

REVIEW: Margie Gillis recalls the expressive power at the root of modern dance.

Letting her emotions take over

Margie Gillis acclaimed solo dancer, can make her body talk - or whimper, sigh, giggle, weep, yell, and even flounder clumsily, like a loon.

Her gift for expression is so sophisticated, so primal, that it can become dizzying to watch her; in one fluid, lyrical movement her arm arcs outward, causing her waist to bend, her head to bow and her cascading hair whizzes afterward like a whip, tracing a circle with hypnotic intensity.

Gillis returned to McKinney Theatre in Mission Viejo on Saturday for the first time since 1991, kicking off Saddleback College's International Guest Artist Series. What a shame to see half the seats empty. Orange County's college and university dance students alone could have – should have – filled McKinney's 400 seats several times over. Maybe a dozen students were in the audience. What a sorry loss for those who missed Gillis' artistry.

Her dancing recalls the melodramatic honesty and commitment of modern dance's founders. Gillis' dancing is earthy, and she shows emotion directly, not self-consciously. She favors soft lyricism, but she can also be abrupt, rocket-like, and can harden herself into stark, ugly positions. While irony is the stock in trade of today's post-modernists, Gillis is all naked openness.

She dances from the "inside out," as she explained in the program. Movement starts in her gut and ripples across her limbs. She gestures articulately, with the expertise of a mime. She knows her body well and designs most of her costumes, which flare away from, caress or hug her strong physique, depending on the need of the dance.

Gillis presented a selection of eight dances (from 1985-1999), all but one her own creations. The show was bookended by two pieces to Bach, and in between displayed her range of styles. In one of the new pieces, "Loon," Gillis portrayed an ungainly bird, moving awkwardly, bent over nearly the whole time. As in "The Little Animal," Gillis twisted her human shape out of recognition; fingers became claws, or sometimes a mouth, while her head and body became plumage.

At the other extreme was "Bloom," in which Gillis acted out recorded excerpts of Molly Bloom's soliloquy (read by Siobhan McKenna) from the end of James Joyce's "Ulysses." In a flash, Gillis was the blushing "flower of the mountain," or the seductress, or the town gossip, bringing to easy life one of the great works of literature.

Not every piece had the same intensity. Another new piece, "George," was an abstract illustration of the music, a lullaby by George Gershwin, but seemed disconnected to the music.

Not so in "Torn Roots Broken Branches," danced to Sinead O'Connor's "I Am Stretched on Your Grave" and inspired by the death of Gillis' brother, Christopher. She whipped her long black dress into waves, simultaneously expressing anger and defiance. My favorite piece, though, was the first one – "Variations" to a Glenn Gould recording of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. Starting small, with hands, then arms, undulating outward, the dance built to a crescendo of skipping, joyous energy. This was Gillis unfettered, what she does best.