

By Christine Terrin  
GLOBE STAFF

# Visions of Sugar Plums dancing differently

Ballet Theatre of Boston is the only classical dance company in New England to perform the work of its artistic director exclusively. This gives a coherence and purpose to its productions, even to "The Nutcracker," which in many companies is the work of many hands. In BTB's "Nutcracker," every step is the work of artistic director José Mateo, an uncommonly talented choreographer whose style of dance is fluid, fleet and streamlined, classicism for the post-Balanchine age.

BTB's "Nutcracker" at the 976-seat Emerson Majestic Theatre is a deliberate contrast to the one across the street - the Boston Ballet version at the 3,700-seat Wang Center. That mega-production is heavy on elaborate stage effects, scenery that grows and moves and so on. Mateo's "Nutcracker" emphasizes dance. Mateo firmly believes that audiences actually like dance, and he gives them as much as possible. "We treat 'Nutcracker' like a ballet," he says. "The curtain opens and there's something engaging going on. Your attention isn't just there for the sporadic moments of 'real' dancing, as in more traditional productions. I'm always looking for places to put in more choreography."

So he shortens the Party Scene, which is usually more mime than dance, "to avoid boredom," he says. He gives the children - 200 this year, in three casts - more responsibility than most choreographers do. "There are things you can do with children that are visually interesting, that don't rely on their cuteness, which is the usual mistake," he says. "I show them off as young dancers. And I change their choreography every year, so they don't just come in and learn something off a videotape."

When Mateo founded his company 11 years ago, "I never thought I'd do a 'Nutcracker,'" he says. Two years later, he caved in, aware that the Christmas ballet keeps virtually every classical company in the country afloat financially. Mateo tinkers with his production each year, though, to keep it alive and to keep his dancers alert.

Those dancers tend to stay with Mateo year after year, and he's proud that one of them, Talya Salant, auditioned for a child's part the first year of his "Nutcracker" and this year is one of the six Sugar Plums. He does have one important new addition to the company roster for "Nutcracker": Victor Carnesolta, a former principal with the Camaguey Ballet Company in his native Cuba, who defected in New York recently. The day before Mateo was scheduled to head to Manhattan to audition male dancers - which would have been a first, since dancers usually come to him - Carnesolta showed up at BTB, having heard that Mateo was also Cuban-born.

There may be another dancer with Cuban roots working with Mateo soon. Fernando Bujones, one of the great male stars of the 20th century, has asked to choreograph a work for BTB. It would be the only work in the active repertory not by Mateo himself.

Ballet Theatre of Boston's production of "The Nutcracker" is at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, Dec. 10-29. Call 824-8000 to order tickets.



PHOTO / GARY SLOAN

For Ballet Theatre, Wendy Shinzawa (left), Allison Bergman and Rebecca Innis all play Clara, with Rebecca Arnold as Sugar Plum Fairy.