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Jose Mateo dances into season with program that's anything but passé

By Candi Carter
CHRONICLE STAFF

The Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre begins its 17th season this weekend, at its Harvard Square home, with a show that continues a tradition of new and innovative ballet theater.

The Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, under the direction of choreographer and artistic director Jose Mateo, prides itself on presenting traditional ballet dancing in a contemporary style. When the dancers in Mateo's studio get together, they're using moves that have been around for hundreds of years, but they're putting them together in ways that haven't been seen before.

"We're presenting ballet in a completely different format, and that's really exciting," Mateo said.

The non-profit studio, which opened in 1986 in Boston, moved its mix of modern and ancient art to the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square just three years ago, where the group began to completely remake how ballet

performances are done.

"The whole experience is different," said Julie Hagen, spokeswoman for the ballet theatre. "Just walking into the theatre is an amazing experience."

In their cozy, historic home, they set up performances in a manner similar to a cabaret style. About 80 audience members can belly up to tables around a room where the dance space is larger than the audience space. And while watching in a close-enough-to-touch atmosphere, they can sip a drink and relax. It's a format that brings the audience close to the dancers, making the performers seem less aloof.

"There's no separation between the artists and the audience," Mateo said. "In this format, the dancers and the audience are occupying the same space."

Everything about the performances, from the length of pieces to the audience format is meant to make viewers comfortable.

"It's a really good introduc-

tion to ballet for people who haven't been to a ballet before," Hagen said.

The newest season opening this weekend continues the theatre's ground-breaking work in ballet theatre with a set of four pieces choreographed by Mateo. Two of the works have been debuted before by the group, but the other two are completely new.

"We're always presenting new work, which in the ballet world, is very unique in itself," Mateo said.

The performances will keep in the theatre's open and friendly character while presenting works set to music spanning the artistic periods by Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, Claude Debussy and Felix Mendelssohn. All of the works will tell a story, but the story is really ancillary to the dance itself.

Mateo wants his audiences to focus on the spectacle and sheer athleticism of dance while they're enjoying a drink and the music.

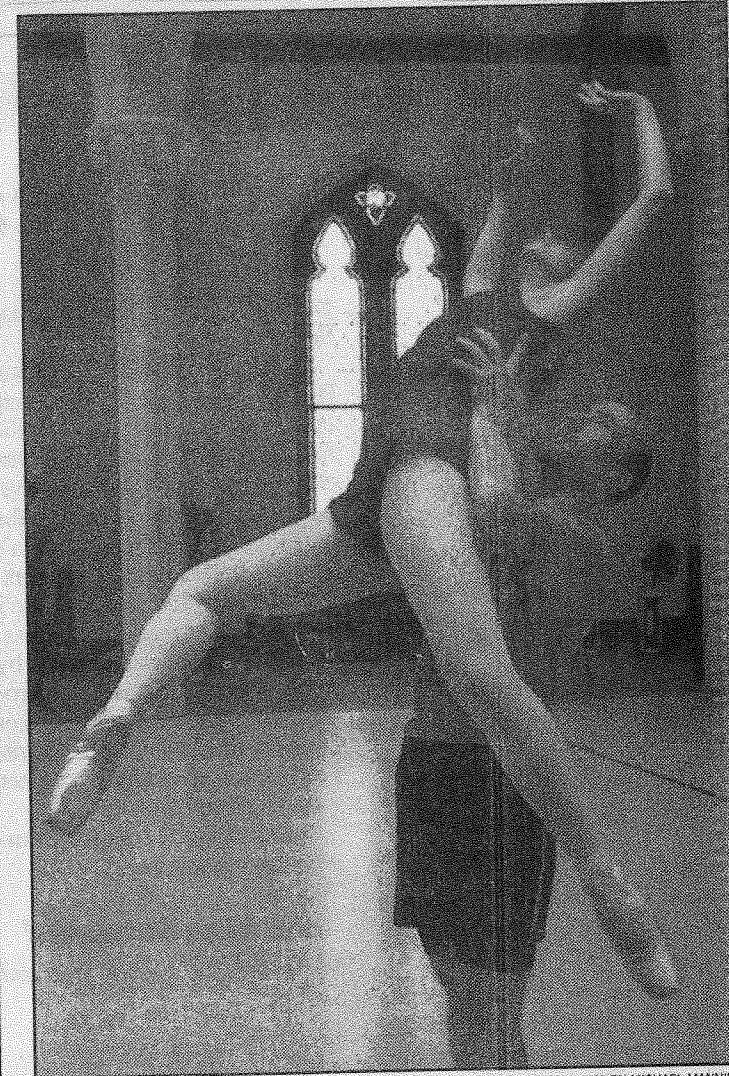
"Our priority is really the vi-

sual element, the dancers, the athleticism and the aestheticism," Mateo said.

And for audience members who want a particularly special night at the theatre, in the opener's final weekend, on Nov. 2, the group will present a wine-tasting fundraiser. With each of the four pieces, audience members will get to sample four gourmet wines, each chosen to accompany the music.

Dancin'

The Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre has nine performances for its opening show. The show begins this Friday and will run through the first weekend in November. Tickets are \$28 per person, and if you want to go to the fundraiser on Nov. 2 with wine tasting, the tickets are \$100 per person. For more information, visit www.btb.org or call 617-354-7467.



STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL MANNING

Dancers from the Jose Mateo Dance Theatre practice for the opener of their 17th season, which begins this weekend in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square.