

Weekend

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Branching out with ballet

Mateo presents new works in 'Then, Here & Now'

You'd have to be a bit of a maverick – like Jose Mateo – to take on the task of competing with the much older and larger Boston Ballet in a city where resources for dance are limited, compared to prominent support for classical music and the fine arts.

More than a decade ago, Mateo dared to take on the Boston Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker" – one of the largest in the nation – by opening his production down the street from the Wang Theater. The gamble paid off: His more intimate retelling of the Christmas story has gathered a loyal legion of fans throughout the years.

Last weekend, Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre opened its 17th season of performances in the Boston area with a program of four works by Mateo called "Then, Here & Now."

The company drew a full house to its preview performance at its own Sanctuary Theater, built on



GARY SLOAN photo

Meg Flaherty and Nathan Cottam in "Still Waters," a piece in "Then, Here & Now."

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Then, Here & Now' at Sanctuary Theater

BALLET

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main floor of the company's home in the Old Cambridge Baptist Church at Harvard Square.

A theatrical grid of draperies and lighting has been constructed high in the Gothic arches of the central space. The walls are newly painted and tables and chairs are placed cabaret-style.

The informal theater seats 80-100 people, who can purchase drinks while watching the performance. "Then, Here & Now" consists of abstract ballets, all choreographed by Jose Mateo, including two premieres, "Oceanid" ("The Hebrides Overture" by Felix Mendelssohn) and "Back To Bach" ("Piano Concerto in G Minor" by J.S. Bach).

"Oceanid" is romantic in feeling, a reminder of the 19th century's love of the sea. Led by Laura Villanuevas and Florian Eckhardt, the movement suggests the ebb and flow of the tides in the horizontal entrances and exits that alternate with swirls of movement as if a whirlpool had descended suddenly in the midst of the sea.

"Back to Bach" is a more structured work with precisely ordered movement. It was crisply performed by Amberly Swihart and Nathan Gramam, backed by the rest of the company.

Greg Flaherty-Griffith, who joined the company in 1990, also partnered with Cottam, and Elizabeth Scherbanizawa, a company member since 1995, who danced with Marcos Molina, led the other two ballets: "All Passing," set to music by Ludwig Beethoven and "Still Waters" to music by Claude Debussy.

Although the style that Mateo employs in his works looks like classical ballet, he has widened the vocabulary to include references to modern dance technique.

"The training allows these dancers to move differently," Mateo said. "It's more evenly elongated in line. We cover the ground with more of an emphasis on movement, less on leg and more speed.

We also have respect for the



Company dancers in "Still Water," a piece in Jose Mateo's Ballet Theatre's "Then, Here & Now"

DANCE REVIEW

THEN, HERE & NOW

JOSE MATEO'S BALLET THEATRE, at The Sanctuary Theater, Harvard Square, through Nov. 23. Tickets \$28. Call 617-354-7467.

movement developed by the 20th-century moderns: Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins and Doris Humphrey, and more emphasis on the weight of the body."

A year ago, Mateo transferred his highly praised production of "The Nutcracker" from the Emerson Majestic Theater to the performing space in the church after the downtown theater closed for renovations. The Sanctuary Theater in Cambridge will be reconfigured for Mateo's 15th annual production of "The Nutcracker," running Nov. 29-Dec. 29. It will become a traditional performance space holding up to 280 seats.

"We were doing well in attendance downtown but the economics were very difficult," Mateo said.

Mateo, who was born in Cuba and

came to the United States with his family at age 5, did not start dancing until his undergraduate years at Princeton University.

After studying in New York and performing with several small companies touring the United States and Europe, he opened a studio in Boston in 1985. He has also established a branch of his school in Duxbury.

At the same time, he began creating a repertory of his own ballets, chiefly to classical music. His company of 11 women and five men is the only Boston-based troupe with a repertory by a single choreographer.

Mateo's company and school moved studios into the historic church three years ago, after his board raised more than \$700,000 to pay expenses for renovating the property.

Although Mateo's organization has taken a 40-year lease on the church, congregants still use the space for

worship on Sundays and other non-profits have offices downstairs.

Mateo's presentations at the Sanctuary Theater offer an accessible way for people who have never been exposed to ballet.

"The people who come to our performances get a close-up look at the dancers and the ballets," he said. "The company is getting stronger and so are our production values.

"We do classical ballets for contemporary audiences," Mateo said. "It's definitely a new classicism."

- IRIS FANGER

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