

Mateo explores medium's earnestness

Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre, "Then, Here & Now," at the Sanctuary Theatre, in Cambridge, Friday night. Performances continue through Nov. 3.

By VICKI SANDERS

It's rare to be able to see a ballerina perspire or to witness how a male dancer's muscles strain as he lifts his partner, and it's uncommon to be so close to the performers that

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practically stereophonic.

But these and other intimate details of ballet are part of the experience — and the charm — of Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre. The staging in the sanctuary of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square is parlor-sized and close-up, making the audience, which is seated

the clop, clop, clop of their toe shoes on the wooden floor is

cabaret-style, feel like a group of invited friends.

In this setting, artistic director Jose Mateo must come up with the choreographic goods. Missteps on the part of either dancemaker or dancer would be painfully obvious.

"Then, Here & Now," a four-dance program featuring two premieres, wisely offers no technical pyrotechnics — just earnest, pretty dancing made more endearing by the dancers' vulnerability in the setting and their command of the material.

"Oceanid," a new work to Mendelssohn's "The Hebrides," displays Mateo's facility for creating lovely group movement. The women are dressed in see-through pale gray or green shifts that evoke water's ephemeral qualities. The men wear simple tights.

While never too literal, the eddying and swirling and the breakaway clustering of dancers in pairs or small groups, give the piece a wavy, restless changeability and an unre-

dictability that one associates with the sea.

With "Back to Bach," the second premiere, Mateo takes more chances. His vocabulary expands to embrace the occasional flexed foot or wrist, and an experiment with balance results in a stunning pas de deux in which a couple, holding hands, leans away from each other almost to the (thrilling) point of breaking apart. Set to Bach's Piano Concerto in G Minor, the piece coalesces around saucy Kimberly Swihart, a dancer who embodies the choreography's languorous volatility.

Elizabeth Scherban Shinzawa and Marcos Medina command focus in "All in Passing," with which Mateo, using a parade of delicate lifts, wafting arabesques and constantly shifting patterns, comments on the fleeting nature of relationships. And "Still Waters," set to Debussy's Nocturne: "Sirenes," coyly keeps the lid on sexuality as the men exhaust themselves swooping up the temptresses who eventually conquer them.