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With Jose Mateo's skill, site, dancers are in good company

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

Forty years — far longer than most dancers' careers — is the length of the lease Jose Mateo has on the Sanctuary Theatre in Harvard Square's Old Cambridge Baptist Church, where his troupe has performed for two seasons.

That lease reflects a continuity enjoyed by few dance groups, especially in America.

In the current program, four works by Mateo, the company of 16 looks at home in the space, which has been spiffed up with a new, dark-toned dance floor and a large curtain at the back of the stage. Both set off the dancers, giving them more presence. The Gothic arches that once marked the bays in the church's nave have been restored and repainted. The audience sits at tables arranged on tiers that ensure good sightlines as well as intimate — and unusual — contact with the performers: You're slightly above them.

Mateo's choreography for this program is billed as "site-specific." It fills the large stage space so you notice its depth — Mateo uses diagonals to emphasize just that

— and reorients dancers trained to perform in an opera-house setting rather than this venue, which is closer to a cabaret.

The company operates as a cohesive ensemble; the dancers are listed alphabetically. There are standouts, including Meg Flaherty, who has been with Mateo since 1990, and Marcos Medina, who joined just this year. Mateo has taught — or retaught — his dancers to move without posing, to go through the steps so you're not aware of them individually.

Mateo likes great romantic scores but resists turning them into mush. They're all recorded, for now. But during the intermissions, Rosalie Hoffman-Goumas plays Chopin and Schumann on the piano, and you think how delightful it might be if Mateo wanted to choreograph to scores that required one to four musicians who could be on the scene, playing live.

Two works on this excellent program — "Oceanid," set to Mendelssohn's "Hebrides Overture," and "Back to Bach," set to the Bach Piano Concerto in G Minor — are premieres. The other two are fairly fresh: the 2001 "All in Passing," to the andante of

MATEO, Page B10

Mateo moves with four fresh works

► MATEO

Continued from Page B7

Beethoven's "Pastorale" symphony, and "Still Waters," set to Debussy's "Sirenes."

"All in Passing" takes place in a paradise populated by untroubled souls. It's tender and joyful, the delicate interludes ending with a lone woman, Elizabeth Scherban Shinzawa, onstage, folding her arms as if she's causing the sun to set.

Both "Still Waters" and "Oceanid" have aquatic connotations. "Oceanid" is dark and troubled. In "Still Waters," Flaherty commands a battalion of women clad in watery colors and shimmering en

Then, Here & Now

Performed by Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre
At: the Sanctuary Theatre in Harvard Square,
Cambridge, Friday through yesterday

pointe. Men enter. Couples form; there's a thrilling moment when a man lifts Flaherty high overhead, turning her into a great sail. The women enchant the men, who end up on the floor. The final gesture is Flaherty's lifting the hand of one of them. Like the supernatural females of 19th-century ballet, this sisterhood has conquered its male prey.

The Bach piece opens with women on the floor. They rise to perform stark, basic gestures. Men join them in impetuous duets. Like Balanchine's "Serenade," "Back to Bach" offers the essence of a move.