

# Spotlight

LIVING ARTS

## The "Other" Nutcracker

Ballet Theatre's rendition is a beautiful counterpoint to the Boston Ballet's

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The Nutcracker, as I remember it from childhood, is a tedious tale of a young girl whose toy doll carries her on a whirlwind tour of a variety of dances. Jose Mateo's rendition of the story adds an element which I don't remember from youth: his

*The Nutcracker, presented by Ballet Theatre, Emerson Majestic Theatre, 219 Tremont St. Through Dec. 30.*

company's performance brings to the production a certain intelligence and humor which makes the ballet entertaining to both mind and eye. The company turns what is often viewed as mere spectacle into good theater.

José Mateo takes on the role of director, both as artistic director of the production and as the character,

Dr. Drosselmeyer, the magician who brings the Nutcracker to life. This connection starts the audience thinking in larger terms about the created, magical world of the theater, one which José Mateo creates with a beautiful cast of dancers.

José Mateo's ballet company has, over the course of the last thirteen years, provided an alternative to Boston Ballet's *Nutcracker*. The company "distinguishes its [production] from most others by its focus on the dancing rather than the usual mime and theatrics associated with other productions." It also claims to provide a "deliberate simplicity of the narrative that allows for the focus to be on the music and the dancing itself."

This focus on the dancing exhibits the talent of the company. Laura Manzella's Columbine is the first to astound the audience with her flawless rendition of the animated doll. Her motions are convincingly mechanical, and the choreography highlights her capabilities as a dancer.

Mateo's organic choreography allows each performer a moment. Leticia Guerrero de Rosario's Snow Queen and Indian dance showcase

different aspects of her dancing, both of which are very convincing. The Cavalier (Rolando Troconis) and the Sugar Plum Fairy (Elizabeth Seherban) have a remarkable series of dances which make powerful use of the space and talents of the performers.

These primary performances all share a common element with the cast in its entirety, demonstrating the success of choreographer José Mateo in producing a unified and playful ballet. Unlike so much ballet, which focuses on the spectacle, the production is both honest and intimate in its depiction of the imagined world of the Nutcracker. The size of the Majestic is only part of the reason for this intimacy.

The children in the performance are as important as the professional dancers. Clara, played by Nora Brown, has a wonderful performance, and her interaction with the other children is particularly disarming. Following Tchaikovsky's music exactly, the boys at Clara's Christmas party rush to attack. The comedy is perfectly timed.

Again, the children win the hearts of the audience when they appear in

tiny mouse outfits again prepared to attack. They hide behind the tree and sofa, sneaking out to surprise Clara and are in turn terrified. Once defeated by the brave Nutcracker, they run off wringing their eyes or lie on stage defeated, legs in the air as the universal sign of the overturned. The playfulness of their choreography, though simple enough, is ingeniously done.

The kids appear one last time under the huge canopied dress of a hysterically funny old lady (played by performer Joe Hull in drag and on stilts). She clucks and shakes her head disapprovingly as the little ones skip gleefully around the stage. Like many other moments in the production, the fun happening onstage is infectious.

The size of the theater allows this joy to spread rapidly, and the audience is able to engage with the dancers on a personal level. In this way, the spectacle of the production is minimized because there is a human connection between the audience and stage. The dancing is real and compelling.

