

Joys, perils of 'Farm' life unfold in theater

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The Jenkins Farm Project (2008)

The program for "The Jenkins Farm Project," choreographer Annie Arnoult Beserra's lyrical, often disturbingly hallucinatory multimedia installation-performance, includes a quote from a poem by Emily Dickinson:

"One need not be a chamber to be haunted/One need not be a house/The brain has corridors
surpassing/Material place."

It is those corridors of the brain that Beserra and her actor-dancers so beautifully explore in her hourlong dreamscape -- a delirium of memory that conjures the world of her grandparents' Depression-era farm in North Carolina.

Enter the theater and you find no seats. Instead, the whole space is defined by four young women in white dresses engaged in such tasks as mixing cake batter, trimming green beans and peeling potatoes, while an older woman and balding man who clearly are mentally ill pass among them.

Dioramas of vintage ephemera in the style of Joseph Cornell's boxes, and a rustic chandelier made of old spoons, hang from the ceiling -- all part of Christopher Ash's magical set. Interviews conducted in apple orchards and fields once cultivated by the choreographer's family are projected on screens.

Amid bursts of movement and as a time-rewinding counterpoint to the taped voices are sounds of the live performers that periodically puncture the air as the singing of a hymn, the recitation of a biblical passage, the reading of Little Black Sambo or the burst of chatter into a telephone that suggests a psychotic break. Before entering the theater, you are urged to interact with the performers and their environments. (The only member of the audience really to do that at Thursday's opening night performance was 9-year-old T.J. Nakano, who studied every aspect of the stage in a way that suggested he was a little Kurosawa in the making.)

I found the best way to absorb all that was going on in this evocation of the joys and terrors of rural life was to perch in a single spot.

It takes a while before the work's 13 scenes begin to make sense, but gradually you become hooked. And the Beserra Dance Theater's* ensemble members -- Vera Blaine, Kathryn Enright, Alana Hardison, Todd Lahrman, Allison Kurtz and Ashley Thorndike --keep the spell going, with help from composers Colby Beserra and Matt Reed.

*Beserra Dance Theater was a Project of Striding Lion under the direction of current Artistic Director Annie Beserra.