

Living Arts

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An intimate and inspired 'Nutcracker'

By Christine Temin

GLOBE STAFF

Jose Mateo gambled with his "Nutcracker" production this year — and won. Mateo, the artistic director of Ballet Theatre (aka Boston's *other* ballet company)

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staged the work on which nearly every classical company depends to keep going for the rest of the year in a hall with 250 seats. Financially, that translates into only 250 seats to *sell*. Artistically, it means drastically altering a grand 19th-century spectacle meant to be seen in a proper opera house with ten times that capacity, with dancers projecting to the far reaches of the balcony.

There are no far reaches in The Sanctuary Theatre in Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square. Yet Mateo's "Nutcracker" comes off as alternative rather than abridged. It's not billed as "after" the 19th-century original; it's Mateo's own, which gives it coherence. The audience, seated on steep risers so everyone sees every-

Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre in "The Nutcracker"

At: The Sanctuary Theatre, Cambridge
Last night. Production repeats, with changing casts, through Dec. 30.

thing at close range, felt so connected to what was happening last night on the surprisingly deep, dappled stage, that during the Mother Ginger number in act two people started to clap along. You don't find that in starchier settings.

Mateo's "Nutcracker" opens with dancing — fairies swirling around a twinkling conifer. There's no tedious mime to suffer through before you see performers moving full-out. The production doesn't have the more dazzling special effects of others: The snow falls unevenly, at first like dandruff, then as if the skies were disgorging all there was ever going to be. The story line, which everyone knows anyhow, is glossed over: This is more a meditation on "Nutcracker" than a spell-it-out pro-

duction. What you're left with is dancers and dancing. The dancers — children included — don't let concentration or commitment flag for a second; at this distance, they can't afford to.

Mateo himself plays Dr. Drosselmeyer, the catalyst for Clara's adventure; he's more a guardian angel than the usual mischief-maker. His Clara — Amanda Bertone — is on pointe, which separates her from the other little girls: She's a step closer to womanhood than they are, and the choreography she performs is quite grown-up. Her Nutcracker Prince — Davide Vittorino — is on a similar journey, from stiff wooden toy to supple young man.

Mateo has a gift for fluid geometric patterns. It shows up in the elegant configurations of the cherubs and angels scene, which is also about maturity, one generation guiding the next. With Clara safely arrived in the Kingdom of the Sweets, the opportunities for soloists to show off arrive as well. Mateo's well-trained company dances the variations without affectation,

to the point where you wish there were some coaching on facial expression: It's all safely neutral. The Chocolate, Coffee, Tea and Trepak dances were well performed, with Dorothea Garland and Florian Eckhardt particularly spirited in Chocolate. Mateo's Waltz of the Flowers looks plucked from an English perennial garden, with dancers in different hues coming together in temporary bouquets. The Dew Drop Fairy, Meg Flaherty-Griffith, was fleet and delicate. In the culminating pas de deux, Kimberly Carnevale, as the Sugar Plum Fairy, articulated the long, languid phrases of the music eloquently. Nathan Cottam, her Cavalier, had less dancing to do than the norm. Indeed, the male presence throughout this production was subordinate to the female.

Yet this chamber-sized "Nutcracker" worked. It's charming. And there is something oddly fitting in presenting the Christmas ballet that makes no reference to religion in a church.