## A 'Nutcracker' that's intimate and charming

By SUSAN DANIELS

For The Patriot Ledger

ike a musical jewelry box with a dancing ballerina on top, Jose Mateo's production of "The Nutcracker" is small and personal, yet captivating and charming. Performing this year in their new home at the Sanctuary Theater in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church, Mateo's Ballet Theater offers a close-up view of the popular holiday classic.

This is a "Nutcracker" where you can practically reach out and touch the dancers. With only five feet or so between the edge of the performance space and the first row of seats, the production has an immediacy usually lacking in a proscenium setting.

Most "Nutcracker" productions are big on mime and theatrics and stingy with dancing. Not this one. In fact, the choreography, which evolves straight from Tchaikovsky's familiar score, is the star in Mateo's version.

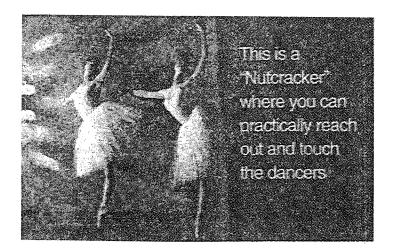
Based on an expansiveness in which every part of the body is constantly reaching and elongating, the steps have an organic quality that originate from a fusion of music and movement. Although the dance patterns give a nod to the 19th century formality of Marius Petipa, who created "The Nutcracker," Mateo's movement is more contemporary than the famous Russian

choreographer's approach. Patterns materialize and melt away with a swiftness more akin to the Balanchine idiom. Even the height of the church ceiling enhances the production by offering a strong, vertical, visual impact to the numerous lifts in Mateo's version.

The curtain rises on a dreamscape sculpted by 12 fairies who dance in a swirl of colorful variations. Clara enters, on point, and has real steps to do, including crisp fouetté turns, chiseled attitudes and long, stretchy extensions and arabesques.

The story unfolds in a cohesive manner rather than

Please see NUTCRACKER - Page 38.



## Mateo's 'Nutcracker' puts focus on dance

**NUTCRACKER** Continued from Page 37

through a sampling of dance morsels, as Clara and her Nutcracker Prince journey to a magical kingdom peopled by the usual cast of characters: the Snow Queen, her Prince and her Snowflakes, the Dew Drop Fairy and her Flowers, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier, Angels, Cherubs, the Divertissements, Dr. Drosselmeyer, ensemble parts - as a dream fairy, a and of course, the Children.

This "Nutcracker" is a lively affair with a cast of 21 professionals, along with a pool of over 200 children from as proficiency. the Ballet Theater's school. The vitality.

between the Soldiers and Mice, the expected in a professional company. children rise (and fall) to the occasion moment is precious.

Choreographically, the role of Clara is an integral part of the ballet, unlike character in a such a natural way that it the spirit of the ballet.

really does seem as though we are eavesdropping on her personal life.

Elizabeth Scherban is another standout. As the Snow Queen, her style is regal and eloquent; her technique. polished and precise. And in Act II, as Coffee, she imprints the Arabianflavored section with her sinuous. undulating movements.

Also deserving special mention is Elisa Gerasin, who performs in three snowflake and a flower - as well as in the featured role of Coffee. She dances with brilliant style and finesse as well

All is not flawless, however. The production, which opened Thursday male dancers of the 15-year-old after several previews, sparkles with company are for the most part not as proficient as the women, frequently In the first act, during the battle lacking the technique and polish

Though some of the costumes have with their twitching noses, trembling seen better days, they are still eyefingers, and lolling heads. Looking catching and colorful, mixing nicely even younger than their six years, two with the expert make-up and creative of the mice could be seen eye-balling hair styles. The onstage Christmas tree, their way through the audience in an which grows to 24 feet, and the set attempt, no doubt, to locate their changes (with scenery moved on and parents, while perfectly maintaining off stage by the dancers), proceed their little rodent characters. The without a hitch, as do the lighting and taped music.

Part of the success of this "Nutcracker" is due to the aura cast by the more passive characterizations Mateo in the role of Dr. Drosselmeyer, typical of most other productions. The the magician. With grand arm exuberant Amanda Bertone performs flourishes, studied poses and piercing this pivotal role with a maturity beyond eyes, he moves the enchanting tale her 14 years. Not only does she dance along from one scene to next. With his with assurance and grace but she matinee idol looks, the Cuban-born. responds to the acting demands of her silver-haried Mateo clearly personifies