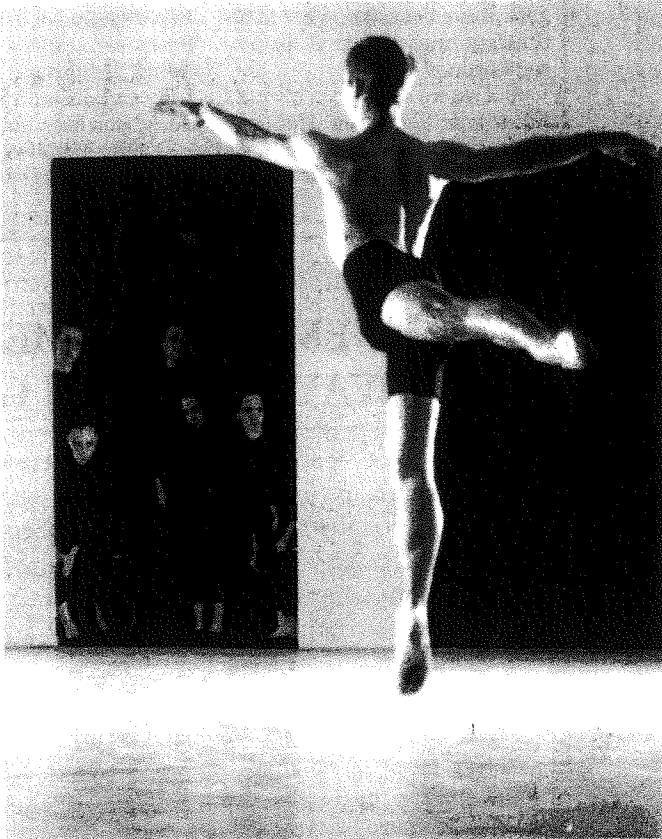


Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2002



A scene from "Dark Profiles," one of four dances in Jose Mateo's "From Worlds Within" at the Sanctuary Theatre.

Dance Review

'Within' is Mateo at his very best

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

The "Schubert Adagio" that Jose Mateo choreographed in 1991 has held up beautifully. The repeated image of four couples in a diagonal shaft of light, all performing the same attenuated phrase, disappearing one by one into the darkness, sticks with you.

The choreography, on the program Mateo opened Friday night, has his hallmarks: a flair for exquisite, inventive visual imagery; a narrative about human relationships that stays just below the surface; a love of the lushest scores by the most romantic composers.

Kimberly Swihart and Nathan Cottam were the lead couple. Her darting, bird-like head and arm gestures contrast with the long, smooth line of her arabesque. Their relationship turns combative, she deceives him with another man, and although the principal woman dominates this work set to the adagio from Schubert's Quintet in C, it's the man who is left alone onstage at the end, quietly lonely.

The "Dark Profiles" that Mateo choreographed last year to the Beethoven Grosse Fugue in B flat is a black ballet, both in costume and mood. Its star, Meg Flaherty, has been with Mateo since 1990, and has become to him what Suzanne Farrell was to Balanchine: the chief muse.

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Mateo and dancers have taken a big step

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She has a tempestuous duet with Matthew White, and is repeatedly annoyed by five micelike women: Like the black swans in "Swan Lake," they seem to represent the eternal presence of evil as they lurk around the periphery. Flaherty triumphs in the end, having dispatched everyone else from her realm.

The two premieres on the program — "Still Waters," set to Debussy's Nocturne: "Sirenes," and "Windborne," to the overture from Wagner's "Tannhauser" — show that Mateo is only getting better. Besides being ever more refined, he has kept an unpretentiousness rare in ballet. (The program calls his premieres "premieres" rather than the more frequently found "world premiere,"

which makes me wonder: Why stop there? How about "intergalactic"?) The 13 dancers on this program, all committed to his aesthetic, never oversell the choreography. They understand they're performing in a church sanctuary, for an audience of 80, seated at little tables, sipping wine or mineral water. And the performers tune their dancing, and even their expressions, to suit the setting.

"Still Waters" is hardly still. The dancers, led again by Flaherty, seem propelled by a tidal force. These sea nymphs lure their male prey with tantalizing gestures: A bent leg that rotates in and out is unmistakably sensual, an invitation. Once the women have snared their partners, the couples engage in stunning sculptural lifts, no two doing the same thing at the same time, offering a wealth of imagery.

From Worlds Within

Performed by
Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre
At: the Sanctuary Theatre, Cambridge,
Friday. (Program repeats Friday
through Sunday and April 19-21.)

The men, eventually spent, end up lying on the stage; Flaherty, the only woman dressed in red, the chief temptress, softens slightly, lifting the hand of the man she has conquered.

In "Windborne" Mateo creates friezelike compositions that resemble the sculptures on a Greek temple. Dancers drop to their knees or into the splits, looking like the marble figures who adjust their poses to accommodate the angled space of a pediment. The women ride the crest of the music,

filling the room with fleet, fluttering bourree steps. As with "Still Waters," there's a mythic flavor, and the dancers occasionally come across as Isadora Duncan acolytes. The finale is smashing, and had the audience cheering.

This is the most cohesive, convincing, and downright enjoyable program by Mateo that I've seen in his troupe's 16 years. The dancers' technique, once uneven, has grown greatly. The company looks like a company, not a pickup group. They've settled into their sanctuary (Mateo has a 20-year lease) and invested in the space. Among the improvements is dramatic new lighting in the vaulted ceiling. In the intermissions you can't help looking up toward the "heaven" of the Gothic Revival architecture, which seems to bestow its blessing on the dancing below.