

A 'Nutcracker' that's intimate and charming

By **SUSAN DANIELS**
For The Patriot Ledger

Like 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

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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, 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 the Ballet Theater's school. The production, which opened Thursday after several previews, sparkles with vitality.

In the first act, during the battle between the Soldiers and Mice, the children rise (and fall) to the occasion with their twitching noses, trembling fingers, and lolling heads. Looking even younger than their six years, two of the mice could be seen eye-balling their way through the audience in an attempt, no doubt, to locate their parents, while perfectly maintaining their little rodent characters. The moment is precious.

Choreographically, the role of Clara is an integral part of the ballet, unlike the more passive characterizations typical of most other productions. The exuberant Amanda Bertone performs this pivotal role with a maturity beyond her 14 years. Not only does she dance with assurance and grace but she responds to the acting demands of her character in a such a natural way that it

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 Arabian-flavored section with her sinuous, undulating movements.

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

All is not flawless, however. The male dancers of the 15-year-old company are for the most part not as proficient as the women, frequently lacking the technique and polish expected in a professional company.

Though some of the costumes have seen better days, they are still eye-catching and colorful, mixing nicely with the expert make-up and creative hair styles. The onstage Christmas tree, which grows to 24 feet, and the set changes (with scenery moved on and off stage by the dancers), proceed without a hitch, as do the lighting and taped music.

Part of the success of this "Nutcracker" is due to the aura cast by Mateo in the role of Dr. Drosselmeyer, the magician. With grand arm flourishes, studied poses and piercing eyes, he moves the enchanting tale along from one scene to next. With his matinee idol looks, the Cuban-born, silver-haired Mateo clearly personifies the spirit of the ballet.

