

Dancer's rich talent seen by few

It must take superhuman focus for choreographer-dancer Margie Gillis to navigate the endless profusion of distraction labelled "society" and "Culture" in order to make and perform her singular solos. Critic Edwin Denby once said of George Balanchine that he restored the clarity and joyousness of ballet. Gillis does much to restore the emotional heat of modern dance.

Gillis, a Montreal-based artist who performs solos exclusively, appeared at Gammage Auditorium on Wednesday night as part of Arizona State University Public Events' Onstage series. Before a small audience assembled onstage on risers. Gillis danced seven solos choreographed mostly by herself. Her works exhibited fine detail and overarching unity, athletic stamina and dramatic punch.

Gillis has an uncanny ability to take on a character so fully that she seems to slip into a different skin with every piece.

In Bloom, performed to passages read from Ulysses, Gillis was a young woman exulting in the dark ecstasy of Joyce's words. In Torn Roots, Broken Branches, danced to Sinead O'Connor, the character seemed to pull whole trees of anger from the ground and shake them at the audience. Even in the most abstract of Gillis' works, Variations, to a portion of Bach's Goldberg Variations as played by Glenn Gould, she was a distinct personality, cognate with the music, pushed and pulled this way and that by the moment-to-moment shifts of Bach-Gould.

Perhaps her most effective acting came in the two works choreographed by others: Nocturne, by Martha Clarke, and Landscape, by her brother, the late Christopher Gillis.

In the Clarke, she was a crone in a tut, the ghost of dance past. In the Gillis, she evoked the inevitability of loss and emptiness without flinching.

Although not well-known in our corner of the world, Gillis is a major artist who usually dances before much larger audiences than the few dozen on Gammage's stage Wednesday. It is hoped that if she returns, her space and her audience will be more expansive.