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'Anytown' Pleases In Many Ways



Dancers fall into a tableau in the opening sequence of "Anytown," an abstract show set to the music of Bruce Springsteen.

CRYSTAL L. LAUDERDALE / Tribune

By **JENNIFER BARRS**

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TAMPA The music roils with rocking familiarity, the sounds of an American landscape made lush by the licks of The Boss and friends. But how this theatrical event looks onstage - and how it feels - is remarkable. So physical. So visceral. So downright dance-able.

"Anytown: Stories of America" came to our town Thursday night, at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. It was only the second stop for the production, which premiered in Philadelphia last week. Although it is billed as a dance piece, it embraces all the elements of great theater: drama, comedy, dance, music, you name it.

For instance, the opening numbers are set to a contemporary tune parade. Among these: "Crazy Talk" by Soozie Tyrell, a violinist who has performed with Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band. Then "Human Touch" by The Boss himself. And later, "When You're Young In The City," by Springsteen's bride, Patti Scialfa.

It is a riveting piece of theater, even more so than its similar predecessor, the Twyla Tharp/Billy Joel collaboration called "Movin' Out." Because of its in-your-face obliqueness, "Anytown" forces you to put your own experiences into the universal themes, and therefore is involving. Engrossing.

Created by choreographers Danial Shapiro and wife Joanie Smith, the story has a Dust Bowl demeanor, set in America between World War I and II. It centers on three families and how their lives and relationships intersect and divide.

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Yet it is not a literal, "Grapes of Wrath" retelling. Shapiro and Smith direct the dancers to savor the sensibilities of the folksy score, but they do not force the performers to interpret the lyrics move for move.

The result conveys powerful emotion. The movements to "City Boys," for example, a Scialfa tune with all the oomph of a sexual, operatic romp are enough to make you leap out of your chair and swing your hair. Same for "White Lines," the Tyrell tune that is so sexual, so sensual, somehow I forgot there was a guy named Springsteen who also allowed his songs to be performed in this show.

This is a production without hesitation. Namely, if you have hesitated about going to the theater to see contemporary dance, this show takes you to the floor of your youth. And I don't mean disco heaven. I mean real world choreography that - in your dreams - you could do.

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