

Growing by leaps and bounds



STAFF PHOTO BY REN NORTON

Ballet Theatre's larger new home inspires Jose Mateo's vision for updated 'Nutcracker'

Morning sunlight pours through enormous stained-glass windows, music echoes against the church ceiling, and the rich scent of star lilies drifts around the vast room. It's a typical Friday morning at the graceful Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square, where instead of a service, the energetic dancers

Dance

THEODORE BALE

of Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre are rehearsing the snow scene for upcoming performances of "The Nutcracker."

In July, Mateo moved his company to the converted church, obtaining a 20-year lease. He has described his troupe's new home as "a dream come true," and says its three large rehearsal studios will have an enormously positive impact on this year's "Nutcracker."

"I can see that the dancers are moving differently, as the result of training in a huge space. The softness of the new floors allows us to dance longer and do



ROOM TO MOVE: Juliana Muirhead and Askar Kettebekov perform in the Spanish dance of Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre's 'The Nutcracker' at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, which runs through Dec. 30.

more jumping, and we're having less injuries and simply less fatigue in the legs," said Mateo. "Our style is based on an expansiveness, where every part of the body is constantly reaching, trying to elongate, which is much easier to do here."

The holiday season is usually the time of year when a ballet dancer works the hardest, rehearsing and performing "Nutcracker" day in and day out for many weeks. It's no wonder Mateo's company is pleased to have just a little more breathing room this season, not only for the dancers but also the numerous others associated with the production, including costume designers and administrative personnel.

In terms of square feet, the new main studio is actually larger than the stage at the Emerson Majestic Theatre, where the company will give 26 performances of "The Nutcracker" through Dec. 30.

The vertical space is important as well. Mateo says that for the first time, dancers can really work on some of the challenging lifts featured in his choreography.

"We've never had such high ceilings, so either we couldn't do certain lifts during rehearsals, or we couldn't see them properly," Mateo said.

This year Mateo has created a new snow scene for the production. Instead of the typical pas de deux, he has chosen

Mateo takes different approach

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to present one ballerina with four cavaliers surrounded by a corps, a decision he says is influenced by the famous "Rose Adagio" scene from Petipa's "Sleeping Beauty."

As the sweeping waltz music for the scene emanates from a boombox sitting next to a vase full of star lilies, Mateo guides his company through a demanding rehearsal of the intricate choreography.

"This has never been easy, even when there were fewer people," he says to the dancers encouragingly. "There's time to cure this, so there's no need to worry, but everyone must

keep aware of what's happening!"

Watching the rehearsal, it's evident Mateo intends a contemporary look for his "Nutcracker," which he believes "distinguishes itself from most others by its focus on the dancing rather than the mime and theatrics associated with other productions."

Additionally, he feels his choreography constitutes a new approach to Tchaikovsky's extremely well-known music.

"Whereas the patterns reflect a formality that is not unlike Petipa, the steps that bring the dancers to those formations are more contemporary in terms of the speed with which the dancers move, the speed with which

the patterns form and then dissolve, as well as the pictures they produce and the relationships among the dancers that these pictures suggest," Mateo said.

His democratic approach to casting the ballet is also a distinguishing factor. Nearly everyone who dances in the corps also performs in the second act divertissement as a soloist, and audiences once again can look forward to seeing Mateo appear in the ballet's first act as Drosselmeyer.

Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre's "The Nutcracker," through Dec. 30, at the Emerson Majestic Theatre. Tickets: \$9-\$29. Call (617) 824-8000.