

# Dancers' new muse

## Ballet company inspired by studio in church

For the past 130 years, it's been a sanctuary for worshippers, and on July 5, it became a sanctuary for dancers.

The Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square has traded its permanent pews for portable ballet barres in a collaboration that signals the rise of an artistic organization and the

### DANCE

Christie Taylor

preservation of an historic landmark.

"It's the most exciting project I've ever been involved with in my entire life," said Scott Fraser, director of development at Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre (formerly Ballet Theatre of Boston). Fraser helped raise funds to secure and convert this space; now he's ripping up floors and recycling pews.

"It took us 18 months to get in this space," he said, "and it's 1,000 times more exciting than I thought."

Since January 1999, the group operated out of an almost hidden studio in Central Square. This came after giving up the chance to lease in Kenmore Square for fear of being uprooted during the Fenway Park negotiations.

The company, founded by Mateo in 1986, suspended its spring performance series the past three years, performing only "The Nutcracker" at the Emerson Majestic Theatre.

The canceled productions were prompted by the company's need to reorganize and implement a strategic plan.

That plan has reaped great rewards in the form of the glorious new space in Harvard Square. The location has already created an influx of visitors, curious about hearing piano music streaming through the church's stained glass windows.

"It's great to have discovered we're in a piece of architecture," said Mateo, the company's artistic director. "We wondered if people would be apprehensive about coming into a religious space."

According to Julie Hayen, director of public relations, the opposite is true.

"Our guestbook has been signed by people from Ireland, England, everywhere," she said. Adult class enrollment has also increased.

The conversion of the church space, helmed by Cambridge architect Brad Bellows, whose children dance with Ballet Theatre, is to be completed in three phases. The first is done. Two studios are operable, and the sanctuary, which will still be used by the church congregation on Sunday mornings, should be done by early September.

"In the dance community, there are those people who can give money and there are those who can give labor," Fraser said. "All of them

**'This is a great identity to give the building, an identity that's befitting of what we do.'**

JOSE MATEO,  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,  
JOSE MATEO'S BALLET THEATRE

have risen to heights we haven't expected."

Fraser described one 19-year-old ballerina who took off her pointe shoes at the end of the day and grabbed a saw to remove pews; parents, students and board members have pitched in to help paint, clean and hang mirrors, sometimes staying at the church past 4 a.m.

Teamwork propelled this project, including that between non-profit organizations.

The church reached its top dollar when it raised \$500,000 to put on a new slate roof last year, having raised money to stabilize the steeple years ago. Then Ballet Theatre entered the picture with its plan for the space, raising more than \$400,000 for its initial renovation phase — to install new floors in three studios, renovate reception and dressing areas and install new lighting.

Ballet Theatre has signed a 20-year lease and now serves as landlord to the groups who have previously used the space for salsa, contra and other dance events.

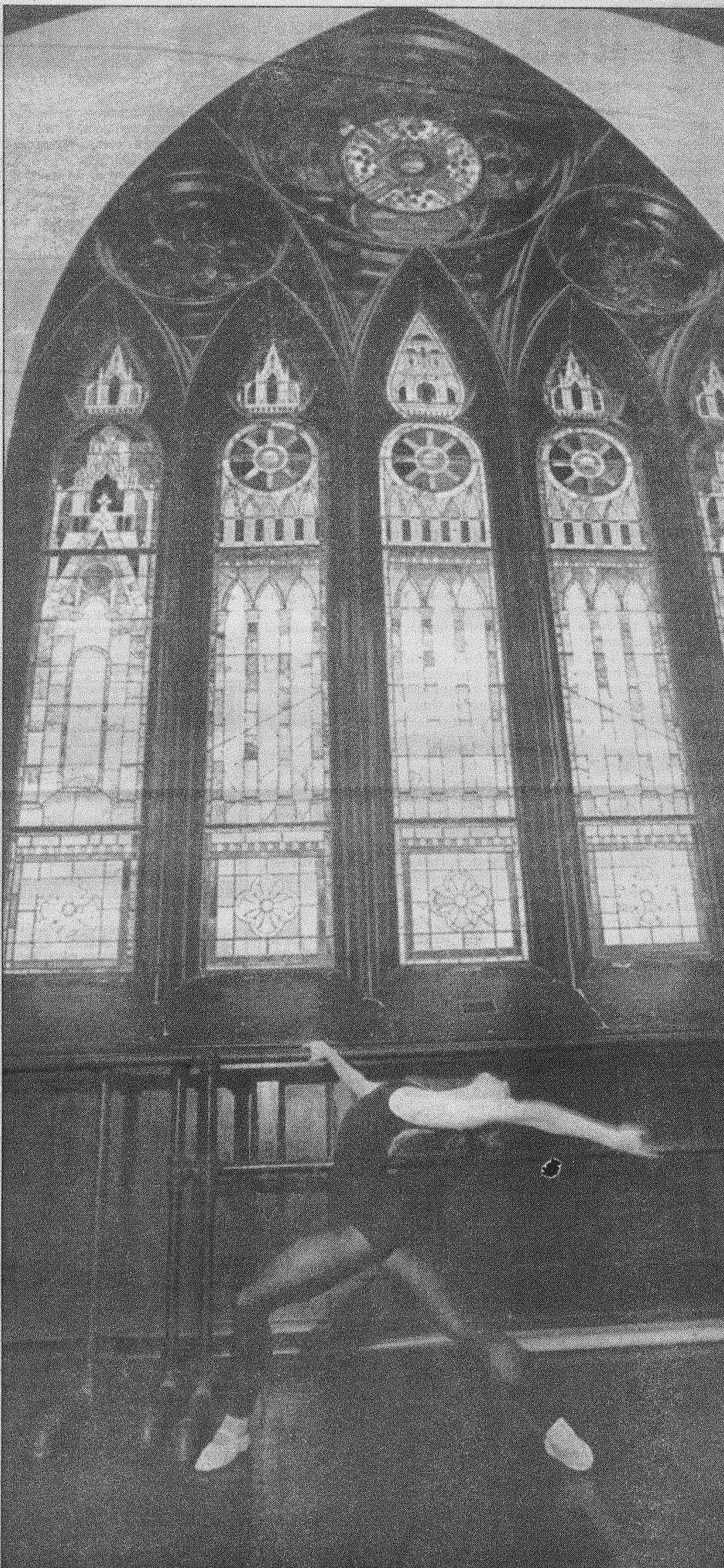
The sanctuary will eventually include a 200-seat performance space, also for use by other arts groups. A fourth studio and second-floor bridged walkway linking the two upstairs studios will also be added. To combat the dearth of parking spots in Cambridge, 30 spaces in the adjacent lot have been secured and will be monitored by Ballet Theatre work-study students.

The 83-foot-long, 40-foot-wide sanctuary is, understandably, the pride of those involved with this project.

With its ash wood-paneled walls, stained glass windows and soon-to-be-installed pipe organ, the space evokes reverence.

"This is a great identity to give the building, an identity that's befitting of what we do," Mateo said. "And we may have underestimated the potential. It's only since we've moved in that we've fully understood all we can do."

After a near-sleepless night of tearing up the sanctuary floor, Fraser said, "It's incredible. The way the sun streams through the dormers in the mornings and evenings is like colored light dancing on the floor."



INSPIRED MOTION: Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre has taken up a new residence at Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square. Visitors are flocking to check out the converted space.

STAFF PHOTO BY JIM MAHONEY