

New life, new home for Mateo company



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/MATTHEW J. LEE

Jose Mateo at a rehearsal in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church.

By Christine Temin

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What do the dancers of Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre have in common with their new digs?

Pointed arches. Mateo's classically trained company members are stretching their feet these days in the august atmosphere of Old Cambridge Baptist Church, a Gothic Revival structure on the edge of Harvard Square. It's here, in the 5,000-square-foot Sanctuary Studio, that Mateo's company gives its first significant public performances — other than its annual "Nutcracker" at the Emerson Majestic — in five years.

Hemorrhaging money, the company was forced into hiatus in 1996.

Now it's back, to present choreography its creator hopes will "communicate with clarity, without dependence on posing or emoting to convey drama."

He cites a favorite phrase as used in describing his work: "Ballet with a heart."

The program of four premieres all by Mateo, is aptly titled "Resurgence." The show runs for three weekends starting this Friday, and because of the nature of the space — deeper than wide, unlike a conventional theater — Mateo is seating his audience on three sides, at tables, in a Pops-style arrangement. People at the slightly more expensive private tables will sip complimentary beverages.

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A new life in a new home for Mateo's company

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ages. There's room for only 80 viewers, all of whom will have front-row seats because the tables are side by side rather than one behind another. Those viewers will have the kind of close-up experience that's rare in ballet, which traditionally has kept its distance from the audience.

Small-scale is fine with Mateo, who once said he prefers the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum to the Museum of Fine Arts, Mozart to Wagner, intimacy to grandiosity.

He's worked tirelessly and continuously, even when he dropped from public view, to keep his company of 19 alive. At a moment of crisis for much of Boston dance — with the folding of Dance Umbrella and Boston Ballet without an artistic director and forced because of finances to mount a 2001-2002 season with nary a single premiere — Mateo and his 15-year-old company seem headed for stability.

It took him 12 months to negotiate the church lease, but it's a lease of 20 years. He'll be 70 when it ends, a fact that gives him pause. While his company was in a holding pattern, he raised money — \$650,000, a sum he split between construction costs in the church and operating funds.

The ambitious transformation of the bedraggled building comes

in three phases, just one of which has been completed. Various spaces have been turned into three studios, two with the sprung wood floors that are kind to dancers' legs. Theatrical lighting, in a future phase, will require complete rewiring of the immense structure.

Unused or underused churches have been to the dance world what old mill buildings are to visual artists. A nice big nave offers good space for performing, after you take out the pews, as Mateo's crew did. It's been mostly modern dancers who have found homes in churches, though. The most famous case is the Judson Church in New York's Greenwich Village. In the 1960s, Judson was the birthplace of postmodern dance, where choreographers including Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and Twyla Tharp collaborated with such visual artists as Robert Rauschenberg on radical choreography more likely to be performed on roller skates than on toe.

Mateo isn't a radical. He's working in an idiom that has evolved over four centuries; he's trying to take it a bit further; and right now he's trying to tailor it to fit the church, to liberate it from the confines of a conventional theater.

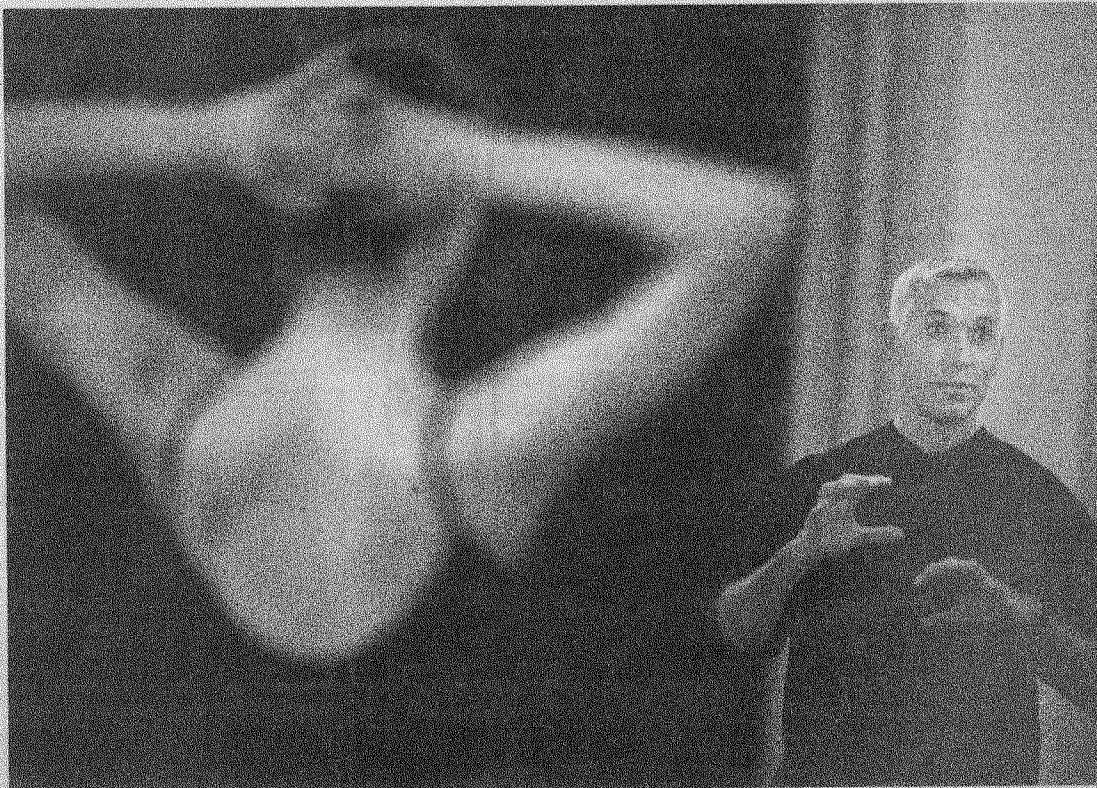
Once ballet outgrew its earliest incarnation — nobles performing in European courts — it made the leap to a proscenium stage, and there it stayed. The technique developed to suit the space. The dancer's characteristic stance, with legs rotated out from the hip, made it simpler to move side to side and remain facing the audience. Turn-out also gave the audience the most interesting view of the leg and foot, in profile. The painters of ancient Egypt depicted legs facing one way and torsos the other for a similar reason — to present the fullest picture of each.

