

For Talented Margie Gillis, life's an emotional dance

She's all woman, Margie Gillis, and whether she's dancing her own choreography or somebody else's, that's what she's dancing about.

She's all artist, too. That was abundantly clear Friday night in the Soreng Theatre at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts when the Canadian dancer swirled, tumbled and swooped her way through seven dances that unveiled the many facets of a woman's emotional life.

Gillis, who has a buxom, wide-hipped body and an abundance of long red hair that she sometimes uses as an extra limb, is a generous performer, welcoming audience members into her mind, her heart and her space.

"Mara," which was choreographed by Stephanie Ballard in 1989 to the music of Camille Saint-Saens, is a dancing miracle. The curtain rises to reveal Gillis apparently levitated above the stage, the folds of her skirted costume draped on the floor.

She is in fact on a pedestal, but not for long. Using the considerable yardage of the costume - designed by the choreographer - and that extraordinary shaft of red hair to augment the shape of the movement as Martha Graham and Loie Fuller have done in the past. Gillis is soon off the pedestal, grounded and rolling and back-flipping around the stage.

Gillis is not the first flush of youth - the Hult Center performances are part of her 20th anniversary tour - and she doesn't do a lot of jumping. Nevertheless, her strength, control and command of her form, basically traditional modern, make her a riveting performer.

In "The Little Animal," a short solo that Gillis made in 1986, she dances in a white leotard, becoming a tight little ball on the floor, crawling, her hands curved like paws, a primal creature not too long ago emerged from the slime.

Gillis and former Paul Taylor Company dancer Joao Mauricio did "Ver La Glace," the only duet on the program. It's not only an expression of a disintegrating relationship but an exploration of contemporary partnering as well.

Here the man and the woman are equal in anguish expressed through lifts - Gillis lifting Mauricio as much as he lifts her - and through small movements as he grasps her foot, she grasps his neck and they seeing each other around.

Gillis created the piece in 1986 in collaboration with her brother, Christopher, and choreographer James Kudelka. It's a poignant, patterned exercise in form as well as emotional distance and pain.

At the end of his much too short life, Christopher Gillis made for his sister a piece called "Landscape," which had its New York premiere last season.

Danced to the stark, emotionally laden music of Edward Grief - with a set consisting of clouds projected on a backdrop and a dead tree branch - the piece radiates the pain of unacceptable loss and grief.

In a tattered housedress, Gillis makes small, withdrawn movements, every jerk of her arms and twitch of her torso a whimper of grief. Like her dress, she is torn apart, horror stricken, out of her mind, her fingers splayed, her eyes staring. There is no rage, just quiet agony and no resolution, as in the end, she ties a piece of cloth to a branch and limps off the stage, crippled by sorrow and loss.

All is not agonizing in this concert, however. Both the opening and closing pieces, danced to music by Johann Sabastian Bach, have considerable playfulness, and Gillis takes joy from the music and the movement and gives it to the audience.

In every piece, she proves herself an extremely musical dancer, with very eclectic taste. "Torn Roots, Broken Branches," a new piece, was danced to the pop singing of Sinead O'Connor with Gillis in an incredible black velvet hat and what looked like a 19th century woman's riding habit. The result was surrealistic, like the paintings of Rene Magritte.

Martha Ullman West of Portland is a free-lance dance critic.