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Family life, according to Bruce

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BY ROBERT JOHNSON
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The stage looks cozily furnished. In "Anytown: Stories of America," an evening-length dance choreographed by Danial Shapiro and Joanie Smith, which made its local debut Saturday at the Count Basie Theatre, in Red Bank, dancers lounge on a sofa watching TV. They have a kitchen table for intimate family gatherings, a rocking chair and a bed.

Yet the comforts of home are usually no comfort at all in works by this husband-and-wife team known for their living-room dramas. Shapiro and Smith pry beneath the upholstered fabric of everyday life. They tear apart the illusion of material well-being to reveal the conflicts, angst and sheer craziness that turn ordinary people into monsters.

"Anytown" is not quite like the psycho-sexual works that made Shapiro and Smith notorious during the 1990s, however. The choreography is set to music and lyrics by Patti Scialfa, Bruce Springsteen and Soozie Tyrell, which Tyrell has knit into a coherent score. No matter how rough the going gets in songs like "Youngstown" and "Empty Sky," or Tyrell's even more provocative "Little Girl" and "St. Genevieve," the rhythms of this music soothe the listener. Being part of a folk tradition gives the characters in these songs and dances a place in the world.

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Significantly, Shapiro and Smith's latest work does not depict an isolated, nuclear family. Though at one point the scampering and nattering of a clan identified by their green costumes brilliantly suggests a closed circle of relationships, "Anytown" is a dance about community. Three families--the Greens, the Reds and the Blues--live here in close proximity, stopping by to visit and silently observing one another's foibles.

There is plenty of illicit sex, despite the town's high rate of church attendance. Some relationships appear destructive, as when Shapiro plays the outsider in an adulterous triangle. Though Nejla Yarkin is Germaul Barnes' lover, Shapiro keeps reaching for her hand, leading to an aching drawn out affair where partnerships break off only to reform again. The score is Springsteen's "Big Muddy." Some sex is liberating, however, as in a duet of elegantly curled symmetries and leaping excitement performed by Laura Selle and Bernard Brown.

Later, the entwined families of "Anytown" mourn Brown's death. They survive flooding and the shock of 9/11. But whether on the job (in a "Youngstown" factory) or after a torrent washes them, slipping and sliding out the wings, these characters are there to support one another.

Comparisons with "Movin' Out," on Broadway, seem inevitable. Yet where Twyla Tharp focuses on a circle of young friends, "Anytown's" inhabitants come in various ages, sizes and conditions. Shapiro and Smith, who dance in the piece themselves, are 47 and 54 years old, respectively. These characters resemble American archetypes rather than the heroes of youthful romance.

As in "Movin' Out," much of "Anytown's" choreography has the spontaneity and explosive energy of rock 'n' roll dancing, borrowing gestures from popular culture. Yet Shapiro and Smith also work in the tradition of modern expressionism. Here dramatic incidents appear natural and believable, even set within a frame of frozen tableaux.

The dancers give performances of startling intensity. In addition to those already mentioned, the highly personal cast includes Maggie Bergeron, Kelly Drummond Cawthon, Carl Flink, Eddie Oroyan and Jamie Ryan.

Missed the show? Shapiro and Smith will present "Anytown," at Manhattan's Joyce Theater, Jan. 24-29, 2006.

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