

At a rehearsal for the Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker," students await their turn to take the stage.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/EVAN RICHMAN

On their toes

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

At José Mateo's Ballet Theatre, the production of "The Nutcracker" uses 400 pounds of fake snow over the course of its run — a dusting compared with Boston Ballet's blizzard, which involves about a ton of white confetti. Boston Ballet's Christmas tree grows to 40 feet; Ballet Theatre's 24-footer is practically a bonsai by comparison.

Scale is a big difference between the two productions. Ballet Theatre dances in the cozy 250-seat sanctuary of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church; Boston Ballet performs in the cavernous Wang Theatre, which has a capacity more than 15 times larger.

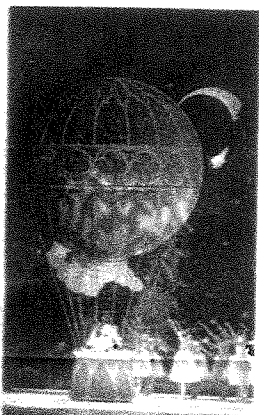
The Wang production is *outsized* in nearly every way, including giant furniture that echoes the proportions of the tree, and that creates an Alice-in-Wonderland effect. Mother Ginger's skirt is 8 feet wide, via a bent-cane scaffolding underneath. More than 400 children have a chance to dance on the Wang stage in the five-week run. Boston Ballet's version even has multiple choreographers: five in all.

At Ballet Theatre, fewer than 200 children will prance onstage, and all the choreography is by Mateo, the artistic director. Mateo's minimalist production is to Boston's bowl-you-over spectacle as Sol LeWitt is to Jeff Koons.

The two "Nutcrackers" simply have opposing priorities. Boston Ballet aims to fill you with wonder, to wow you with special effects up to and including a hot-air balloon. Mateo's focus is on the dancing itself. His post-Balanchine style is fleet and fluid, streamlined and seamless. Boston's choreography is more in the manner of the 1892 original, a lavish lineup of discrete dance numbers.

What the two versions share, of course, is the almost fanatical devotion to detail that ballet demands: a corps of dancers all lifting their legs at precisely the same angle; a tree that doesn't lurch as it lifts to the rafters; snow that has an on-time arrival. Globe staff photographers Evan Richman and John Blanding visited rehearsals of both versions of "The Nutcracker," to capture the behind-the-scenes effort that results in an effortless effect onstage.

Boston Ballet dances "The Nutcracker" at the Wang Theatre through Dec. 30. Tickets are \$14-\$65, and are available through Tele-charge at 800-447-7400, at www.bostonballet.org, or at the Wang box office, Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Ballet Theatre presents "The Nutcracker" at the Sanctuary Theatre, 400 Harvard St., Cambridge, from Thursday through Dec. 30. Tickets are \$25 and \$29; to order, call 617-354-7467.



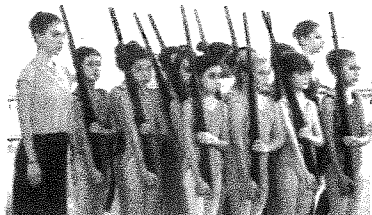
PHOTO/JOHN R. LESTER

Boston Ballet's "Nutcracker" aims for spectacle, as when a hot-air balloon carries us off to the realm of fantasy.



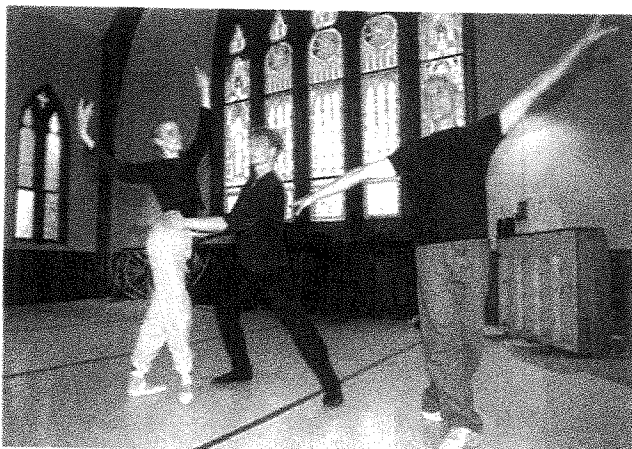
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN BLANDING

Meg Flaherty-Griffith of the Ballet Theatre practices in the spare confines of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church.



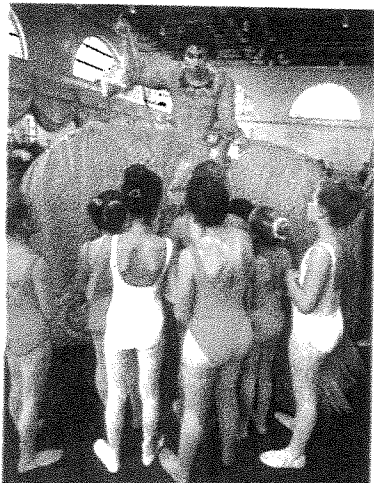
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/EVAN RICHMAN

Some of the Boston Ballet's young "Nutcracker" soldiers muster for their cue at a rehearsal.



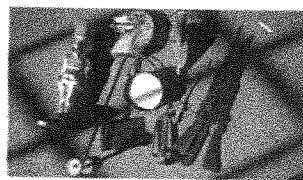
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN BLANDING

Jose Mateo (right) rehearses with Jolanta Valeikaite-Suter and Florian Eckhardt for Ballet Theatre.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/EVAN RICHMAN

Gianni Di Marco, "Mother Ginger" in the Boston Ballet show, instructs young dancers on the art of popping out of his skirt.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/EVAN RICHMAN

(Left) Olivia Hartzell, 12, one of this year's *Chars* for Boston Ballet, makes sure the Nutcracker hits his mark; (above) some of the preents for the party scene are laid out for the rehearsal.