

# 'Nutcracker' choreography is Jose Mateo at his best

By IRIS FANGER

For The Patriot Ledger

Jose Mateo opens his annual production of "The Nutcracker" with a dream scene that finds the child Clara darting in excitement among the floaty ballerinas circling a beautifully lighted Christmas tree, which is silhouetted against a starry sky.

This vision of the familiar narrative as a figment of the imagination continues throughout the first act as Dr. Drosselmeyer waves his hand to freeze the action at key moments, like in a film.

He wants to be sure that the audience knows he is in charge.

This "other" production of "The Nutcracker," as distinct from its big brother mounted by the Boston Ballet up Tremont Street, has a number of innovative ideas besides this original first scene to move the story along.

Mateo as choreographer, leading actor, director of the company that now bears his name (changed from Ballet Theater of Boston), and moving force behind the competition to the Boston Ballet, makes a genial master-of-ceremonies, on and off stage.

The other notion that resonates well is casting a slightly older Clara so that a young student, already proficient on pointe, can take the role. On Thursday night Alexandra Adomaitis, age 13, held center stage in charming manner with her solos and in the various pas de deux with the toy Nutcracker, the Nutcracker Prince and with Dr. Drosselmeyer as his partner in the couples' dance of the party scene.

Mateo is at his best in choreographing large arrangements of dancers, particularly in streaming his well-trained corps de ballet across the stage in the snow scene and in the Act II Waltz of the Flowers.

He creates long, lyrical patterns for his female dancers who stretch out their arms as if reaching to a goal beyond the wings. He's also managed to give the groups of children interesting material to perform, making them an integral part of the dance passages as well as adorable decorations to the stage.

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At Thursday night's performance, the children in the party scene had long reels of movement, interwoven among the familiar games with the toys. Mateo blocked the 11 tiny mice in the fight scene behind the furniture so they could jump up and frighten Clara in a well-planned dramatic turn of the plot.

Other than wishing for live music to enhance the carefully-wrought story-telling, the concerns with this year's production lie in its leading dancers. Understandably, Mateo cannot hold performers because he cannot offer enough seasons beyond "The Nutcracker" to keep them in Boston.

We have seen a succession of intriguing company members arrive, only to be groomed by Mateo and then move on.

New to Boston, this year's Sugar Plum Fairy, Mara Vivas, a native of Venezuela who has danced with the National Ballet of Caracas, and her Cavalier, Daniel Hohagen, a native of Brazil who comes with extensive professional credits, were less effective than hoped for in the famed pas de deux that serves as the climax of Act II.

There was little sense of partnership and Vivas has a stiffness of carriage that marred the adagio (slow) section; Hohagen is insecure in landing from his jumps. Both did better by the end, however, when each of them performed solos propelling them in circling turns around the stage and Vivas tossed off a series of fouettes (the twirling turns on one toe).

Elizabeth Scherban as Snow Queen, who is a product of Mateo's school, was regal in her Rose-Adagio-like segment with four Princes. This was a new conception to the Snow scene; rather than a single Snow King, the



Ghislaine Sosa, left, Kim Carnevale, middle and Debbi Burns in Jose Mateo's Ballet Theater's "The Nutcracker," at the Emerson Majestic Theater.

Jim Soherer

presence of four princes was an idea borrowed from the ballet, "The Sleeping Beauty."

Debbi Burns, a longtime veteran of Mateo's troupe, was gracious as the Dew Drop Fairy, leading the waltzing flowers.

Leticia Guerrero de Rosario, in her third season with the company, appeared as a luscious and sensuous harem girl in the Chocolate variation. And if you looked closely, among the attendants of the Sugar Plum Fairy, you could

see Wendy Shinzawa, last year's Clara, who is beginning to learn the adult roles.

That's what Mateo's work is all about: the fine teaching of children now taking place at the company's new studios at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square — and coaching them as they grow into maturity as artists.

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Jose Mateo Ballet Theater presents "The Nutcracker" at the Emerson Majestic Theater, through Dec. 30.