

Inside: A full Oscar ballot (Page M15), the 'Crouching Tiger' hidden force (M9), and why Ed Siegel won't be watching

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GLOBE PHOTO/GARY SLOAN

Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre rehearses in its new home.

Is Boston dance losing its balance?

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local audiences a wide spectrum of modern dance by the country's top choreographers, went out of business in 1991.

In 1999, Dance Umbrella, the region's leader in presenting contemporary work, briefly collapsed, bouncing back only after a public appeal for cash. The Umbrella and Jeremy Alliger, the man who founded it 20 years ago, are about to part ways, currently communicating only through lawyers. Paul Organisak, the Umbrella's executive director since August 1, declined to comment on anything to do with Alliger, but confirmed that there will be a 2001-02 season, to be announced this spring.

Two openings this coming Thursday are painful reminders of what's wrong.

Boston Ballet, which presents the local premiere of British choreographer Michael Pink's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Wang Theatre through April 8, is in the midst of an embarrassing, mishandled mess: Artistic director-designate Maina Gielgud abruptly resigned at the end of last month, leaving the company only partway through the process of determining both repertory and dancers for next season.

Meanwhile, the 14-year-old

Marcus Schulkind Dance Company, one of the finest modern groups in Boston, disbands permanently after a program aptly titled "Farewell to Arms and Legs" at the Green Street Studios in Cambridge this Thursday through Sunday.

Like many directors of small companies, Schulkind loses big time when he performs — \$5,000 to \$15,000 annually in his case. At 53, without a penny saved for retirement, he says he's got to start thinking about his future.

There *is* some good news, if not on an earth-shattering scale.

The New England Foundation for the Arts has just announced \$240,000 in grants to 39 New England presenters, to support performances of both regional and national companies in the coming year. NEFA, through its various programs, contributes more than \$400,000 a year to New England dance. Because it works through a network of presenters, it tends to be all but invisible to the general public, even though it's involved in major projects. One is a national tour of Cambodian dancers who will visit both the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and the Memorial Auditorium in Lowell in August.

The venerable FleetBoston Celebrity Series, founded in 1938, has beefed up its dance offerings during Jones's five-year directorship. "I've been working with my board on presenting dance on a

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Losing its balance

GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO/JOHN BOHN

Why dance in Boston is teetering on the edge

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

From top to bottom, Boston's dance scene is shakier now than at any other time in its history.

Boston Ballet's incoming artistic director fled before she officially took the reins of the financially troubled troupe. Dance Umbrella and its founder/artistic director are about to part ways. A small but excellent modern-dance company is going under.

Dance's roots here go back about four decades, but they have never run deep. "Dance has been the one artistic discipline without an ongoing presence in Boston," says Martha Jones, director of the FleetBoston Celebrity Series.

Dance went from spotty to significant in the 1960s, when the New England Civic Ballet turned pro, becoming Boston Ballet, thanks largely to a Ford Foundation grant. Small dance companies started to proliferate, thanks to new state and federal government support. Local colleges and universities brought in major dance attractions, thanks to money from the National Endowment for the Arts.

By the early 1990s, the money had gone *poof!* and things had started to unravel. Fewer touring companies visited, which meant Boston's dance audiences couldn't keep *au courant*. As far as traffic in the other direction, Boston Ballet did no real touring after 1991, while some of the city's top modern dance choreographers, including Beth Soll and Susan Rose, left permanently. Concert Dance Company, which for 23 years had offered

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Comedy Star of the HBO special "Killin' Them Softly"

Lack of performance space is also a limit

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more consistent basis," she says.

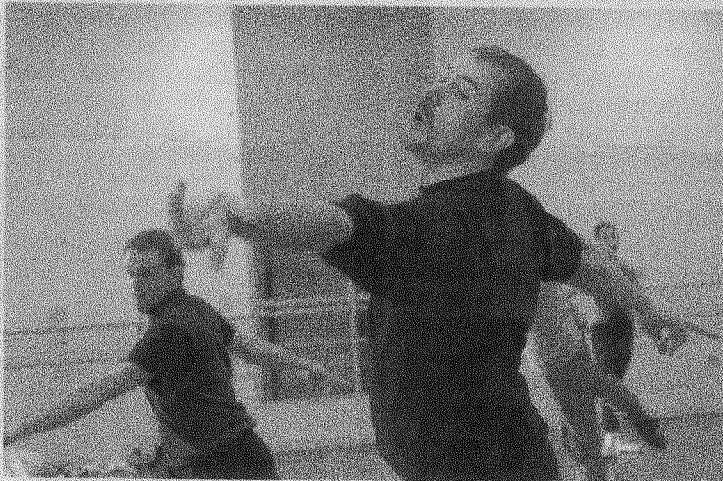
She's committed to bring the Mark Morris Dance Group and the Paul Taylor Dance Company to Boston every year, hoping audiences will build the way they have for the annual run of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Ten years ago, 10,000 people saw Ailey in Boston. Now, it's twice that.

