



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Choreographer
José Mateo with
dancers.

THE NUTCRACKER

Presented by
José Mateo Ballet
Theatre. Nov. 27-
Dec. 6 at Cutler
Majestic Theatre,
Dec. 11-20 at
Strand Theatre.
Tickets: \$20-\$75.
www.ballettheatre.org

'Nutcracker' on a bigger stage

By Karen Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

To celebrate its 30th anniversary, José Mateo Ballet Theatre has special plans for "The Nutcracker." With new sets and updated costumes, the company takes its holiday classic to downtown Boston for the first time in 15 years. Instead of performing in its Cambridge studio of just 250 seats, it brings the Sugar Plum Fairy, Nutcracker Prince, and more to Emerson College's 1,200-seat Cutler Majestic Theatre, its home for almost a decade in the '90s. Mateo's "Nutcracker" is slated for the Majestic for the next five years.

"ArtsEmerson has been gracious to work with us in making it economically feasible by staggering the rent over a five-year contract," explains company spokesperson Julie Hayen-Miller. "Cambridge was not a long-term economically viable venue in that it was expensive to produce 'Nutcracker' there with a limited audience capacity, [which] we had outgrown."

David Dower, vice president of Emerson College's Office of the Arts and artistic director of ArtsEmerson, says, "We are very happy to be able to welcome JMBT's 'Nutcracker' back to the Majestic. We are deeply committed to the civic role our historic venues play in this city's evolution. . . . JMBT is a perfect partner, and this show a perfect match, for animating these values."

For Mateo, the move helps cement his company's artistic credibility, and the choreographer is rising to the occasion by fine-tuning the storytelling. "This is a children's ballet," he says. "That requires clarity and continuity that is often lacking in [other productions of] 'The Nutcracker.' The first act tends to be choreographed for children and danced by children, and the second act is overly esoteric in its maturity. I think a child can sit through this production and understand its overall narrative from beginning to end."

Colorful new sets by Laura C. McPherson reinforce that focus. "The magic is driven by [Clara's] journey," she says. "Everything is seen through the eyes of a child. This is reflected in perspective with a lot of ceiling and a high horizon line."

One hallmark of Mateo's company is a commitment to making ballet accessible and inclusive for both audiences and dancers. "That's been our mission since the very beginning, to pare down those barriers that made ballet so exclusive," Mateo says. The company has taken "The Nutcracker" to more than two dozen cities and towns, and it holds open auditions, rather than restricting participation to students from its own school. More than 200 kids from Massachusetts and New Hampshire perform this year alongside 18 company dancers and four apprentices.

This season, the company is also extending its annual "Nutcracker" performances at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester, where the troupe has expanded its teaching program at St. Mary's Church. "Last year, we did one long weekend and the house was packed for all performances," Mateo says. "If we can establish a strong presence there, we can look for support to make a strong difference in the community, and we're getting a wonderful response. We do a lot of outreach to people who might not be able to afford it otherwise. . . . With a training presence in Dorchester, it's not just about engaging people in performances, but engaging people in participation."

Mateo knows "The Nutcracker" will always be one of the best introductions to ballet for children. "When you see them on their feet dancing after the show, which is so common, you really feel good that you've sparked something in them. That's got to be a good thing."

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