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By Michael Crabb-Special To The Star

Gillis may indeed be modern Duncan

It's almost 20 years since Margie Gillis began her career as a solo dancer. She's toured the world several times, brought audiences to the verge of tears and ecstasy and, in the ultimate critical accolade, been hailed as the Isadora Duncan of the late 20th century.

This week, Gillis is back in Toronto, proving, as she did last night to a packed Premiere Dance Theatre, that the passing years have not lessened her power to move audiences.

Gillis may indeed be the modern Duncan. Variations, the opening dance on last night's seven-part program, with its luxuriant gestures, skipping steps and heroic shifting of body weight seems an almost intentional reference to the great American dance pioneer. Yet, technically and emotionally, Gillis explores territory that is entirely her own.

Her body is solid and athletic. It can move with lyrical grace or explode into spurts of fury. Her emotions are blazing in their intensity.

Landscape, the solo Gillis performed on Tuesday night at the Dancers For Life AIDS benefit and which reappears on her Harbourfront Centre programs, is typical of the way Gillis now measures out her physical power and distils her emotions. It is so poetic in its concentration that at times it's almost unbearable to watch.

Landscape, set to elegiac string music by Grieg, was created for Margie Gillis by her brother Christopher, almost his last act before dying of an AIDS-related illness in August, 1993. It is his testament to the agony of dying and now it is Margie Gillis' testament to his memory. But it goes beyond personal history. The grieving woman we see dragging a broken branch is a universal statement of despair. Her movements are often tiny, disjointed, directionless.

Landscape could easily become mawkish but like everything Margie Gillis dances it is kept pure in its emotions by the honesty and simplicity of her performance. The Gillis of today, mature and seasoned, is more than a dancer. She has become, as Duncan did before, a living embodiment of spiritual values.