

The Harvard

# Mochelem

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## Think magically, dance locally

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CHOCOLATE, COFFEE, MARZIPAN, sugar plum... no, it's not just another hunger-induced hallucination during your noontime class, but Jose Mateo's production of the *Nutcracker*—which you should check out if you're in the mood for some genuine holiday entertainment. Intimate and appealing, this production of the *Nutcracker* offers a surprisingly close view of the dancers. It is also accessible to the cash-strapped—the cheapest tickets are only \$15. The dancing is generally of high quality, and the theatrical elements, though not mind-boggling, still pack enough of a holiday punch to have you humming Tchaikovsky's score all the way home.

This *Nutcracker* is directed (and danced, and choreographed, and many other things) by the multi-talented Jose Mateo, a Princeton-educated dancer who only seriously took up ballet during his college years. Since then he has created a stellar career for himself by founding the Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, which is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> season. The ballet company rehearses and performs in the newly created Sanctuary Theatre, part of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church on Harvard Street. The use of a small, intimate theatre is one of the definite pluses of this production—the audience can actually see the facial expressions of the dancers.

One of the other perks of this production is the appearance of Mateo himself in the role of Doctor Drosselmeyer, the magician who gives Clara the nutcracker. With his striking appearance, sweeping green cloak and abundant charisma, Mateo steals the first act. Also charming is the use of over 200 children in a variety of roles, most notably as the rats who battle the *Nutcracker* prince. The sight of little six-year-old children scurrying in rat costumes (complete with fake potbellies) will have you cooing along with their besotted grandparents seated next to you.

The sets and costumes are reasonably eye-catching, though not as spectacular as those of the Boston Ballet. The Christmas tree, an important part of any *Nutcracker* set, rises to a respectable height, and the lightings shift subtly to match the moods of the music. Somewhat oddly, the backdrop in Act II consists of Grecian pillars, but these don't really detract from the theatrical experience. The special effects

could use some work, however—the fake snow in particular tended to fall in random clumps onto the stage. But, as Mateo emphasizes, this production is about dancing rather than glitz and theatrics.

And dancing there is. Unlike many other productions, Mateo's *Nutcracker* actually opens up with dancing, rather than with awkward mime scenes that try to explain the plot to audiences that know it anyway. This production also demands more of its younger dancers—the role of Clara, for instance, is played on point, which increases the difficulty level substantially.

The choreography throughout is in Mateo's trademark “neoclassical” style, which pays homage to traditional styles while incorporating modern fluidity. Mateo's fondness for interesting geometric patterns becomes most visible in the Waltz of the Flowers, in which

the brightly costumed dancers form a variety of colorful bouquets. At times, however, the style seems a bit too rigidly classical. The Arabian dance, for instance, comes off as more dignified than sensual with its slow lifts and twirls.



The dancers give satisfying and sometimes even outstanding performances. The 14-year old Amanda Kostreva, for example, plays Clara with surprising grace and maturity. Kimberly Swihart sparkles as the Dew Drop Fairy, and Meg Flaherty casts an appropriately enchanting spell as the Snow Queen. One of the most impressive dancers among the many talents in this troupe is Elizabeth Scherban Shinzawa, who dazzles the audience as the Sugar Plum Fairy. Her astonishingly fluid movements and beneficent aura make her an ideal fairy.

This production also sports an outrageous “Mother Ginger,” the strange matron who hides little sprites underneath her huge skirt. Played flamboyantly by John Wilpers, this “Mother” could rival any drag queen with her gold fake eyelashes, ridiculous makeup and ostentatious gestures.

If you're in the mood for some charming entertainment and don't want to impoverish yourself in the process, then this is the *Nutcracker* production for you. Located only a few minutes from the river houses, this ballet production is the hidden holiday treasure beneath your nose.