

Ballet Theatre presents Jose Mateo's grand illusion

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CAMBRIDGE - White cumulus clouds float in a blue sky outside the large windows of the fourth-floor walk-up at 585 Mass. Ave. in Central Square. Inside, puffs of white tulle edged with rhinestones mirror nature, as 10 young dancers, playing snowflakes, bourre and spin and slip through the air. They are rehearsing scene 5 ("In the Forest") of Ballet Theatre of Boston's 12th annual production of the "Nutcracker," which opens for a 42-performance run Thursday at the Emerson Majestic Theatre.

"So, we know what all the steps are," says artistic director Jose Mateo when the dancers stop, panting. "But how do we give the impression of a better uniformity? What's happening 'in between' as we go from one pose to another or from one face to another?"

The simple question lays bare Mateo's aesthetics: Just as the 46-year-old choreographer aims to capture the spirit - rather than only the step - of Christmas in his dance-tween "Nutcracker," his approach to dancing aims to capture the heart and soul - rather than only the steps and positions - of classicism.

Mateo has been following that vision for 13 years now, ever since he founded Ballet Theatre's school, in this very same space, in 1986, and later settled, for 12 years, in studios at 186 Mass. Ave., in Boston. And he will continue to pursue it in a new facility come spring, when the 26-member company and the 100-student school move to the Old Cambridge Baptist Church at 400 Harvard St. That is, if the \$300,000 worth of renovations that Mateo has jiggered out with architect Brad Hows are completed on schedule.



The Ballet Theatre "Nutcracker": Mateo's aim is to capture the heart and soul, not just the steps and positions, of classic dance.

PHOTO / GARY BLOAN

"It was impossible to expand where we were – not just from the point of view of allowing more programming, but just qualitatively," says Mateo, on a break from the daily five hours of "Nutcracker" rehearsals, which include, on weekends, training the 230 children, ages 6 to 17, in the production's four casts. "Our facility just wasn't keeping up with the standard. It had low ceilings – the dancers couldn't practice any real lifts in there – and hard floors, and there was no waiting area, so the parents of the students in the Young Dancers Program always felt very uncomfortable."

The conviction that a stronger school would fuel Mateo's dream of a "different model for a ballet organization" – a model that teaches ballet as a collaborative, not a competitive, art form and that focuses on enabling students to graduate into companies – grew out of six months of strategic planning that Ballet Theatre did two years ago. The undertaking was sparked by the question "How do we stabilize the organization in a way that it can really develop?" and included laying the groundwork for a \$500,000 capital campaign whose design was ultimately financed by the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Project.

"Personally, it just took me a long time to convince myself that this could be a long-term endeavor," says Mateo, his blue eyes as clear as water. He's dressed comfortably, in a brown plaid shirt, loose khakis, and white sneakers, so that he can mark the movements when he gives corrections to his dancers. "It's nice to choreograph some work that people find worthy of the stage, but having come from an art history background, I knew that you have to look at a person's body of work over a course of many years to really be able to assess whether there is anything worth developing there. And at that point [two years ago], developing the organization finally seemed like a worthwhile pursuit. We had to figure out, then, what must we do? And the facility was a major issue holding us back. It also became clear that the school was necessary to train the dancers that we would need for the company, because we were trying to develop a style that could give the company an identity that would make it unique."

Ready for 'Closeups'

The new, 8,000-square-foot space, which Ballet Theatre will share with the church congregation,

will allow Mateo not just to attract more students but also to develop new audiences through what he calls "Ballet Closeups," frequent showings on-site of short programs. The space can easily accommodate both mandates: It will be configured to hold four studios with springy, state-of-the-art floors, as well as administrative offices, for Ballet Theatre, and a sanctuary and offices for church members.

"The church presents an incredible opportunity, because it houses a small congregation that has to maintain this very large building, which is a national historic landmark," says Mateo. "And so the congregation basically needs a resident tenant to occupy a good part of the building. I think there's a possibility of a wonderful symbiotic relationship there, because we need the space every day except Sunday mornings, and they just need the space on Sunday mornings."

The timing of the construction phase of the project, however, is not nearly so neat. The major work runs smack into the preparations for, and the presentation of, the "Nutcracker," the company's most elaborate – and most expensive (it has a budget of about \$400,000) – production of the year. Yet given the economics of the 980-seat Emerson Majestic Theatre, Mateo laughs, "we may be the only company in the country for whom the 'Nutcracker' is not a cash cow."

Still, audiences for Ballet Theatre's "Nutcracker" continue to grow. According to spokesperson Julie Hayen, attendance rose 31 percent over the past three years, to over 28,000. The holiday classic does bring in a profit, however small. The numbers are a testament to Mateo's artistry – his insistence that his "Nutcracker" be filled not with pagantry and extravagant stagecraft (though the sets are lively and even feature a growing Christmas tree), but with dancing that springs straight from the Tchaikovsky score.

A unique 'Nutcracker'

"I didn't want our 'Nutcracker' to be like the other hundreds of 'Nutcracker's around," says Mateo. "I figured the world doesn't really need another 'Nutcracker,' but if we have to have one [to satisfy the students in the school], how can ours be different? And I also thought, 'Can I choreograph a 'Nutcracker' that dancers enjoy dancing? You always notice that dancers treat the 'Nutcracker' as this thing they must do:

They roll their eyes as they talk about the 'Nutcracker,' and they cover their ears if they hear the music in the supermarket. So I looked at it from a dancer's point of view as well."

Mateo began choreographing with a list of things he wanted to avoid: Clara's brother, Fritz ("I felt he was superfluous and sometimes obnoxious"), the seemingly endless miming, the lack of continuity in the story line between Acts 1 and 2, and the artificialness of the typical characterizations. What was left, he found, was plenty of room in the music for real steps and real movement dynamics. For example, Mateo has transplanted the decoration of the tree from the parlor of the main characters to a dream world inhabited by the entire company. "So the audience feels like it's watching a ballet company right from the start," he says.

"You always heard that the adults found the first act boring and that the children would fall asleep for the second act. So I was thinking, 'How can you make both acts good?' That was the challenge, really – to make both acts engaging for any kind of viewer, from novices to balletomanes, and to bring some integrity to the choreography and the dancing so that people felt like they were attending a ballet and not just a holiday event."

The quality of the dancing alone might be enough to do that. Mateo may be one of the most "organic" of ballet choreographers around, in that his emphasis is on moving from the inside out, rather than in just the line a dancer's arms and legs take in the giant studio mirror; on the transitions between steps, rather than on the steps themselves; and on the energy and intention of positions, rather than on their static "rightness."

"When we talk about arm positions, we always reference them to the body," Mateo says to the rapt dancers in the snowflake rehearsal. "But when you start dancing, you have to reference them to parts of the room."

And so the illusions created onstage in Mateo's version of the seasonal tale outdistance even the dancers – the illusion makers – themselves. Isn't that, after all, what the "Nutcracker" is supposed to be about?

► *The Ballet Theatre of Boston presents the "Nutcracker" Dec. 2-26 at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, Boston. Call Majestic at 617-824-8000 or visit the BostTix Booths at Faneuil Hall Marketplace and Copley*