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By Emilla Malashenko

Margie Gillis celebrates 20 years of performing with a memorable experience

Margie Gillis's moving opening night performance of her 20th anniversary celebration as a performer at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts ended with a long and deserved standing ovation Thursday night.

The show featuring five Montreal premieres and two of Gillis's famous signature pieces had a sombre aura reinforced by music. But the emotionally charged evening won the audience.

Gillis's style of dance sheds all the sophisticated physical skills and virtuosity of classical dance which results from the refinement of the human body through strenuous training. It also sheds the aesthetic of classical dance, Her dance reverts to the initial reason why dance came to be.

If the earliest dances were rites celebrating the divine presence, they later became centred on the dancer's own psyche through exploration of the inner landscape of human feelings. That is what Gillis is epitomizing.

She can be compared to the naïve art form with her self-taught style and her mystic concern with human troubles. She wants the audience to feel with her and in this manner to recapture, vicariously, what were once their own feelings.

Gillis's own Torn Roots, Broken Branches and The Heaven I Cannot See, co-choreographed and performed with Paola Styron are two most touching pieces on the program. The death of her brother, Christopher Gillis, brought her close to the ritual of death. In Torn Roots, she manipulated her black dress as if the waves of grief are drowning her.

The Heaven I Cannot See, set to songs by Henry Purcell and Gustav Mahler sung by Jessye Norman, is a masterpiece. One by one the images arise before the viewer's eyes: the praying Byzantine Madonna, the guardian angel, the child, the woman, the sorrow, the doubt, and the acceptance - all are naturally and beautifully said.

The Farewell, which was choreographed and danced by Pauline Koner 33 years ago, is a dance in memory of Doris Humphrey who was the innovator of the American modern dance.

The 82-year-old Koner asked Gillis to dance the piece because of Gillis's "tremendous presence." The four-part creation to Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde articulates human emotions throughout the various stages in life.

Here Gillis's technical skills showed weakness but one easily forgot them in her powerful interpretation.

Her renowned pieces Mara and Slipstream are similar in texture with Mara stronger of the two. In both pieces Gillis uses her long auburn hair with great dexterity. Mara opens with Gillis standing on a chair with her long skirt draped around her and the stage. As the dance progresses she rolls on her back lifting the huge dress high in the air as if it were a fish tail.

The other two pieces, Ne Me Quitte Pas and the extract from The Stolen Child, are equally fine works. Gillis's show is a memorable experience worth having.