

Gillis takes flight in Loon by Alexander Varty

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Voyages: Into the Interior Landscape

Choreographed and performed by Margie Gillis. A Margie Gillis Dance Foundation production, presented by Dancing on the Edge. At the Vancouver Playhouse on Thursday, July 7. No remaining performances.

As Hollywood has shown us, it's possible to do almost anything with computer animation. Talking meerkats and donkeys, starships whirling into interstellar space, ninja fighters defying all known laws of gravity—all these are cast onto the screen for our delectation, and they look, for an hour or two, real enough to convince. Technology is wonderful.

But on Thursday, a woman turned herself into a bird, and technology had nothing to do with it.

Margie Gillis's *Loon*, which opened the 2005 edition of the Dancing on the Edge festival, may be the most beautiful performance I've ever seen. The Montreal-based choreographer's tribute to the iconic Canadian waterfowl thrums with the kind of detail even a 30-metre-tall IMAX screen can't provide: by turns she is the bird, its beak, its talons, its prey, its young, and the water it hunts in. Upended on-stage, she lifts her feet skyward, then flattens their arches to become a pair of cooing avian newlyweds; standing with her legs apart and her knees flexed, she shoots one arm out at a 45-degree angle and is transformed into the loon's elongated throat, head, and bill. Her dance is rooted both in her extraordinary physical vocabulary and her equally remarkable powers of observation. In a seemingly effortless series of contortions she gives us various courtship, threat, and display postures; the only time she appears earthbound is when she depicts the loon, so swift and elegant in the water, walking clumsily on land.

Miraculously, *Loon* is not merely imitative. It's shamanic, elemental, and sculptural too; it's the loon's song made physical and a poem about how much Gillis loves wilderness. And it was not the only extraordinary work in this retrospective collection of five solo dances. *Voyage*, the longer piece that made up the evening's second half, applied *Loon*'s imagistic specificity to a human story of removal and loss, emigration and arrival, and it was very nearly as breathtakingly lovely.

Arriving on-stage in a full black skirt, her long hair braided and her upper body nude, Gillis quickly donned a man's tailcoat and the contrast between her vulnerable skin and this formal garment amplified the intensity of her gestures. She played a child torn from her parents, a widow grieving her emigrant kids, a wide-eyed youth arriving in some new world, and a lonely drifter bowed under the weight of joblessness and despair. Two vintage suitcases served as boat, berth, island, and shelter; in a memorable moment that managed to be both comic and uncanny, she turned them into a train that floated, weightlessly, across the stage. We laughed, but after the show at least one audience member was in tears, caught short by longing for her own absent daughter.

Also on the bill were *Blue*, danced entirely on a chair; *Bloom*, set to Molly Bloom's soliloquy from James Joyce's *Ulysses*; and *A Complex Simplicity of Love*, performed to the music of George Frederick Handel. Collectively, they reinforced the notion that Gillis is one of this country's great cultural treasures, and that technology is no substitute for the power of the imagination unbound.