

# Ballet company makes church offering

Ballet and the Baptist Church have more in common than churchgoers and dance lovers might have imagined.

Ballet companies need new audiences and churches need new members. Both need healthy finances to carry out their programs and, perhaps the most daunting challenge in today's real

## Dance

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estate market, both need buildings to call home.

Jose Mateo, artistic director of Ballet Theatre of Boston, has rented two studio spaces in the past year and signed and terminated a lease on a third. And now he's seeking refuge for his dancers in the sanctuary of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. "Dance studios and churches share one thing in common," Mateo said. "We both have large spaces that don't get used for a large part of the day." So his proposal to the church's long-range planning committee is for ballet

classes to be held during the days and evenings, with church services and events happening at their regularly scheduled times — when the dance studios are empty.

He has proposed a 15-year lease, which would help fund the church's restoration, including masonry repairs for leaking stone walls, work on the stained-glass windows and painting. The church is a national historic building.

"We're a small church with a very old building that's on the National Register of Historic Places that needs lots of preservation work," said Jean Chandler, co-chair of the church's long-range planning committee. "We sent 60 proposals to foundations, and we got one grant from the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund that fixed the roof. We don't see any other sources of large capital."

If cohabitation in the building works the way both sides envision, Ballet Theatre would operate four studios in the building, with traffic

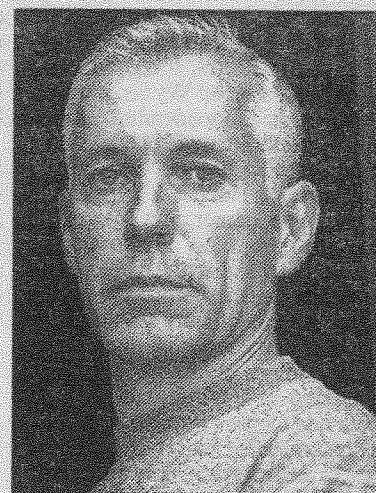
flow designed not to interrupt any church activities. In turn, the building's open spaces, high ceilings and solid floors would provide Ballet Theatre's 100-member school and 18-member company with an awesome place to work. But Mateo is careful — almost to the point of being skittish — not to count on this space prematurely.

Last year, Ballet Theatre signed a five-year lease on studio space in Kenmore Square, but the Red Sox's new Fenway Park proposal squelched Mateo's plans to renovate the space and move in. He feared he would get squeezed out once the new ballpark was built. So Mateo temporarily moved operations to Central Square, home to his school and company for the past nine months.

If this proposal is approved, Mateo must then present feasible business and architectural plans.

He would then hope to rent out the renovated studio space to groups such as the Renaissances and the traditional New England contras, who currently rent from the church. The basement tenants, including Spare Change and Solutions at Work, would not be affected by Ballet Theatre's residency.

"So you can see why this has to take precedence over programming at the moment," said Mateo. For the past two years, Ballet Theatre canceled its spring season at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, citing a need to restructure the organization. That process has taken



STAFF PHOTO BY REN NORTON

**HEAVENLY IDEA:** Jose Mateo, artistic director of the Ballet Theatre of Boston, has proposed sharing space with the Old Cambridge Baptist Church.

longer than Mateo anticipated, but has resulted in three grants: \$30,000 from the Boston Foundation for marketing, \$25,000 from Fidelity Investments for development and a \$50,000 challenge grant from an anonymous foundation.

After a strategic plan was developed in 1997, the company set a capital campaign goal of \$500,000 and has raised \$234,990.

Mateo said rethinking ballet's relationship with the community is crucial for the dance form's survival into the 21st century, and it's his motivation for enduring this search

for a new home.

"For the first 10 years, Ballet Theatre was the classic example of how the first 10 years of an organization are spent," he said, "testing a philosophy and finding support to build momentum that can allow an organization to survive in a city that has a wealth of established institutions. We have found ourselves in the classic predicaments — finding support, clarifying our mission, developing stable financial structures — but we have survived them."

"We're trying to build a different model for a ballet organization," he said. "There is no longer in America a tolerance for the pedagogy of the past."

*Ballet Theatre of Boston and Ballet Theatre's Youthworks perform excerpts from classical ballets and Mateo's new work, "Rotarota," at their Fall Festival, Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. at the Publick Theatre. Tickets: \$4-\$6. Call (617) 354-7467.*