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## Review: Annex Dance Company's 20-minute trip to Utopia enthralls

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Imagine kicking around the city peninsula over the holiday weekend to find yourself suddenly in a fantastical garden graced by five ethereal sprites beckoning you onward.

After a trim, transcendent 20 minutes, you may well emerge in utter serenity, as I did when I caught “Dancing in the Gardens of ‘Cry Joy Park’” earlier this week.

Beguiling, organic and otherworldly, the work is an altogether inspired convergence of contemporary art and dance that beautifully illustrates how mutually elevating crossing those streams can be. A site-specific collaboration between the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art and Annex Dance Company, the elegant piece gently wends and ripples around the Halsey’s current exhibition, “Cry Joy Park — Gardens of Dark and Light,” by Chinese-American artist Jennifer Wen Ma.

The work was sprung from Annex’s artistic director Kristin Alexander during her recent residency at the College of Charleston. It furthers the company’s body of work created explicitly for the spaces in which they are performed, this time making evocative use of Ma’s exhibition.

For the current one, Alexander and dancer/choreographer Julie DeLizza Clark facilitated an ensemble of five dancers drawn from Annex and C of C, who choreographed the pieces. The ensemble includes Hannah Dunnaway, Aimee Gwynne, Alison Provost, Bethany Rupert and Sydni Shaffer.

Spanning the three discrete spaces of the exhibition, the dancers render living and breathing a terrain that already possesses a curiously seductive life of its own. It is one spun from painted mirrored walls and outsize black and white sheets of Tyvek that have been laser-cut into floor-to-ceiling foliage, which dangles, towers, looms — and unexpectedly moves — to transporting effect.

The intention is to provide an opportunity to interact with all the shifting and contradictory perceptions of dark and light, drawing from the artist's Eastern and Western influences, as well as from Charleston's history. Through painting, paper and a table welcoming any and all to join, it explores the concept of utopia.

And explore it we do, guided silently by the dancers clad in midnight culottes over grey leotards, performing to the exhibition's lulling, original music. At a communal table, each slides out a chair, sitting briefly to then rise and tilt and lean in subdued, smooth movements. Extending limbs in a manner somewhat akin to a warrior pose, they at times interact with one another across the table to replicate gestures before leading us onward and into the black.

In the dark garden, which the artist has imbued with a sense of anxiety, select dancers crouch downward and hover before moving to the light, where they sway inches from the installations, as if they were summer vines compelled to entwine. Lightly sprinting elsewhere, they face the rippled white walls, dispersing and gathering again in an angled line, before stealing off to mysterious parts unknown.

If I could have, I would have gladly followed them, so transformed was I by their soothing, meditative world.

Another chance awaits with one more performance Saturday, which is also preceded by other programming in the gallery. It culminates the exhibition, thus dispatching its whimsical flora and these five talented faeries elsewhere, paradise eluding us once more.