

Canadian dancer speaks to the heart, soul

Margie Gillis' dance performance on Friday evening was a special holiday gift to Kravis Center audiences. The intimate Rinker Playhouse was like a black velvet box that displayed a holiday tiara of rare beauty.

REVIEW

Gillis is a gifted Canadian dancer/choreographer who has created a repertory of works that glitter like fine-cut gems. Each of the eight solos on the program was carefully crafted by Gillis, beautifully lit and minimally costumed. Several of the dances seemed to speak to the soul, while others cried out to the heart or exploded with joy.

Gillis has a powerful vision of her own. Her dances pulse with intense emotion and breathtaking physicality. Each piece was dramatically different in themes and movement style, yet the overall program had a rare dignity and balance. As a solo performer, Gillis held the audience spellbound.

The program opened with Variations, to music by J.S. Bach. Gillis set the tone for the evening with a free-flowing interpretation of the score. At times, her body moved as a complete unit in sweeping circles and diagonals that covered the stage. At other times, entire musical phrases unfolded in a rippling arm or carefully placed foot. In the intimacy of the Rinker Playhouse, Gillis' changing facial expressions and deep breathing added special vitality to the piece.

The Little Animal seemed to be an exploration of a primeval life force. Gillis wore a simple white unitard and was bathed in an intense orange glow. In a series of crouching, crawling movements, she was transformed into an animal just awakening. Her hands became claws, and her bare feet splayed open in a lazy stretch. Only when she finally stood and looked outward did she appear human.

George may be a meditation on modern man and stereo types. To music by George Gershwin, Gillis' George moved about frantically in a green business suit. He was a man on the go, answering phones, pushing papers, flexing his muscle and rushing headlong through his day. When the business coat was briefly removed softer movements and hunched shoulders revealed a vulnerable inner being. But the transformation was fleeting, and the business coat soon masked a hidden reality.

A highlight of the program was Gillis' Bloom. Instead of music, she danced to a taped monologue from James Joyce's Ulysses. Gillis captured each spoken phrase with a gesture, facial expression, saunter or tug at her dress. This was dance to the spoken word. The language and the movement were perfectly matched and the effect was lyrical.

Gillis continued in the Irish mood with Torn Roots Broken Branches. She created this heartrending piece as a tribute to her brother, who died recently of AIDS. To powerful music sung by Sinéad O'Connor, Gillis used the flowing drapes of her black gown to create multiple images. In rapid succession, one saw an art deco maiden, the Grim Reaper, a wailing Irish banshee and a whirling dervish. Gillis' anger and sorrow illuminated this work. Her torn roots and images of mourning burned into our memories.

The program ended on an upbeat note with a joyous Slipstream to music by Bach. Gillis left us with a final haunting image of flowing red hair fanned out around her and a green dress rippling in wide circles. Her face sparkled with life and hope.

There was sheer joy in her movement and magic in her performance.