

Choreographing In the Face of Death

By DIANE SOLWAY

EDWARD STIERLE, THE Joffrey Ballet's most daring virtuoso dancer and a fledgling choreographer, died on March 8 at the age of 23, just three days after the world premiere of his ballet "Empyrean Dances." Mr. Stierle had been ill with AIDS for three months prior to the Joffrey's just-concluded season at the New York State Theater. Though he had grown progressively debilitated, he somehow found the creative energy to fully realize the new work, a 22-minute ballet for 18 dancers.

Indeed, it was during the period when his health began to ebb that Mr. Stierle made the taxing transition from dancer to choreographer.

"His is a stunning talent," wrote Anna Kisselgoff, chief dance critic for The New York Times, in her review of "Empyrean Dances," adding that the work was "a rarity, a visionary ballet, and the vision of the Empyrean or highest heaven that Milton extolled is translated by Mr. Stierle into a burning onrush of hope."

Mr. Stierle became so obsessed with the creation of this ballet that it led him to neglect his health. Even after he had tested HIV-positive for the AIDS virus in 1987, he continued to dance at full throttle; later, he threw himself into the making of "Empyrean Dances," spending long hours outside the rehearsal studio devising and tinkering with the elaborate drawings he made as a blueprint for his ballet. That determination characterized the whole of Mr. Stierle's brief career and, while singular in its expression, exemplifies the creative fervor that drives all artistic endeavor.



Bill Cunningham

Mr. Stierle accepting a prize, three days before he died.