

# The gait of grief

*A dancer's new work grapples with death*

**M**argie Gillis has earned rapturous reviews for her ability to translate basic human emotions into a clear and powerful language of movement. Over the years, the auburn-maned dancer and choreographer from Montreal has articulated everything from ecstasy to jagged anger in her work. But when she began her 20th season as a solo artist in Toronto last week, the emotion that took front and centre stage was grief. A year and a half ago, Christopher Gillis, her older brother and occasional dance partner, died at 42 of AIDS-related causes in New York City, where he had been a dancer and choreographer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. Margie Gillis, now 41, was his primary caregiver in the last years of his life. Returning to the stage after seriously injuring her knee in a Vietnam performance last year, she is touring with works that include *Landscape*, the final piece her brother created for her. Gillis describes the last months with her brother as "very painful but very beautiful," adding, "there was all the horror of dying and things just sort of exploding in your body. But there was also an incredible transcendence and courage, grace and an enormous amount of love. I'll never be frightened of death again."

Her tour, which will take her to Ottawa, Montreal and New York, opened with the first Toronto performance of *Landscape*—at Dancers for Life, an AIDS benefit at the Royal Alexandra Theatre on Jan. 31. Then, in a Feb. 1 to 5 run at Toronto's Premiere Dance Theatre, she presented *Landscape* along with several other works, including two inspired by her brother's illness and death.

Although Gillis still misses her brother acutely, sorrow has not extinguished her sense of fun. "He was like putting your hand in water in the middle of a dark, big mountain—so solid, so wonderful, and inside was this gushing thing that sort of cleansed your whole being," she said in a recent interview. But then she broke into an incandescent grin. "He was also a jerk. Chris did lots of jerky things."

Gillis punctuates her conversation with

laughter that is hearty and often self-deprecating. Reminded that an infatuated American critic once described her as a combination of interpretive dancer Isadora Duncan and the racehorse Secretariat, she hooted with amusement. "Plow horse is more like what I consider myself. I'm an excellent conundrum but not a thing of sleek beauty."

The Montreal-born artist is much too lovely to remind anyone but herself of a plow horse, though from her athletic parents she did inherit muscular thighs and a frame that is large-boned by dancers standards. Gene Gillis and his wife, Rhona Wurtele, were both Olympic skiers, and all four of their children turned out to be interested in physical pursuits:

different. "We wanted to discuss and share the process of what it's like to die," Gillis says. "That's what it's about: him teaching me what it felt like from the inside." In *Landscape*, she wears a ragged dress and drags a branch that is bare except for a forlorn cloth bow. Her hobbled movements suggest pain and despair.

Meanwhile, *Torn Roots, Broken Branches* (1993), a piece she began when she learned her brother was HIV-positive, is a swirling, seething rage against the dying of the light. The world première on the program, *The Heaven I Cannot See*, is an introspective, death-accepting duet that Gillis choreographed and performed with U.S. dancer Paola Styron. Gillis portrays a woman grappling with thoughts of death; Styron is an angel or spirit who invisibly offers guidance.

Dancers tend to dread growing older even more than most people, but Gillis believes that maturity has given her "more prowess" as a dancer and many other benefits: "I feel like I'm calmer about things. I don't feel like the highs have been taken out but I do feel like I know how to deal with the lows a lot better." Over the turbulent past three years, she has drawn comfort from a romantic partnership with a man whom she describes as "a calm spot" in her life.

Gillis works on several different choreographic ideas at once and often takes years



*Gillis: creations inspired by her brother's passing*

Christopher's and Margie's younger siblings are Jere, an NHL player from 1978 to 1983, and Nancy, who teaches skiing and aerobics in Montreal. Margie Gillis started dance lessons at the age of 3, and by her teens she knew that dancing her own creations would be her life's principal work. "I just suddenly knew I had something I wanted to say and that dance was the way I'd do it," she recalls.

Gillis's Toronto appearances last week revealed that she is still a breathtakingly dynamic artist with finely calibrated control of her body. In *Slipstream* (1985) and *Variations* (1991), two abstract works set to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, her limbs rippled and furled like light silk in a breeze. Her brother's *Landscape* could not be more

to finish a three- or four-minute creation. She recently had an idea for a new piece related to her brother's death—one that will put more distance between herself and the "stone of grief," as she calls it. "My mother says our family works really well with deadlines and pressures," says Gillis. "It gives me a shudder to think that it's really true, and I'm just going to keep looking for catastrophes. There's something to be said for art that arises out of suffering, but there is a lot to be said also for art coming out of joy." Her brother Christopher, who asked her to make sure that people laughed during his memorial service, would doubtless have agreed.

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