

## Gillis is Sublime

MONTREAL - There was an excited hush among the people who arrived early at the Theatre Maisonneuve in Place des Arts in Montreal last Thursday.

Montreal's own favorite daughter, dancer Margie Gillis, was celebrating two decades of dance, and it was an event that simply couldn't be missed from a nationalistic standpoint.

Gillis, who is known for her charismatic style as well as her hip-length, Titian tresses, is a phenomenal artist.

A friend remarked during intermission that the breadth of Gillis's work embraces ballet, modern dance, orchestral music, theatre, poetry and moving song, but it is neither of those, all and something quite separate.

We were buffeted in Gillis's storm as she whirled onstage in her voluminous, flowing apparel. She was the catalyst resonating aliveness, prompting everything in her sphere to move, move, move, from the scarlet ribbon in her hair in "Extraits de The Stolen Child," to white, nautical ropes and stage-length white ribbon reflecting silver-blue light in "The Farewell." It was pure, lyrical Gillis.

Everything seemed larger than life, more vibrant, more transcendental as Gillis spiraled her way through the program.

In "Torn Root, Broken Branches," a piece she choreographed, Gillis stood, at first, like a sentinel in dark red light. She wore a black slouch hat, a severe black jacket above a flowing skirt, and of course, she was barefoot.

When she later discarded both the hat and the jacket, I became aware of the translucence of her skin, of the strength of her back as her muscles rippled, before she twirled into yellow light fading to black.

Strength is something that runs in Gillis's family. Her mother is one of the famous Wurtle twins of Montreal, and both she and Gillis's father were Olympic skiers. Her youngest brother, Jere, plays professional hockey and her sister, Nancy, is a prize-winning freestyle skier.

Gillis and Joao Mauricio performed "Ne Me Quitte Pas," which was choreographed by her brother, Christopher, who was her first dance partner when she was 3 and principal dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company before he died of AIDS. The work explored the great joy and great sadness of lovers who finally part.

With Paola Styron, daughter of author William Styron, Gillis performed "The Heaven I Cannot See," a dark pieced echoed with Henry Purcell, Gustav Mahler and mezzo-soprano Jessye Norman.

Styron and Gillis moved though the piece as if a veil separated Gillis of this world and Styron of the spirit world. The piece began interestingly enough. Gillis stood at center stage, undulating her arms like the Hindu Shakti, Shiva's consort. Styron knelt behind her, but all you could see was Styron's arms mirroring the same wave-like motion. The other-worldness of the image was simply explosive, and it a the thread throughout the work.

"Mara," which was choreographed by Stephanie Ballard was the most ethereal work Gillis performed. Perched on a basalt-like dais, Gillis appeared an Amazon, a Titan. The 20-foot illusion was riveting especially when she turned on the dais and twisted and retwisted the yards upon yards of charcoal-black material of her dress that cascaded to the stage.

When she descended to the floor, Gillis explored a horizontal-dance plane by doing somersaults and kicks that were accentuated by the billowing material.

A poet from New York City, who had seen Gillis perform many times, sat on my left. At certain points when Gillis meandered between silences, the poet inhaled quickly and expelled her breath with an appreciative sigh.

As Gillis walked beneath the suspended large, white ribbon into the "light" in "Le Dernier Adieu," the final movement of "The Farewell," the poet had tears in her eyes.

"Beautiful," she said. "Just beautiful."