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BODY & SOUL

The heartfelt, deeply human dance of Margie Gillis.

BY CLAUDIA BAUER

Margie Gillis dances the human experience. Undulating naked in a field of billowing grass in *Lessons from Nature 4*, or whirling in a sweep of lilac fabric in her signature work *Slipstream*, her movement is free of flashy technique and tricks, but driven and defined by emotion. “There’s a central philosophy in my work about what the experience of being

human is,” says Gillis, whose movement style is an alchemy of Isadora Duncan’s uninhibited self-expression and Paul Taylor’s musicality, blended with elements of dance theater into something utterly unique and immediately accessible. “I want an authenticity,” she says. “I want to touch my audiences profoundly and deeply.”

Gillis’ unique vision has led to a nearly 50-year career as a solo performer of iconic works like *Bloom*, her 1989 rendition of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and the 1999 *Loon*, a reflection on the childhood trauma that would define the direction of her life. She has garnered the highest accolades of her native Canada, including the Ordre national du Québec and the Order of Canada. Now 65, she performs less rigorously than she used to, but through teaching she continues to influence countless people—dancers and nondancers alike—around the world.

Largely self-trained, Gillis is neither a master of formal technique nor the product of a seminal company. Yet Taylor himself regarded her as “one of the greatest artists I’ve ever seen,” says John Tomlinson, executive director of the Paul Taylor Dance Foundation.

Taylor became a lifelong friend, and before his death in August 2018 he commissioned a work from Gillis that will premiere this month, alongside four of his own classics and a commission from Pam Tanowitz, in the Orchestra of St. Luke’s Bach Festival in New York City. “We did our first session prior to Paul dying, and I was just awestruck by how generous the dancers were with me,” she says. “The way I work is really different, and they’ve been beautiful.”

What makes Gillis different is an alchemy of emotional rawness and mesmerizing movement that many people describe as transformative. “She *was* the dance,” Tomlinson says of seeing *Slipstream* in the mid-1980s. “You didn’t see a person; you just saw this incredible experience of movement and joy and power. It brought you to tears.”

When Alexandra Wells, director of

artist training at Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, saw Gillis for the first time in 1999, “I couldn’t stop weeping. It’s like Margie has a zipper down her heart, and she opens it and shares it with people.” Afterward, Wells went into the dressing room to meet Gillis. “Margie was stark naked, and I hugged her,” she says. “We’ve been best friends ever since.”

Through Springboard Danse Montréal, which Wells founded in 2001, Wells and Gillis initiated the Legacy Project in 2015 to keep Gillis’ oeuvre alive for new generations of dancers and audiences. Run by the Margie Gillis Dance Foundation, the Legacy Project provides financial and logistical support for Gillis to teach her work to a curated group of professional dancers, who perform it in Canada and abroad.

While her career may sound meteoric, it was born out of profound trauma. At

just 8 years old, when most dancers are taking creative movement classes and performing in recitals, Gillis had a nervous breakdown that lasted nearly a decade. After her father left the family and her mother became critically ill, “I fell apart,” she says. The family relocated and Gillis gave up dance, and “I never went more than a third of a year to school. I was frightened of people.” (Her hair also fell out, and when it eventually grew back, she vowed never to cut it—her waist-length tresses became a trademark.)

“Being frightened, you spend a lot of time looking very carefully at everybody—what was it to be normal? What wasn’t it?” she says of that time. Naturally curious, and constantly analyzing herself and the people around her, she developed keen senses of introspection and observation. “I watched my personality disintegrate and then reintegrate,” and when she recovered in her mid-teens, “I had an understanding of elements of personality that was really experiential.”

She also reemerged with an inexplicable yet unshakable faith that dance would be the vehicle for her to share her perspective on the human experience. But rather than take up formal training, “I did my own explorations and cobbled together movement vocabularies from here and there,” she says. At 19 she followed her older brother Christopher to New York City, where he was training on scholarship with José Limón and May O’Donnell. “May brought me along even though I was rough and raw,” she says of the dance legend, who saw promise in Gillis’ quirky individuality. “She was technical and demanding, but I would cry in class, I would laugh in class, and she would indulge that.” Gillis also studied with Linda Rabin and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens répétiteur Daniel Jackson, still a treasured advisor.

