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Mateo mixes premieres, past work

Dance by Theodore Bale
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For choreographer and artistic director Jose Mateo, process is just as essential as product, maybe even more so. Though he has plenty of ideas for new ballets, Mateo has continued to resist falling prey to what Mark Morris once called "masterpiece syndrome," namely, feeling pressured to make each new dance bigger and better than the last one.

Mateo is featuring two premieres in his new show, "Then, Here & Now," which opens tonight at the Sanctuary Theatre in Harvard Square. When he spoke with the Herald during a rehearsal break last weekend, though, Mateo was most excited about what he considers the greater accomplishment - further development of his distinctive style within the classical ballet vocabulary.

Two years ago, when he moved his ballet company to Cambridge, Mateo entered into a particularly prolific period of dance making. "Then, Here & Now" is the fourth installment in a series of programs that began with "Resurgence" in 2000, followed by "Hallowed Dances" in 2001 and the remarkable "From Worlds Within" earlier this year.

The programs have offered fans a unique opportunity to see a repertory of contemporary ballets (which now exceeds 40 works) as it continues to unfold and widen, as well as the chance to watch certain of Mateo's "stars" (dancers such as Meg Flaherty, Elizabeth Scherban, Matthew White and Nathan Cottam) tackle a variety of original roles.

"I think we are one of the few companies that train and choreograph together," said Mateo. "It's not as though we bring in a ballet master to do the training, someone else to set the ballet, and then perhaps the ballet is choreographed by yet another person. I think that's what contributes so much to the lack of identity or any distinct style in so many ballet companies today."

With his carefully considered sentences and secure wisdom, there's something of the Zen master about Mateo. Even though he agreed that certain dancers have emerged within the group, when I referred to some of them as his "corps de ballet," he gently corrected me, saying there was no such thing in his company.

"We don't list them as such," said Mateo. "When you have a company of 16 dancers, you want to be able to incorporate them in any number of different ways. By eliminating those kinds of distinctions, which really belong to an older order, when things were more hierarchical not just in ballet but in the world in general, you create a better camaraderie among the dancers and there is a much stronger level of cooperation in terms of arriving at an understanding of what those common denominators are that ultimately make for a more distinctive style."

The first of Mateo's premieres is set to Bach's G minor Piano Concerto, a three-movement composition that the choreographer has, in his own words, "bridged into one long piece."

"There's no story line at all to it," said Mateo, "though every segment would suggest that there is. I don't think it begs any explanation as you're watching it. It's really a beautiful piece of music that lends itself well to both allegro and adage movement."

In addition to his "Still Waters" (set to a nocturne by Debussy) and "All in Passing" (to Beethoven's Sixth Symphony), Mateo will present a second premiere choreographed to Mendelssohn's musical landscape "The Hebrides."

"Some of the imagery it provokes is very much like the Debussy, since it's also about the ocean, but I'm always looking not to be literal," Mateo said.

"There's a formality that may be reminiscent of the court ballets of the past, but the manners of the dancers are not affected court or period. It's also based on what I would like to think of as the ballet vocabulary in its most natural form."

Nine performances of "Then, Here & Now" will be presented through Nov. 3. Tickets: \$28. Call 617-354-7467.