

dance

Born Right Here

Stories of you and me and anyone in Springsteensland

by Deborah Jowitz

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 MY YAHOO!

So you want to make a dance-theater piece called *Anytown*, subtitled *Stories of America*. Your fictional town's not going to be like Thornton Wilder's Grover's Corners—folks' behavior is a little grittier, and there'll be a TV onstage. This is about working class-families in, say, '50s America, with a whiff of the '30s blended in and more than a whiff of the '60s. What music are you gonna use? No contest: Bruce Springsteen singing in his rough-streets rasp, and sometimes with a sound as sweet as corn silk.



The population of *Anytown*

photo: Paul Vertucio

Anytown

by Joanie Smith and Danial Shapiro

Joyce Theater

January 24 through 29

If you are Joanie Smith and Danial Shapiro, you're already halfway there. Smith's sister, Soozie Tyrell, has contributed vocals and fiddle to six Springsteen albums and toured with his E Street Band. She's been longtime good friends with Patti Scialfa, Springsteen's wife, who sings and plays alongside him. The two women used to hang out with Shapiro and Smith before the dancers were a married couple—maybe while they were still performing with Alwin Nikolais's company; they'd all sing and dance together for their own pleasure. Both Scialfa and Tyrell have since released juicy albums of their own compositions.

So *Anytown's* choreography can ride (and coast on and be bucked off) the music of three singer-songwriters very much on the same wave length. Even on tape, their raw power and emotional edge grab you. The women are not only people Springsteen knows; they sound like the kind of women that Springsteen's musical persona *would* know. Tyrell has also composed instrumental pieces and segues for Shapiro and Smith's work. Snippets of song lyrics, interview quotes, and journal entries are projected (sparingly) on the back wall.

Dances by Shapiro and Smith are famous for furniture—for sitting on it, standing on it, falling from it, rebounding off cushiony surfaces and skidding along hard ones. In *Anytown*, a bed, sofa, table, and chairs also get moved around a lot, since the choreography weaves private moments with scenes in which the members of three color-coded families mingle or live their daily lives simultaneously. The green family: a middle-aged couple (Smith and Carl Flink), their agile, gutsy elf of a son (Eddie Oroyan), and their wayward daughter (Maggie Bergeron).

The red family: a man (Shapiro), his two daughters (Jamie Ryan and Laura Selle), and (I think) his wife (Kelly Drummond Cawthon). The blue family: a married pair (Germaul Barnes and Karine Plantadit) and their son (Bernard Brown). These are riveting performers.

I was worried at first. Springsteen is singing "Human Touch" and the performers are meeting and greeting, trying to slip in clues to their characters and problems, but the choreography is meandering and more than a bit messy. One of the projected quotes mentions rivers, and sometimes in the piece Shapiro and Smith fall so in love with flow that they can't stop it (the prime example is a playfully sexy duet in which Selle and Brown wheel and spin the bed around until I want to yell, "Just lie down and do it!").

But *Anytown* invades your heart, and some moments almost stop it—like the one in which Brown, dead, lies on a table and those close to the boy keep trying to cross his arms over his chest and make them stay there. Or the end of an adulterous duet between Shapiro and Plantadit (watched, with little overt jealousy, by half-hidden Barnes and Cawthon). Plantadit starts slowly walking, and Shapiro, on his knees, crawls along gently cradling each heel before she steps. When, much later, Plantadit leaves with her husband (Barnes), Shapiro follows them, catching at her foot again, still trying to be part of her life. A gripping, foot-stamping march in place by Cawthon to Tyrell's "ferdougana!" sums up the grit of these people, before they join her for Springsteen's epochal "Born in the U.S.A."

The choreographers give us snatches of violence. The green family members bash around the supper table like jerky puppets barely in control; a push or a punch can start a cycle. People give comfort to neighbors (Plantadit stays with Smith while we hear Tyrell's "Little Girl" and see in the opposite corner what Smith is worried about: her runaway daughter and a bed full of grasping men). Scialfa's "City Boys" turns Ryan on, and Ryan's delight in her own sexiness turns the guys on. To Tyrell's "White Lines," Selle runs wild through a luscious, outflung solo that remembers childhood and ends with her on the sofa and Brown diving on top of her. Men trudge to work (while Springsteen memorializes "Youngstown") and go to war; the "Big Muddy" is just as much about the Plantadit-Shapiro-Barnes mess as it is about the Vietnam that has numbed Flink (he puts on uniform after uniform as doggedly as Smith takes them off him and carries them away).

The piece is not without longueurs and puzzling flaws (given Plantadit's delicious sensuality, it's a mystery why there's so little chemistry between her and Shapiro), Also disappointing: The characters only occasionally burgeon from their obvious roles into individuals. However, *Anytown* is still an achievement for these two choreographers and the performers. If we shut our eyes for a second, we've still got those songs. Speaking to us.

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