When Christopher joined the Paul Taylor Dance Company in 1976, Gillis caught the legendary choreographer’s eye—he even asked her to join. “I said, ‘Paul, I would give my eyeteeth to dance *Esplanade*, but I cannot count,’” she says, referring good-naturedly to her dyslexia, which she cites as another influence on her independent path. “He



Gillis rehearses with the Paul Taylor Dance Company. The work, commissioned by Taylor before he died, will premiere in June at the Orchestra of St. Luke’s Bach Festival.



would say, ‘Everybody go to your left,’ and I would be standing in the middle of the room looking at my hands while everybody brushed past me. We laughed, and that was that.” Nevertheless, Gillis’ affiliation with Taylor was formative. “I would sit on the floor and watch Paul choreograph,” she says. “I loved his understanding of humanity. He had great insight about it by being an outsider, and I felt like an outsider, too.” (Christopher danced with PTDC for 18 years and died in 1993.)

Gillis speaks reverently of the teachers who shaped her quirky artistry. “The greater love is being seen,” she says, “and they really saw me, and they pulled out of me the best of myself.” She brings that same caring attention into her own teaching practice, which she took up only after many years as a performing artist.

“For a long time I would never dare to call myself a teacher. I called myself an instigator,” she says, and today she is sought-after for her uncanny ability to help dancers bring honest emotion into their movement. Whether privately coaching a National Ballet of Canada prima ballerina or leading a



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weekend workshop for nonprofessionals with Hawaii-based New Age musician Rhiannon, “you’re going for this transformative process. What can you do? Is there one part of your body that feels joy? Let’s move that part,” she says. At every level, Gillis creates a safe space where her students can take creative risks without fear of failure. “The sense of honesty, the willingness to be engaged in that way, I find incredibly fulfilling and healing.”

She also uses movement to access and release emotions in her conflict-resolution practice. Introduced to the field in 2009, when she consulted on a study led by professors Michelle LeBaron and Carrie MacLeod of the University of British Columbia, she has since worked with a wide range of people, from diplomats to teenagers.

“I was teaching working-class high-school boys and girls in Quebec, and the boys were disenfranchised and really at exploding points,” she says. “I started by having one of the boys push my shoulder. As a dancer, you can take the aggression that’s coming toward you, and you roll it off your body.” She guided the teens to playfully push each other, and

then to dance with each other. “It was extremely exciting that when I left that class, those boys would no longer be frightened of the volatile energy within them, but would see it as something that had quality, that had art, that you could use in a playful way.”

Gillis’ methods are intuitive and take practice, but they work, says Vancouver dancer Caitlin Griffin, 33. The former member of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal took her first workshop with Gillis in 2015. “My world shifted,” she says. “I was so used to rooms where you prove yourself, where there’s this hierarchy and expectations.” In contrast, “from the second that you are in the studio with Margie, there is this sense that by being in the room, you are adding value.” A Legacy Project member since 2016, Griffin, who dances *Loon*, credits Gillis with helping her become more grounded, resilient and clear in her artistic intentions.

“Working with Margie has given me a lot of confidence in my own instincts. Her affirmation of that has been huge,” says Brooklyn-based Troy Ogilvie, 34, a former member of Gallim Dance. For

the Legacy Project, Gillis coached her in *Bloom*. “Instead of ‘What would Margie do?’” says Ogilvie, “she is a facilitator. ‘What would you do in this piece, in this house that you’ve created?’ That’s the work: to be faithful to the choreography, but also very present in the moment.”

What Gillis does, with herself as well as with others, is integrate authenticity into art. At Springboard last year, Gillis incorporated the chronic pain in her knee into her workshops. “She would say, ‘I’m having a hard time today, but let me see what I can do,’” Wells says. “She wasn’t doing big jumps, but she was still able to capture us. You think, ‘I can do that, too. I can be present in that way.’”

A partial knee replacement has restored Gillis’ mobility, but nowadays she limits performances to two minutes max. Life as a teaching artist, she says, brings her a “phenomenal joy.” “Watching people transform and have their aha moment—it’s exciting to me to move people on that level.” **DT**

Claudia Bauer is a freelance writer in the San Francisco Bay Area.

A treasured snapshot, with her brother Christopher Gillis and Paul Taylor



On tour with her “Evolutions” concept, Gillis performs with nine Legacy Project dancers. Each show is different, depending on which dancers participate.



Former member of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal Caitlin Griffin dances *Loon* (1999), Gillis’ reflection on her childhood trauma.

