

Clara's world

For 14 years José Mateo has been bringing Boston a 'Nutcracker' of the utmost sophistication

by Theodore Bale

José Mateo's Ballet Theatre's 'The Nutcracker,' Emerson Majestic Theatre, Boston, through December 30. Performance reviewed: December 14.

What if I give Clara some "real" solos instead of just asking her to waltz around in a bathrobe? What if I turn the Russian "Trepak" into a pas de deux? And what if I surround the Snow Queen with four cavaliers instead of just one?

José Mateo's determination to challenge himself with such questions is one reason why devoted audiences have returned for 14 years to see his original, ever-evolving production of the holiday classic "The Nutcracker," running through December 30 at the Emerson Majestic Theatre in Boston. Under his expert artistic direction, the Christmas boilerplate ballet really comes to life, and manages to be both forward-looking and nostalgic at the same time.

The Cuban-born choreographer has always maintained a certain intellectual approach in his work, which he might have acquired in New York City, where he studied ballet technique in the traditions of Cecchetti and Vaganova as well as the modern Americans. Somewhere along the line, Mateo managed to develop his own personal style of ballet choreography, which is characterized by qualities of elongation and expansiveness, not to mention dense, fast-moving ensemble work. Mateo has also assembled



Dancing snowflakes in José Mateo's Ballet Theatre's 'The Nutcracker.'
Photo: Jim Scherer

an impressive company that is well prepared to present his sophisticated, unique approach.

Mateo's "Nutcracker" maintains certain traditions and dispenses with others. After an un-choreographed overture, the curtain rises not on the predictable "preparations for the party" scene, but rather a mysterious manifestation of Clara's dreaming mind. Ten "Dream Fairies" dance around an enormous white Christmas tree covered with blue, purple, and silver ornaments. Clara mingles with them before presenting a developed solo en pointe. This is Mateo's way of saying, "this whole ballet is about Clara's adolescent imagination," without being pedantic or psychologically pretentious.

There are a number of old-fashioned, archetypal props that give the party scene a striking authenticity. These include Drosselmeyer's dusty carpetbag, the modest toy trumpets he passes out to the boys, and the simple blue nutcracker that Clara actually uses to crack real walnuts. Further delineated by the elegant Victorian costumes, Mateo's party scene has the ironic feeling of being the "original" that has served as the pattern for all other productions.

Adult sophistication

At the December 14 performance, the role of Clara was danced by the talented 13-year-old Alexandra Adomaitis, who demonstrated

a confident technique throughout the evening. She also brought an adult sophistication to the part. With his striking line and handsome good looks, Matt White was perfect as her imagined Nutcracker Prince, and he and Adomaitis maintained an "I am 16 going on 17" dynamic that brought cohesion and interest to the story line.

Mateo's new snow scene, which is loosely based on the structure of the "Rose Adagio" from Petipa's "Sleeping Beauty," was glorious, not to mention challenging for the dancers. The strong and graceful Elizabeth Scherban as Snow Queen had four Snow Princes to escort her through the lush, enchanted forest, as well as an impressive, impeccable corps of Snow Flakes exactly her height. By deviating from the standard pas de deux structure, Mateo has created a passage that more closely resembles an inspiring snowstorm, and his elaborate patterns are mesmerizing from start to finish.

The dancers continued their statement of Mateo's contemporary look in the Act II divertissement, "The Kingdom of the Sweets." Florian Eckhardt delivered such sensational cabrioles and soft, high jumps that he nearly upstaged Kim Carnevale in the "Chocolate" pas de deux. In "Tea," Christine Scarlett and Ghislaine Sosa presented an understated array of petits battements that made one forget the usual racist movement clichés associated with this awkward scene. A smoky Leticia Guerrero de Rosario and shirtless Alejandro Gomez offered an erotic "Coffee" pas de deux that perfectly illuminated the sultry music.

While Mishelle Sloan and Carl Adams danced admirably in the "Trepak" pas de

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José Mateo dance'

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deux, it's unfortunate that there is no scene in the Act II divertissement where just the men can let off steam and dance competitively with each other. The women, however, had their chance to do so in the all-female "Waltz of the Flowers," with its fabulous yellow and purple gowns that looked like something by Coco Chanel.

Finally, Mateo's Grand Pas de Deux is jam-packed with extraordinary lifts and classical partnering of the utmost elegance. Mara Vivas as Sugar Plum Fairy and Daniel Hohagen gave a dramatic and completely engaged performance that never sagged in energy. Mateo has provided choreography worthy of the two stars, while maintaining an artistic integrity that acknowledges the sweep of Tchaikovsky's score. Vivas' lucid piqué turns and Hohagen's impeccable jetés were a stunning conclusion to a satisfying evening of ballet. ▼

For tix (\$29, \$23, \$19 & \$9) to José Mateo's Ballet Theatre's 'The Nutcracker,' call 824-8000 or visit BosTix at Faneuil Hall and Copley Square, Boston. The Majestic Theatre is at 219 Tremont St., Boston.