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By Elissa Bernard, Arts Reporter

Gillis's dance: expressions of life's emotions

After her brother died, dancer Margie Gillis found solace in the things she loves the most "Dance is cathartic and it should be" says the internationally-acclaimed, solo dance artist. "It is a ritualized expression of what our experience is as human beings. We all have sorrow, we all have joy."

Gillis compared in recent years by critics to Isadora Duncan, is coming back to Halifax since she first wowed an audience here about 10 years ago. That was a solo show; this time she is bringing Brazilian-born dancer/choreographer Joao Mauricio.

Since her brother died Margie Gillis has been working in duets with other choreographers like Mauricio and one of her best friends, Paola Styron, daughter of author William Styron. "I used to do duets with Christopher and we performed them whenever the two of us were able to do so. So when Chris died it was a natural extension."

Margie Gillis, who has been a dancemaker for 23 years creating and performing over 70 solo works, is the eldest daughter of two Olympic skiers. Her eldest brother Christopher Gillis was her first dance partner when she was three. Christopher, who died of AIDS, was a choreographer and principal dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Five years ago he put Margie with Mauricio, a dancer for 10 years with the Paul Taylor Dance Company and a former member of Brazil's Olympic team, when Margie was a guest performer with the Taylor Company.

"Out of that grew a partnership," the cheerful, chatty and direct Gillis said in a phone interview from Montreal.

"As Chris become ill and died I began doing more and more duet work. For three years running I have been doing nothing by co-choreographing duets and I've loved it." says Gillis, who is now working on a solo piece. "I think because it has been a co-choreography and I've worked with extremely gifted people in all different styles and techniques."

Gillis, coming to Halifax on Wednesday, Oct. 29 and Wolfville on Saturday, Nov. 1, performs a mix of solo and duos including her signature pieces The Little Animal and Slipstream, a tribute to Molly Bloom with text from Joyce's Ulysses, and Windows of Loss, choreographed by Christopher and Margie and Mauricio.

The piece , Torn Roots, Broken Branches, with music by Sinead O'Conner, is her response to the death of her brother, who was her soulmate.

"When Chris died I was for the first time dealing with grief and anger at the loss and the political situation. The whole thing. Reagan suppressed medical research into it and Mulroney said whatever they're doing we'll do too."

"I was dealing with grief and anger and trying to find a way to get the anger to work for me. You don't want anger to be dangerous, you want it to be useful."

Her brother set the piece Landscape on her when he was dying "to share the experience of dying slowly and losing your person." says Margie.

"It was his wonderful sense of humanity - I'm dying of AIDS but everybody dies do let's explore this."

Though her life has been buffeted by change, Gillis says her ways of working has remained the same. It is kinetic-based and she works from inside out.

"I start with an image, what I've seen, what I feel, what I'm thinking about. It is a process of nature and understanding nature and it is the nature of what it is to be human that creates the dance."

"I've got 23 years of going this, of understanding the kinetic process, understanding the nature of the human spirit, of what it is to be a human being. There is a wisdom of the body just as important as the wisdom of the intellect and how that plays into what and who we are."

"I'm always watching people for the miracle of life and figuring it out and playing with it and researching it. I am in a constant state of questioning."

Gillis' schedule has been "a bit nutty," she says. "I was home 14 days in 11 months last year."

She showcased her new production, In Extraordinary Company - Margie Gillis and Guest Artists at the Joyce Theatre, New York, then flew to Brazil for a tour, back to Montreal for two nights, and then to Greece. From Nova Scotia she is going to Montreal, New York, Pittsburgh, Dallas, Quebec, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Toronto "and then Christmas happens."

She loves Christmas because "it give me a chance to be with my family," says Gillis. "I've got a great brother and a great sister and a great mum and cousins and nieces and nephews. My mum is not only my mother she is my mentor."

"My mum has the pain threshold of an animated cartoon character. She'll fall off a roof and say "It's OK, I'm taking a bath." She deals with life so simply, where I have to rake everything over the coals. It's so natural, so practical and I adore her for it and I adore her courage. I don't think she realizes it."

Tickets for Gillis' Halifax show are \$26 and \$23 at the Cohn box office. Tickets for Wolfville are \$18.40 and \$14.95 for students and seniors. Gillis finds it easier to tour around the world than to go across Canada, " there's no sponsorship for dance in Canada, I can't afford to self-produce. Even if you're at the top, you're making far less than anybody with that reputé would in any other field."