

Saying Goodbye: The Uses Of Grief

Margie Gillis, usually robust, flamboyant and sensuous, has devoted her new and atypically sober dance program at the Joyce Theater to a meditation on loss and healing

Grief, as poets have proved through the ages, is one of life's most potent emotions, surpassed only by love, with which it is inexorably entwined. Such was the subtext on the program (five solos and two duets) that opened Ms. Gillis's weeklong engagement on Tuesday night at the Joyce (187 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea)

In her first season since the death in 1993 of her brother Christopher, Paul Taylor's leading dancer, there is a sense of continuity; there is also a change in dramatic register. Mr. Gillis's choreography for his sister in recent years dealt with the theme of not coming to terms with death; her own more cathartic and raging response was embodied in "Torn Roots, Broken Branches," a solo she created for an AIDS benefit after Mr. Gillis died of AIDS.

The striking solo is repeated on this bill, but the overriding tone of the entire evening, whose audience includes Jessye Norman, Mr. Taylor and many dancers, evoked a series of farewells. Ms. Gillis, who looks more and more like Isadora Duncan and moves with a similar all-encompassing sweep, remains her magnificently intense self. But she is, in these new dances of acceptance, more subdued.

"The Heaven I Cannot See," her Norman's recordings of Mahler and to Dido's lament from Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas." If the abandoned Dido's words, "Remember me but forget my fate," telegraph Ms. Gillis's leitmotif, a major revival on the program is even more significant.

Pauline Koner actually called her celebrated 1962 solo "The Farewell." It was a tribute to a great dancer pioneer Doris Humphrey, who died in 1958. Performed to the last movement of Mahler's "Song of the Earth," the 30-minute solo originally banked on Ms. Koner's own intense presence. In the 1970's, Alvin Ailey's dancers succeeded in conveying its elegiac spirit.

Thanks to Ms. Gillis, "The Farewell" has a rare revival, and an extraordinary solo becomes an apt and strong centerpiece for her program. Ms. Gillis nonetheless comes out of a different esthetic mold. In "Variations," her 1991 solo to the beginning of Glenn Gould's recording of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations, she is as individualistic in her dynamics as Mr. Gould a fellow Canadian. Invariably, she suggests a statue irrepressibly seeking to escape from a sculptor's space.

In "The Farewell," she is confined by a formal structure and Ms. Koner's highly abstract images. These include symbolic props, a coiled rope on the floor and the tape stretched across the stage that Ms. Gillis initially holds in her hand. In the fourth segment, this thread of life is wound around the dancer's body and then rises high across her head, an obvious release.

When Ms. Gillis does not perfectly in the first segment, "To the Earth," Mahler's own meditation on life and death seems to lose its meaning. "To Youth," the second part of this remembered life, finds her more at home, girlishly circling in little stag leaps in pink veils. The section "To Love" calls up the requisite passion. "The Last Farewell," the final section, is full of contrasts: a plowing journey in which the protagonist does twisting rises reborn from expressive despair.

In her new duet, "The Heaven I Cannot See," she is possibly identified with Dido, and Paola Styron with Dido's attendant, Belinda. That it is a mourning dance becomes even clearer when Ms. Norman sings the "Urlicht" section from Mahler's Second Symphony, known also as the "Resurrection" Symphony.

For all the messages in the music, the dominant aura is of desolation. Both women in black have the same restricted movements; both lift their skirts as shrouds, but Ms. Styron is the comfort and Ms. Gillis the barely comforted. By contrast, Ms. Gillis and Robert LaFosse, a guest artist with his own fine projection, seem to find mutual consolation in the 1986 "Ver la Glace" created by Ms. Gillis, Mr. Gillis and James Kudelka to a deliberately fragmented score by Eugene Friesen and David Rothenberg.

The tension does not go unrelieved in "The Little Animal" (1986), Ms. Gillis's forest creature is made whole, and "Slipstream," with Ms. Gillis in back-flipping form.