

TAB

ENTERTAINMENT

2003: A (dance) space odyssey

Higher rents and fewer spaces keep most dancers on the move

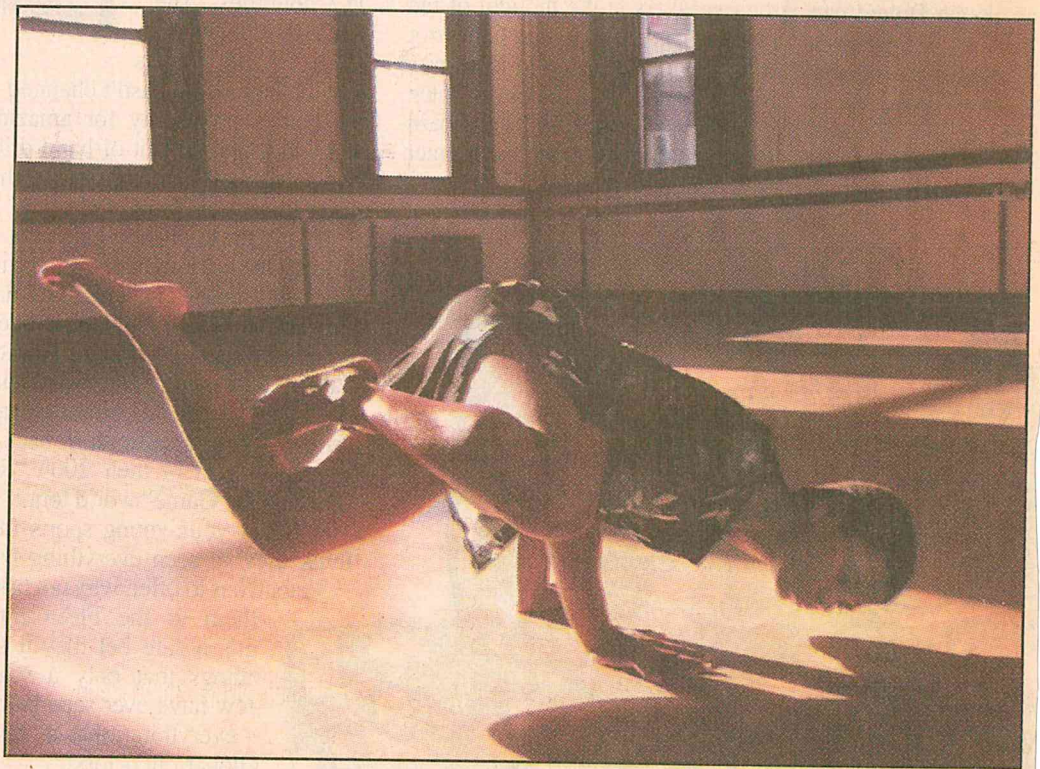
By **Christie Taylor**
CORRESPONDENT

Before Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre moved to its current location in Cambridge, the company was faced with what has become a familiar refrain in the dance world: Pay higher lease payments or find somewhere else to dance.

Ballet Theatre got lucky. In August 2000 the company and school moved into a renovated space in the old Cambridge Baptist Church, where sunlight streams through stained glass windows as dancers *jete* across the floor.

Ballet Theatre's managing director Scott Fraser realizes the company is in an enviable position having just signed another lease on the studio. Their original lease was for 21 years; the one they just signed secures the place until 2041.

The Dance Complex also has an enviable situation — thanks to its 99-year lease — but for those choreographers and teachers who fall



Malinda Allen rehearses at the Dance Complex for a performance at Green Street Studios, March 27-29.

somewhere in between big ballet and mid-size modern dance, the prospects for finding places to rehearse are grim.

"I think the space issue has for the last decade been the single most detrimental factor

for dance," says Fraser, who has worked for Ballet Theatre for the past 17 years and seen the company reside in several different locations. "With dance, you need so many square

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Local dance shuffle

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feet before you can do anything.”

Boston real estate is still at a premium. Few dance companies have the resources to pay thousands of dollars per month for a lease; even fewer have the funds to convert an old building into one suitable for dance — complete with sprung floors, high ceilings, sunlight, a sound system, mirrors and barres.

This is precisely the reason the New Arts Center in Newton converted its largest studio into an area for visual artists, discontinuing its dance program altogether.

“We had to take a hard look at the art center’s strengths and weaknesses,” says director Jean Mineo, who has worked there for eight years. “After going through a strategic planning process for the better part of a year, we decided to move into a visual arts orientation.”

That change was implemented on January 1, 2003.

Mineo says letting go of the center’s six-member dance faculty was difficult.

“We did our best to help place those teachers in other jobs,” she explains. Two teachers joined the faculty of Boston Ballet School. Others took jobs at suburban schools farther away. Some still remain jobless.

“This is a tremendously challenging time for the arts, and for dance in particular,” Mineo says.

The directors of Green Street Studios in Cambridge remain under pressure to keep things running smoothly, despite the steady stream of dancers and choreographers who take classes, rehearse and perform there. Green Street boasts a small black box theater that at some point has hosted almost every small to mid-size dance company in town.

“We are in negotiations right now over our current lease,” explains director Nicole Pierce. “We are working on plans to create a permanent dance space in Boston.”

Dancers will rehearse just about anywhere for

the love of their art form.

The first occupants of the Dance Complex practiced in cold studios with makeshift barres until renovations began on the historic Old Fellows Hall. Now, the building has improved dressing rooms, new sound equipment and is handicapped accessible. According to founder Rozann Kraus, the demand for studio space at the volunteer-run Complex is continually greater than the number of studios available.

“Whatever goes on in the economy affects us programmatically, but as long as people want to take class, we’re here,” Kraus says. “We are here forever. This is our building.”

Although many feel the crunch for space, Dan Yonah Marshall is doing his part to help alleviate it. As president and director of the new Brookline Community Center for the Arts, Marshall began working last October to find a space that could be used for dance in Brookline.

On April 21, the Brookline Community Center for the Arts officially opens for classes. One hundred and fifty hours of dance classes are booked for the first week.

“It was time,” Marshall says. “There is so little space for dance.”

In addition to directing his own dance company, FreEMotion/LibrEMocion Repertory Company, Inc., Marshall is an electrical engineer. He and two other directors, Vlad Selsky and Olaf Bleck, have personally guaranteed the lease on the space at 14 Green Street.

The dance floors are in at the new center and the surround sound systems are wired. Three studios upstairs are almost ready; plans for three basement studios are in the works. Classes are slated for Indian dance, Latin, ballroom and ballet — among many other dance forms — and Marshall has hired most of his staff.

This is great news for dance in Boston. But for independent dancers and choreographers who still need a consistent place to teach and rehearse, the hunt for space continues.