 and is now celebrated in 225 cities around the world. The original idea was to use the art community to bring a city together for an all inclusive celebration, that is drug and alcohol free. And Miami Beach's certainly reflects the entire, diverse community in all the events that are planned.

"First Night is so popular because it allows you to craft the evening to what makes the most sense for you," says Ellen Wedner, project director and event producer for First Night Miami Beach. "You get to do this in a wonderful environment which is Miami Beach. This is a very healthy way to celebrate a New Year with a very visual, performance art celebration. The fact that we are very inclusive also makes it a popular event. Whether it's a Haitian theme or gay and lesbian or classical or jazz, we try to make this as multicultural and as diverse as we can."

Wedner says that this is a perfect even for families, for single people who don't want to be alone, or for elderly people. It's for people who love the arts, too.

"People can also just come to the festival part of things, too," Wedner explains. "It's fun and wonderful. We really try to craft the celebration to reflect what is going to happen in the coming year. You can go to the Garden Center and see Japan 2000. We bring in talent from outside including international talent like Paul Taylor 2 Dance Company. We also have inner-city dance, the Gay and Lesbian Youth Group. It's a combination of emerging artists, community artists, and professional artists."

Wedner says Miami Beach is a great venue for a First Night celebration

because of the art nature of the Beach. The Beach is a "mecca for the arts," she says. It's not just a mecca for sun and fun.

"When you look at the venues we use-The Lincoln Theater, the Colony, the Alliance, the Jackie Gleason, along with the Recreation Center and the GardenCenter-it's a great place for this celebration," Wedner says.

FIRST NIGHT IMAGE BY NOEL

"I wanted to paint an image that would evoke a dynamic sense of energy and excitement," says Noel a former ballet dancer. "I tried to use movement in my visual image to convey the creative spirit synonymous with First Night 2000."

The painting, created in oils on canvas, features a female figure leaping through a golden frame to catch a star. The piece embodies this year's First Night theme, echoed in cities all across North America: "Share the Light. Ignite the Spirit," symbol of the hope and promise of the new millennium. She is surrounded by a swaying palm tree, as well as composer's score donning symbols of all the art forms that will comprise First Night.

Noel donated the painting, valued at \$7,000 to the two-year-old event as a way to merge his love of both art and philanthropy. It was purchased by Mango's Cafe owner, David Wallack. All proceeds benefit First Night 2000.

Attendance is expected to be somewhere between 8,000-10,000. All the year-long work comes to a focal point. And it is a year-long process as advisory boards and the artistic committee continually are looking for the right mix of events to make the celebration a success. It has to be a good balance, a good mix. Different groups work on the family dimension of First Night, for example, as well the artistic components of the night. It really takes a solid group of volunteers to work on this project all year, Wedner explains.

What's really nice, too, is that people can attend some of the events that are of interest and then go on to their other activities that night. It is scheduled perfectly for just that. The whole program is so accessible, too. Everything is right there on the Beach in walking distance. So this is a great way to spend New

Year's Eve. Pick and choose what you want and continue the party for the rest of the night.

Pick up a First Night button, \$10 for adults and \$5 for children, at participating Miami Beach businesses that include Walgreens and Starbucks, News Cafe, Words on the Beach, Wild Oats, and Books & Books.

First Night starts at 4:30 p.m. at the Carnival CruiseLines Family Festival at the Convention Center, Hall C, and ends with a dazzling Millennium Fireworks Spectacular at midnight.