Fringes on his underpants, pain in his heart

Dance 24/5/00

Montana's Winter
JAVIER DE FRUTOS, QEH

THERE are few things so bleak to be seen on stage as Javier de Frutos's dances. He is a poet of blood and loneliness, of agonising sexual relationships where violence and narcissism go hand in hand, and where tenderness is sought but rarely found.

His naked, sometimes blood-soaked characters are tough to watch but engrossing all the same, with touches of Lorca and Goya — homosexuals whose fantasies about love lurch into vicious, man-made hells, man flayed to his most base instincts. It's a risky area for an Arts Council-supported artist to explore, but at his best, de Frutos rides the line between audience fascination and disgust like a champion, dropping universal resonances prolifically along his path.

His latest piece, *Montana's Winter*, is a two-act dance on American themes, with his typical hallmarks — transvestism and machismo, cabaret and Catholicism, posturing and inner agony. Act 1 is subtitled *Affliction of Loneliness*, and shows him alone, a cowboy in a big stetson, with a jokey taste in underwear. The fringes normally found on the jacket are here on his underpants, long, white and silky, reaching down to his knees under his shirt.

For 25 minutes he gyrates and twitches his hips, making the tassels swing, his face a mask of unhappiness, while through the speakers comes the unyielding, incoherent babble of a Texan cattle auctioneer. Playing the rhythms and changes of vocal pitch like a musician, he judders around his little square room with its sad, undecorated Christmas tree in the corner.

At first he's a lonely, ridiculous man escaping to some fantasy of being in cabaret, you think; but then his tremors begin to look obsessive, dysfunctional — he flutters his shirt like a matador, yet can barely manage to hang the shirt on a chair. He claps the hat back on his head the moment he has finally, painfully, decided to remove it. His bobbing half-curtsies to an unseen audience provoke one to laugh uneasily.

In Act 2, *Mazatlan*, the speakers play the cabaret song he was probably humming to himself: a catechism of imperfections ("If my face was thinner, if my legs were longer, if my bust was smaller"). In the dim light there appears to be a huge centipede, actually a sitting conga of six men and women whose limbs float up in soft Mexican waves like a marine creature wafted by an undercurrent, or bodies caught up in billows of emotion.

Fragments of this conga return in the hectic crowd that follows, where men and women constantly show each other their sexual organs, pulling down trousers, pulling up vests — but are they inviting congress or comparison? Tennessee Williams's old, hoarse voice is heard lamenting his absent father, and pale Jamie Watton seems to embody this waiting, powerful figure, a last judge.

In the end Watton strips his chosen mate naked and daubs his entire body with blood, before marching him gently away. Horrific or heroic? Troublingly, it's both.

At the Lowry, Salford (0161 876 2000) tonight and the Arnolfini, Bristol (0117 9 9191) Friday and Saturday

Ismene Brown