This way of arranging body parts in relation to an audience of people all facing the same direction goes out the window with Mateo's performance. Viewers seated in the bays at the sides of the nave "will see the choreography from some unconventional angles," Mateo acknowledges. They'll also notice the way ballet dancers eat up space. Trained to project to the last row of an opera-house balcony, they use their bodies to create lines that seem to extend beyond their actual arms and legs, to dance larger than life. At close range, they can almost overwhelm audiences with the amplitude of their gestures.

Like Gothic architecture, which grew ever taller thanks to breakthroughs in engineering, ballet technique evolved so that each new generation was able to jump higher than its predecessors. Both Gothic architecture and classical dance aim to soar.

Mateo, though, is wary of an overemphasis on technical virtuosity, worried about pushing training to extremes that take their toll on the body and about dancers starving themselves physically and spiritually. "Humanistic" is a word he likes to use when discussing the ambience he's after in the studio.

"Dancers," he says, "are not skilled androids."



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/MATTHEW J. LEE

Mateo directing rehearsal: "There's always a story behind the choreography."



"Dancers," the choreographer says, "are not skilled androids."

While his dancers rehearse, the Princeton-educated Cuban-American choreographer takes notes. When the dancers finish a ballet, he gives them corrections — quietly and collaboratively, asking questions as well as giving orders. So modest is Mateo that for a long time he resisted having his name attached to the company.

"But every marketing and development person we consulted advised it," he says. So Ballet Theatre of Boston became Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre. All the choreography in the current repertoire is his. "I'm not against outside choreographers on principle," he says. "It's the money. Also, it would be like hiring someone to paint a picture with your paints."

The four new dances he's created for his comeback are all abstract, more or less. "There's always a story behind the choreography that helps it develop a structure," he says. "It can account for when a dancer enters, and with whom. But I don't tell the

dancers the story."

Musically, his choices are ambitious: Bach, Beethoven, Bruch. "I'm a lot less intimidated by great music now than I used to be," he says. "The more I listened to the music for this program, the more it seemed to demand dance." He also works with a musical score "to get a visual impression of the piece." The program will open with "Dancers' Overture," a courtly, processional piece whose title is taken both from the music, the Bach Overture in B minor from the Orchestral Suite No. 2, and from the dance's status as a new beginning.

Mateo, his company, and his 140-student school use the church spaces constantly, with the exception of Sunday mornings. The church — designed by Alexander Esty, completed in 1870, and boasting a particularly gorgeous stained glass window by Louis Comfort Tiffany — has not been deconsecrated. A small congregation still gathers there every Sunday and sets up chairs for services.

Mateo, who wasn't raised in any religion, is sometimes in attendance.

"I think we should try to understand our landlords," he says. "And I hope we've brought a new vitality to a rather important building that had suffered from neglect."

Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre performs "Resurgence" in Old Cambridge Baptist Church, 400 Harvard St., Cambridge, this Friday through Sunday; April 27-29; and May 4-6. Tickets to this Friday's and Saturday's benefits are \$100 each. Tickets to all other performances are \$15 and \$18 for general table seating; \$60 for a private table for two; and \$100 for a private table for four. For tickets and information, call 617-354-7467.

Mateo is also the focus of a segment of "Greater Boston Arts" debuting this Wednesday at 8:30 p.m. on WGBH-TV (Channel 2), with frequent repeats on that channel and on WGBX-TV (Channel 44).