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Evan Richman for The New York Times

José Mateo, artistic director of his ballet theater company, rehearsing this season's performance of "The Nutcracker."

A Choreographer Builds From the Dancers on Up

By SUSAN DIESENHOUSE

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., Dec. 31 — A young ballet institution on the rise here offers a bright counterpoint to the retrenchment of classical dance elsewhere around the country. Over the last 15 years, fed by the elegant choreography of its artistic director José Mateo's Ballet Theater has cultivated a distinctive ballet style, a critically acclaimed repertory of original work, a school and 20-member company. With performances of this season's "Nutcracker," which ended on Sunday, the troupe has opened this erudite city's first home for professional ballet, the city historian, Charles M. Sullivan, said.

Last year the company signed a 20-year lease and moved into the Old Cambridge Baptist Church at Harvard Square, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It began interior renovation, most notably building a grand studio with a custom-made, sprung-wood floor. This year it buttressed the basement to install a theater with 250 raked seats. But much more than a building, José Mateo's Ballet Theater, which recently reached a \$1.2 million-a-year budget, is an emerging dance institution nourished by its own style of movement, choreography and pedagogy, created by Mr. Mateo.

"Now that Ballet Theater has a home, José can institutionalize his work," said Bruce Marks, the artistic director of Boston Ballet from 1986 to 1993, who transformed that endangered company into a major dance presence. "A wonderful choreographic talent with his own neo-classical look and movement that surprises, we're likely to see a lot of innovative work coming from him," added Mr. Marks, now an arts consultant. He credits Mr. Mateo's scholarships, ticket subsidies and school performances with leading him to start City Dance, Boston Ballet's community outreach program. Iris Fanger, arts critic, historian and contributor to Dance Magazine said, "There's an elegance to José Mateo's choreography, which displays respect for ballet technique and the fluidity of contemporary ideas." While much current new ballet is underchoreographed and derivative, she added, "his work fills the space and is musical, intuitive and intelligent." She continued, "Rather than imposing his vision, he choreographs from the dancer up and is a superb teacher."

"Amid the dearth of new classical choreography," said Christine Temin, arts critic for The Boston Globe, "he produces humanistic pieces with wonderfully patterned corps work. He's very skilled at quasi-abstract ballets that imply but don't spell out a narrative concept except for his 'Nutcracker,' which is charming and stresses dance over mime." She said: "He's bred a generation of teachers who've built the finest open enrollment school in the region."

One student, Wendy Shinzawa, 16, has studied with Mr. Mateo for 10 years but has spent summers at American Ballet Theater, the Kirov Academy in Washington and Pittsburgh Ballet. "It seems that Mr. Mateo really knows what his ideas are," she said. "The other teachers are good, but all say the same thing. At A.B.T. they set a piece of choreography on us, but compared to José's it was really boring, so symmetrical. With José there's always a twist that makes it more interesting to do and to watch. Plus he can choreograph on you. If you can't do this, it's O.K., try that. But he still keeps his idea, and he has a sense of humor."

But since "he's the only one running things," she added, "sometimes little details get lost."

Ms. Fanger concurred. "José raises money, designs his space, brings in master teachers." Most critics also agree that at times limited financial and physical resources have led to an uneven caliber of dancer from enraptured to raw.

But Mr. Mateo is on a mission, that's immeasurably enhanced by having his own home and performance space. "To fulfill the artistic objective it's necessary to have systematic training, a movement style with integrity and integrated choreography," he said. "I want to train a thinking dancer, more than a cold pyrotechnical instrument whose persona swings from bravura to aloof and who mechanically articulates someone else's idea. I hope our new space will draw athletic virtuosos."

Humanistic pieces that feature patterned corps work.

willing to be artistically, dramatically and psychologically involved in collaborative choreography so the inner dynamics of the dancer's mind provides the springboard motivating the movement."

Mr. Mateo's parents were working-class Cuban emigres. As a sixth grader at Public School 150 in the Bronx, he was "blown away" by the first Broadway musical he saw and the next year started to study music. Later, as a Miami high school student, he mastered popular teenage dances like the Phillie Dog and Sing-a-ling. As an art history student at Princeton University he began formal dance training with Ze'eva Cohen. There he performed in musicals and dance concerts. Back in New York during the 1970's dance boom, he continued to study ballet and modern dance while performing with Ballet Hispanico, Princeton Ballet, Youngstown Ballet and others.

In 1981, finding dissonance between his delight with ballet's broad ranging movement and comfort with modern's search for artistic essence, he moved to Boston to pursue a master's degree in art history. He worked at the Fogg Art Museum and took a side job teaching ballet. Agam, captivated by dance, in 1986 he founded his dance troupe.

Through good times and bad (from 1998 through 2000 he suspended repertory concerts to raise money and reorganize) he has been training children and adults. Some students have joined his company and others teach at the school or dance with companies like the New York City Ballet, Paul Taylor Dance Company, Mark Morris Dance Group and North Carolina Dance Theater.

In the future he plans to have five performances a year, up from three, start training workshops for professionals, and develop a summer dance program with performances that include company members.

But until Sunday Mr. Mateo had another distraction. Beside his usual duties as choreographer, teacher, artistic director, costume designer and public ambassador, he appeared in "The Nutcracker" as Drosselmeyer, the magician who invites the heroine on a flight of fantasy. Hardly a burden, said Ms. Fanger, "For José Mateo, it's the icing on the cake."