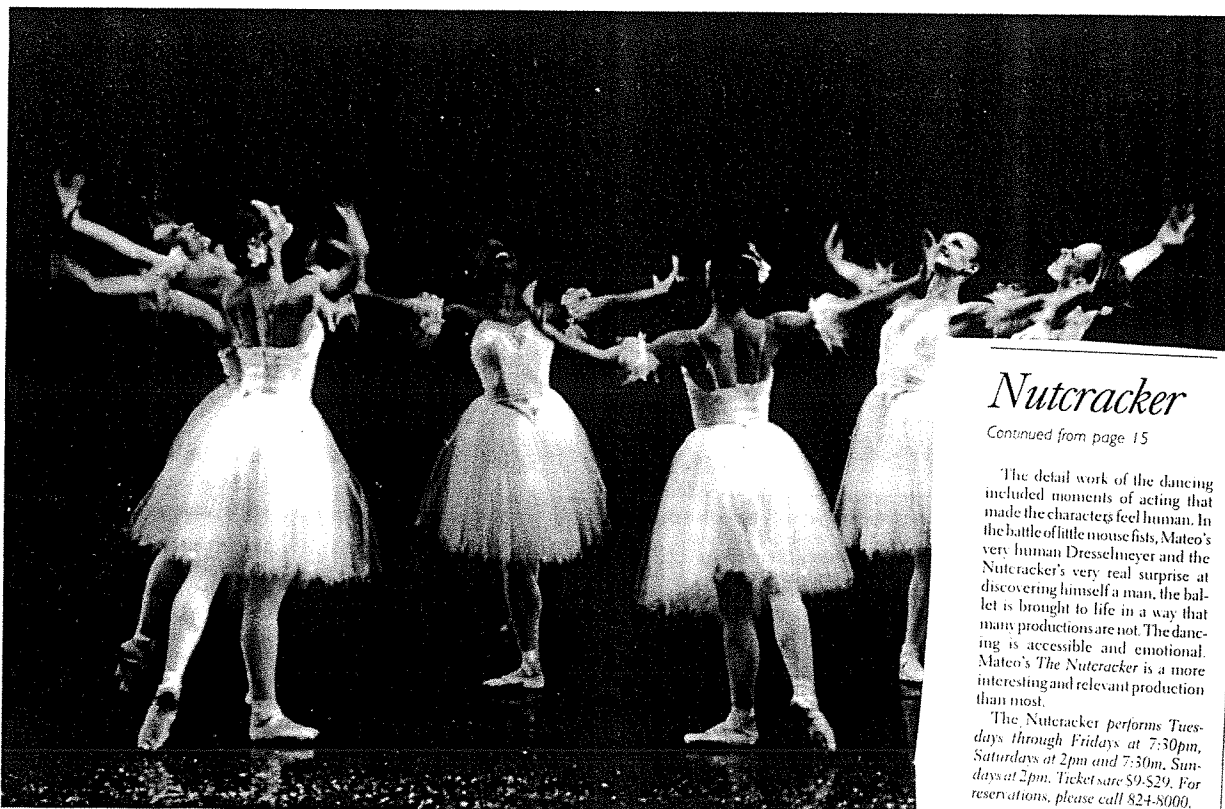
Even so, advertising the show as pure dancing would be doing the

production an injustice. The beauty of the set and costumes do not take away from the intimacy of the production, but they do exist and should be recognized and commended.

Beautiful backdrops and a twinkling background of stars, as well as a Christmas tree that grows to the height of the stage, are part of Roger Lavoie's set. The set reminds the audience that the ballet is about a magical world. The colors of the costumes are impeccably organized. At one point, dancers weaving back and forth across the stage represent all the shades of red through purple and dance among each other in a perfect presentation of the richness of colors.

It is, of course, not so much the space and the costumes that makes the production powerful as the energy with which the performers fill that space and dance in those costumes. The physical aspects of the production are yet another way in which José Mateo succeeds as a director through a choreography which playfully makes use of the space and color.

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### Nutcracker

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The detail work of the dancing included moments of acting that made the characters feel human. In the battle of little mouse fists, Mateo's very human Drosselmeyer and the Nutcracker's very real surprise at discovering himself a man, the ballet is brought to life in a way that many productions are not. The dancing is accessible and emotional. Mateo's *The Nutcracker* is a more interesting and relevant production than most.

The Nutcracker performs Tuesdays through Fridays at 7:30pm, Saturdays at 2pm and 7:30m, Sundays at 2pm. Ticket sale \$9-\$29. For reservations, please call 824-5000.

Dancing Snowflakes in José Mateo's Ballet Theatre's *The Nutcracker* at the Emerson Majestic Theatre.