

Dance

Weak Dance Strong Questions

ICA, London

★★★★☆

How much can you strip away from a dance performance and still make it count as dance? It's an issue that minimalist choreographers have been probing ever since the 1960s, and it's one that Jonathan Burrows addresses with peculiar doggedness in his latest piece, *Weak Dance Strong Questions*.

Made and performed in collaboration with Dutch theatre director Jan Ritsema, the feel of this show is less like dance than two middle-aged guys mooching around a garden shed. There is no music, no theatre lighting and virtually no stage — the small audience sits around on a few stacking chairs.

And the choreography itself offers no story, no discernible structure and absolutely no virtuoso gloss. As the title suggests, this is dance premised on uncertainty and on failing strength.

As Burrows and Ritsema circle round each other, every phrase they dance seems to abort before it achieves its point — as if their bodies aren't up to the task of full utterance. Knees buckle, backs slouch, ankles cave and sudden emphatic gestures waver into thin air.

It's almost impossible to know whether the piece is improvised or not, for there's no obvious development of the material and no formal linking between the two performers.

And yet for the first 20 minutes or so, this duet is oddly compelling. One of the tasks that 20th-century dance set for itself was to discover a language for charting the silent, secret fluctuations of our inner lives — the subtle sensations, the small flurries of emotion that raise our pulses or tug at our guts, but which we barely attend to, let alone speak of.

In the peculiarly intimate, questioning, middle-aged moves of *Weak Dance*, we feel under our skin what it's like to be inside the minds and bodies of men aged 41 and 56. It's as if the silences in a Beckett or a Pinter play were allowed to dance.

The problem for an audience, though, is that the piece delivers nothing significantly new in its final 30 minutes. Amiable and clever as these two men are, it's as if their conversation gets stuck into a groove so personal the rest of us can't follow. We're not unhappy to be present, but we're not that excited either.

Burrows and Ritsema have undertaken interesting and necessary research into the

fringes of dance expression, and have shown what truths can be told when the spotlight of virtuosity is turned right down.

But they have knowingly, and I guess cheerfully, put themselves beyond most people's idea of a good night out at the theatre.

Judith Mackrell

Classical

BBCSO/Saraste

Barbican Hall, London

★★★★☆

The BBC Symphony Orchestra launched its new season with a compelling programme calling for huge forces. It was a shame that the hall was less tightly packed than the stage — because the BBCSO was on excellent form.

Proof came in Suite No 2 from Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*, a work gloriously evocative of a glittering, mythical world, brought vividly to life under Finnish conductor Jukka-Pekka Saraste. The music undulated and exploded into flashes of blinding light and, whenever it seemed that the players had reached the limit of one of Saraste's well-timed crescendos, still more came.

The brass fanfare, written by Dukas for his ballet *La Péri*, had made a celebratory opening. Next it was the strings, giving the London premiere of *Acintyas* by Swedish composer Jan Sandström. There were some striking sounds (glassy-toned, sliding violins, aggressive solo outbursts, gently pulsating bass notes) but not enough to sustain the work over its 15 minutes.

Stravinsky didn't intend *Oedipus Rex* to be immediately comprehensible. Before he set Jean Cocteau's text, he had it translated into Latin. But he did provide a narration. The English translation of this, by ee cummings, was delivered lucidly by Fiona Shaw; it was unfortunate that the spontaneity of her speeches was belied by their being printed in the programme.

Thomas Randle was a luxurious late replacement for Kim Begley in the title role. When seated on stage, he and Susan Bickley (*Jocasta*) couldn't have looked more different, she staring beatifically ahead, he fidgeting like a naughty schoolboy. But their gripping, well-sung performances complemented each other perfectly.

Although he occasionally let the orchestra drown out the singers, Saraste gave the louder passages punch, and mellowed his taut conducting to bring out the lyricism. A devastating performance.

Erica Jeal

**Guardian
Unlimited**

Read all this week's arts
news and reviews at
guardian.co.uk/arts