

An appreciation of José Mateo's New Classicism

By Keith Powers, Correspondent

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At a climax in José Mateo's last ballet, "New Pasts," dancer Angie DeWolf exited slowly through a doorway at the back of the stage. The spotlight faded out.

You thought, "No, this can't be the end. That's much too sad."

Thankfully, that wasn't the end. Mateo's troupe returned to the stage for an energetic ensemble finale, and then the curtain finally fell. It was an appropriate comment on Mateo's retirement - an ending to one thing, but the continuation of others.

José Mateo Ballet Theatre, created 32 years ago by the Cuban-born dancer turned choreographer, will no longer present his original works. Mateo will continue with his other projects - his vast teaching programs in Cambridge and Dorchester, his seasonal "Nutcracker" performances, his enormous movement and social outreach event, Dance for World Community.

But his choreography - now numbering hundreds of concert dances in his New Classical style - will no longer be performed.

Mateo and his longtime life and artistic partner - José Mateo Ballet Theatre's managing director Scott Fraser - will hardly be retiring in leisure to their Cape Ann home in Annisquam. The energy and creative enthusiasm that allowed them to support a troupe, establish schools, develop programs for nontraditional audiences, and build the massive one-day "Dance for World Community" into a life-affirming event, knitting together the arts and the social programs - those will never be "retired."

The choreography will be missed. It's hard to have a perspective on what Mateo really has accomplished. The broader dance world has two successful models: one is the small, constantly touring modern dance troupe; the other, major city ballet companies, like Boston Ballet.

Companies like JMBT, presenting new ballets by one choreographer, just don't exist anymore. Which makes this ending all the more historic, and this three-decade run of new work all the more important.

Mateo's New Classicism defies trends in choreography - and not just by working in ballet instead of modern dance. Contemporary choreographers create dances with identifiable signatures: dance lovers easily recognize Cunningham, Lang, Ailey, Tharp and others, from signature gestures and movement. Mateo almost never did that.

But his style never looked like it was taken from from a ballet textbook, either. He once said he thinks of his choreography as "incorporating 50 years of modern dance into ballet vocabulary." Mateo's ballets looked natural, organic and controlled - hardly ever virtuosic, demanding on the dancers or gymnastic. "More fluid, graceful, safer on the body," he has said.

And then there's the music. The appropriateness of Mateo's movement has always been most visible in the appropriateness of his musical settings. His Bach feels like Bach, danced; so, too, his Schnittke, his Ginastera, his Schubert, his Górecki. Mateo's music came from all eras, and his choreographic interpretations came from all directions.

That he chose to set his final premiere from young Bulgarian composer, Dobrinka Tabakova - whose "Suite in Old Style" sounded at times like Bach, at times like Nino Rota, at times like a gypsy fiddler had wandered into the room - says remarkable things about looking toward the past, and anticipating the future.

That appropriateness extended outward to the José Ballet Theatre experience. His intention was to create an intimate moment - a close understanding of the music through dance, and a close understanding of the dancers for the audience. His Harvard Square Sanctuary Theatre - could there be a more appropriately named venue? - kept audiences on the stage level, at café tables, sitting close together, to experience the performances.

Dance can be inherently voyeuristic: a remote audience, peering intently at physically gifted, attractive dancers in athletic movement. Mateo's dancers - far from the most physically talented troupe, but all invested artists - worked inches away from the audiences that admired them. This was never a "great artistry, lofty and imperious" experience; these were genuine artists, working in new ideas, guided by a special genius, bringing it all lovingly to appreciative viewers.

It is a sad event for those audiences, and for his dancers - most of whom were weeping onstage at the conclusion of Sunday's final performance - that the three-decade glory of new choreography has come to an end. Dancers and audiences who have experienced 32 years of José Mateo's work, and those who will continue to experience his egoless efforts as a socially concerned artist, can try to find an appreciation that transcends that sadness.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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