The series is going into partnership with the Wang Center in presenting one major international ballet company at the Wang each year for the next five years, starting with England's Royal Ballet this June. Slow and steady is the Celebrity Series style; that's helped keep it in business for so long.

Yet there's a cautionary tale in the ambitious dance series the Wang — then called the Metropolitan Center — mounted in 1981-82. It sputtered to a halt with the cancellation of an appearance by the Royal Danish Ballet after the money ran out.

The cost of presenting a big ballet troupe isn't small change: The tab for five Royal Ballet performances of "Swan Lake" in Boston will be around \$800,000. Even after raising \$150,000 toward the event, the presenters will have to sell 75 percent of the Wang's 3,600 seats just to break even.

For the last four years, the Celebrity Series has also presented



PHOTO/FARNSWORTH-BLALOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

Choreographer Michael Pink rehearses Boston Ballet dancers.

one local dance company each season, and will continue to do so, perhaps adding a second. Still, most Boston-area choreographers are forced to self-present, which means they hire the hall, try to pay the dancers, cope with the costumes, lighting, publicity, and programs, all while trying to stay focused on making art.

Those choreographers have two primary needs, says Maure Aronson, founder and executive director of the 10-year-old World Music: presenters to ease their burdens and spaces in which to perform. Aronson is doing his bit with a new program to present contemporary dance and theater, which he's calling "CRASHArts."

The first dance offering in the series was "MASS Choreographers," at the Emerson Majestic Theatre earlier this month, which featured the most recent dance winners of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's coveted \$12,500 grants. Without this performance, the public wouldn't have had the chance to see, on a single program, the winners of these publicly funded awards.

It wasn't that big a public, though: Only 40 percent of the Majestic's 976 seats were filled. The numbers are strikingly different for the 150 dance troupes from Senegal, Turkey, Tibet, and other far-flung locales that World Music has brought to the Boston area. For these attractions, audiences never average less than 75 percent

capacity. The reason: high-level multicultural attractions have built-in niche audiences.

The entry of World Music and the Celebrity Series into the Boston contemporary-dance scene once dominated by Dance Umbrella blurs the distinctions among the three organizations, although all say they mean to complement each other, not compete. For many years, Mark Morris's group was Dance Umbrella's territory; now the Celebrity Series will present the company here. (The Morris company and Alliger had a falling out that neither party has publicly discussed.)

As for performance spaces, Boston still lacks a proper opera house. The Wang is a made-over movie theater with poor sightlines and acoustics, and although both problems have been addressed, they haven't been solved. There's a limit to how much Boston dance can grow without a real opera house, which is a topic of perpetual discussion without, as yet, meaningful action.

As to smaller stages, the Emerson Majestic has emerged as the favorite over the past decade. But the Majestic will close for much-needed restoration from this May through October, and again in April 2002, for an undetermined amount of time. Presenters are scrounging for substitutes. Aronson has high hopes for the 400-seat, dance-friendly theater planned for the Institute of Contemporary Art's new waterfront facility, but that project isn't scheduled for completion until 2004.

Samuel Miller, NEFA's executive director, also sees great promise in an ICA modeled on the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis or the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, organizations in which, he says, "Great performing-arts stuff happens in the context of a contemporary [visual] arts institution."

A newly converted space has enabled Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre to make a comeback. Except for its annual "Nutcracker" stint at the Majestic, Mateo's much-praised, chamber-sized company hasn't performed in a Boston-area theater since 1996.

On April 20, though, it opens a three-weekend series, featuring four premieres by Mateo, in its new home in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square.

Mateo holds a 20-year lease on the spacious facility, with an option to renew for another 45. His situation has, it seems, stabilized. The title of his forthcoming program is what the Boston dance community is hoping for: "Resurgence."