For José Mateo, a new direction in dance

CAMBRIDGE — When José Mateo Ballet Theatre opens the three-ballet program “Stolen Hearts” on Feb. 23, the occasion will undoubtedly be a bit bittersweet for the 66-year-old Mateo. That’s because it marks the beginning of an ending: After the company finishes its last program of the season April 29, Mateo, one of the area’s most prolific and respected choreographers, is officially retiring as its artistic director.

Mateo is not sailing off into the sunset, however. Far from it. He’s merely shifting gears and changing focus. While Mateo will direct the professional company in its annual “Nutcracker” next season, the troupe will cease repertory concerts after the close of this season until a new artistic director is found. In the meantime, the organization plans to provide affordable performance space for other area dance groups in Cambridge’s Sanctuary Theatre, with an eye toward possibly presenting. Mateo himself may continue to choreograph for special projects, but he mostly will commit his energies toward strengthening his organization’s outreach and educational programs.

Training dancers and teachers has been at the heart of Mateo’s vision from the beginning of José Mateo Ballet Theatre 32 years ago, and the organization’s after-school young dancers program, its summer dance program, and open adult classes bring in roughly $700,000 annually. On a recent visit, dance students of varying ages, shapes, sizes, and backgrounds flooded into the school’s two floors of dance studios in Harvard Square’s Old Cambridge Baptist Church. Parents lounged outside in the hallways, reading or chatting amiably while young dancers attended classes, rehearsals, and auditions.

“It’s a busy place,” Mateo says with a trace of awe in his voice. “It continues to surprise me. On the one hand, there’s been so much growth over the years. On the other hand, I’m always aware of how much work remains to be done. That need to come closer to a vision I’ve had for so long is part of what’s driving this transition to the next phase.”
The transition, for which Mateo says he is grateful and relieved, has been five years in the planning. It’s been guided by a legacy and succession planning committee that Mateo says has been especially sensitive and generous in dealing with the typically tricky challenges of any founder-led organization.

Mateo’s consistent message over the decades has been that dance matters, and he says his educational vision starts with the observation that most American ballet schools are modeled after European and Russian academies, where students are carefully selected according to specific criteria, especially body type. In contrast, Mateo maintains any body can be taught to move beautifully, efficiently, and with technical polish, without having to conform to a standardized size and shape.

“Yes, the knees have to straighten, the feet stretch, spines have to become supple, and coordination has to be brought to all that,” he says. “Athleticism and musicality remain important. But it’s a matter of recognizing that different people achieve that in different ways. And the ultimate goal is not necessarily to create professional dancers, though a surprising number of our students insist on going into dance. We’re trying to provide a ballet education as a means to enriching lives.”

He adds, “We have to be able to understand where students are coming from, their needs, talents, ways of learning, and that’s highly individualized. When you do that successfully, you recognize the vast room there is for diversity and inclusion.”

Watching Mateo teach a class of energetic 6- to 8-year-olds, one can see that philosophy in action. He is a gentle, soft-spoken disciplinarian who uses humor and Socratic questioning to engage his students.

Company dancer and faculty member Patricia Chiang has been affiliated with the organization since she was a child in the young dancers program, its sequence of classes for kids. She calls Mateo a brilliant teacher, a nurturing father-figure authority with a keen sense of fun.

“He has helped me see how important it is to instill a genuine joy for dancing in the children, all while also showing them that the hard work and discipline involved in ballet can be both fun and extremely rewarding,” she says. “The school has truly been remarkable in its ability to provide high-level instruction and produce technical achievement across the board for all of the young dancers, no matter their age, race, body type, or economic background. This is rare in the ballet world.”

In addition to the Cambridge school, José Mateo Ballet Theatre also has a satellite young dancers program at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Dorchester, which Mateo hopes to expand. Now in the middle of its third year, the program reaches populations that, Mateo says, “might not find their way to ballet education.” For 15 years, the organization also had a school in Duxbury.

Jason Weeks, executive director of Cambridge Arts, the city’s nonprofit arts council, calls Mateo a “cultural treasure” who not only has redefined ballet education but “developed pathways of support and engagement that allow everyone in the community to practice and celebrate dance.” To that end, as Mateo redefines his role at the company, he also plans to concentrate on another pillar of the organization, Dance for World Community, a set of ongoing community programs culminating in an annual indoor/outdoor festival in Harvard Square. The largest dance event in the area, it draws nearly 20,000 people each year for performances and free introductory-level classes in a wide range of movement styles, according to José Mateo Ballet Theatre managing director Scott Fraser. The 10th anniversary Dance for World Community on June 9 will present more than 70 performance groups while fostering connections with social action organizations.
Mateo views Dance for World Community as a way to help reposition the role of dance. “A lot of dance organizations are isolationist, always in survival mode trying to grow a base of support,” Mateo explains. “I’m trying to make dancers from different forms become aware of each other as part of a large community. If we unify, we can use that collective power as a real force to bring the broader community together, to impact issues that we care about, create other forms of convening and exchanging ideas.”

However, Mateo’s most immediate task is preparing six works — including a world premiere — for the company’s two upcoming programs. After that, he plans on buckling down to sort through piles of notes and write.

“He plans to codify his teaching pedagogy to ensure ballet training remains humane and empowering for everybody who participates,” says legacy committee chair Ellen Porter Honnet. “But as he moves away from producing new ballest every year and toward supporting other dance ventures, his goal remains the same — to have dance be a positive force for change in a way that people will feel valued and come together to make a difference.”

Anita Walker, executive director of the Mass Cultural Council, adds, “Jose has opened the door to dance for thousands of people. He doesn’t see dance as something just for the fortunate talented few, but as something that can build community and change lives.”

**JOSÉ MATEO BALLET THEATRE**


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