

# Pro: Altman didn't sweat the details

By THEA SINGER

A new word may have to be coined to describe Robert Altman's ethereal yet crackling "The Company." The movie, a layered look — almost a backward glance — at the daily life of a Chicago-based ballet troupe, is not a documentary. Nor is it a drama or even a docudrama, in the classic sense. It's more like a docu-poem, a rhythmic and elliptical distillation of the truth.

At least that's what it aims to be. Which raises the question: How realistic, actually, is Altman's portrayal of the day-to-day world of classical dance — a world he wants to show, he says, "with all of its contradictions"?

To find out, we attended a screening of the film with the real thing. Parren Ballard, 34, is ballet master and lead dancer with Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre in Harvard Square. He was a soloist with the Houston Ballet for eight years, and also danced with the Basel Ballet (Switzerland), the Deutsch Oper am Rhein (Germany) and the English National Ballet. In other words, he's been around.

Does "The Company," which uses the dancers of the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, ring true?

Yes and no, says Ballard.

The social scenes — the way the dancers interact, the parties, the bowling nights, the roast at season's end — get a thumbs up, though details are exaggerated. "There's not a lot of Perrier Jouet going around in the dressing rooms," said Ballard. "It's more lowbrow: beer or cheap red or white wine." There are more cigarettes, too.

The housing situation — crisis, really, in the movie, with one dingy apartment serving as crash pad for multitudes — also gets Ballard's nod, though it takes actual conditions (one or two roommates, an occasional guest) to an extreme. And a dancer in a troupe the size of the Joffrey would never work till the wee hours in a club during the on-season. Altman — whose aesthetic depends on overlapping dialogue and shards of actions — never clarifies when it is that the lead character, Ry (Neve Campbell), takes up her cocktail tray.

The scene in which boyfriend Josh (James Franco) ducks behind bowing dancers onstage to reach Ry in the opposite wings is pure fiction.

"That would absolutely never happen," said Ballard. "No one but artistic staff can get backstage till the curtain comes down." Oh, and Ry's injury — the fall on her arm that sends her scuttling offstage in mid-performance? "She would have finished the show," said our veteran flatly. "You need to tear your Achilles, blow your knee out," to bail.

Injuries, of course, do happen. That a dancer in the movie snaps her Achilles tendon during rehearsal is authentic. That the company's artistic director, "Mr. A" (Malcolm McDowell), other staff and the surrounding dancers spend about a second ministering to her is not.

"It would have gone on long-



STAFF PHOTO BY ROBERT ENG

**REAL THING:** Parren Ballard dances for the Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre.

er," said Ballard. "There would have been more concern, more upset, they would have waited until maybe the doctors or am-

balance got there."

Sure, everyone can be replaced. The show must go on. But not cavalierly.

Then there's Mr. A himself. More a caricature of a director (distracted, dismissive, controlling) than a real person, he talks some of the real talk but neglects to walk the walk.

"I think he has no familiarity with dance at all," said Ballard. "It was all very put-on, very surface: This is the director, these are my lines, and I've got to have this kind of character, but without ever having been in the environment of a ballet company."

And his use of the salutation "babies" for the dancers, says Ballard, is a no-no. It's in the national contract.

The real dance world comprises maybe 95 percent sweat (rehearsals) and 5 percent magic (performance). "The Company," though, is full of performances: There are dances by Lar Lubovitch, Joffrey co-founder Gerald Arpino, Robert Desrosiers and more.

"In the studio, the rehearsals are much more work-oriented" than in the movie, said Ballard. "It's gritty and sweaty and grimy: Do it again and do it

**'In the studio, the rehearsals are much more work-oriented. It's gritty and sweaty and grimy: Do it again and do it again, and get it right. Hours and hours of that.'**

**PARREN BALLARD, PROFESSIONAL DANCER**

again, and get it right. Hours and hours of that. Performance something completely different. It's a multifaceted one-time-through. You're in the moment — and it's fleeting. It seemed, in the movie, like they had endless performances. No. There are longer rehearsal periods and the shows are much more fleeting. In the good companies, out of 10 shows you might get two."