In life, fish fingers, in death, encomia

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Dance

Jeremy James memorial concert
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IN DEATH, Jeremy James had all that a rising young choreographer could desire. A celebration of his work, a major venue, a full house, a large company, with funders, critics, the public, all out in force — and a pot of ticket money at the end to do something with. This is the irony of dying young, and it's even more savage in the impecunious, obstacle-strewn life of an independent choreographer, one of the most-poorly rewarded careers that anyone could take up. In death, encomia; in life, fish fingers.

Jeremy James died of an overdose last year at 38. He was, as I say, on the rise rather than at his peak. His creative career was only a few years old, but his special gifts were noted and loved by the entire British modern dance world. Hence the lustrous turn-out at this memorial concert, remarked upon sadly by one of James's greatest champions, the choreographer Siobhan Davies, in a touching speech.

They called the concert *The Last Fish Finger*, a title discovered among James's notes, and no more baffling than any of his other titles. Six of his dances were given: *Gaps, Lapse and Relapse*, danced very well by Rambert, for whom it was made; *Scag*, *Minty*, *Cheese*, *Parts* and *More Curly*, made for his own company. The pieces were created close in time. *En masse* they look too alike to make a fulfilling evening, but the evolution of an unusually distinctive imagination was there to see.

A film of James dancing *Scag*, a 1993 solo, defined a restless, driven mind at work inside a body capable of the controlled lines of his early ballet career. The upper torso and arms fidgeted, jerked, snatched sudden angles out of the air, hunched against invisible borders, while the legs moved almost subconsciously in big, lithe, solid phrases.

The group pieces scratch away around the same patch. Unisex dancers in big combat pants move calculatedly round each other like pieces on a chessboard. There are usually five of them, an unsymmetrical, disturbing number even when very strictly organised. The fragility of the little community is intensified by the head-banging club music that James liked. *Cheese*, his last piece, had dancers in homespun, red-striped woollies, and an acrid band called Third Core on stage. Their violently loud noises highlighted the diddly inertia of the dance.

More vivid were the two with scores by Matteo Fargion (a most inventive dance composer). *Minty* and *Parts* showed appealing signs of James unbuttoning a lyrical, more emotional imagination. As a choreographer he had the mechanics all right; the tragedy is that, to a viewer, the meaning seemed ready to flow in his art just when for him there was no meaning worth living for.

I hope that his dances will still be performed, though it will be difficult, without him present, to recapture that austere, hair-shirt quality of his best. The memorial fund will help a mature choreographer in 2002 to take off time for creative thinking, in order to prepare new ideas; it's a necessary, sensitive memorial.

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