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Dance Review/ The Montreal dancer's latest program shows the her focus has evolved, from the stirring of her gut to the dramatic implications of her accompanying music.

By Deirdre Kelly, Dance Critic

Margie Gillis's mood swings

The mixed program that Margie Gillis, Canada's premier modern dance soloist, has brought to Toronto's Premiere Dance Theatre for a limited run that ends tomorrow, is mostly intimate studies of the dancer as a work of art.

But soloists are like that. Take, for instance, the dancer Gillis is most often compared to, Isadora Duncan. Considered by many to be the mother of modern movement, Duncan can dance primarily to express herself and found freedom to pour out her heart in Bacchic abandon clothed in diaphanous fabrics. Like Duncan, Gillis dresses often in loose-fitting clothes that billows around her as she moves. But her most distinctive prop is her waist-length hair, which she will shake, lift and unfold to underscore the inherent sensuality of her dancing.

The easy comparison between Gillis and Duncan fails to encompass the dancer Gillis has become after almost 15 years. She was more visceral and more self-absorbed than she is now. Sure, the focus of her work is Gillis herself, a fact that sometimes give rise to a bald portrait of the artist as a dancing narcissist. But these days it seems her focus is less on the stirring of her gut and more on the dramatic implications of her accompanying music.

This is particularly true of Variations, a work dating from 1991, which was a wonderfully nuanced and varied reading of Glenn Gould's interpretation of J.S. Bach. Her gestures were sweeping, buoyant but also decorous, never once seeming to fly off in a fury of emotion.

How different this piece was from Slipstream, a work dating from 1985, that Gillis used to close her 90-minute program. Also set to Bach, the movement was like a mirror of a raw and turbulent soul, with hair flying, emotions reeling and aggressive and rough gestures.

This work contrasted with a collaboration between Gillis and New York choreographer Paola Styron entitled The Heaven I Cannot See (1993). Set to music by Henry Purcell and Gustav Mahler, this poignant duet evokes thoughts of mourning with its dirge-like movements and black costumes designed by Barbara Bush.

The sadness of this work was amplified by Landscape (1993). Created by Christopher Gillis, the dancer's brother who died of AIDS two years ago. Here, Gillis is a mournful woman with a rag-tag dress (designed by Ginger Blake), which she tears into pieces to tie to a naked branch.

Rounding out the 90-minute program were Torn Roots, Broken Branches (1993), a work set to a song by Sinead O'Connor that features Gillis undulating her Norma Kamali-designed skirt in imitation of a fluttering heart, and The Little Animal (1986), a work that shows the dancer nearly as naked as the day she was born.