

Backstreets

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THE JOHN FOGERTY INTERVIEW

STORY TELLER

Springsteen the
Raconteur is Back
for Devils & Dust



HEY MISTER DEEJAY! RIDING THE RADIO WAVES WITH LITTLE STEVEN
PLUS: VIN SCELZA ♦ ED SCIAKY ♦ RICHARD NEER ♦ MAXANNE ♦ CERPHE ♦ SCOTT MUNI ♦ KID LEO

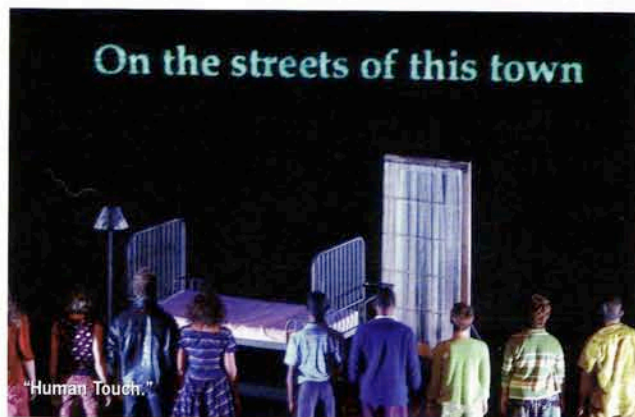
Got the heart of a ballerina

Anytown: Stories of America

By Colleen Sheehy

One of the most telling gestures in the new dance work *Anytown: Stories of America*, set to the music of Bruce Springsteen, Patti Scialfa, and Soozie Tyrell, comes at the end of "The Big Muddy," when two men yearn for the same woman. As the woman, exquisitely danced by Toni Pierce-Sands, moves away from one lover, he kneels on the floor, cupping her bare heels in his hands as she walks away. That small gesture speaks beautifully of the mix of desire, care, and loss expressed at that moment and also of *Anytown's* larger themes concerning both the fragility and endurance of human relationships.

Thoughtful, expressive details such as this, combined with a leap of faith in experimenting with choreographing to pop music are hallmarks of *Anytown*. Other choreographers have tried—Twyla Tharp doing Billy Joel; Joffrey Ballet dancing to music by Prince—with mixed results. Lucky for Springsteen fans and



for contemporary dance enthusiasts, Shapiro & Smith Dance has finessed the dance/pop relationship in *Anytown*. Choreographers Danial Shapiro and Joanie Smith have created a beautifully moving and satisfying work of art, using the trio's songs like chapters in a dreamlike story. The selection and sequencing of the music, combined with inventive choreography and impressive performances by the dance troupe, deepen our understanding of the music, emphasizing

thematic relationships among the three songwriters as solo artists rather than as members of the E Street Band.

Anytown has a remarkable backstory—this is not just any dance company deciding to use Springsteen's music. Joanie Smith is Soozie Tyrell's sister. In the mid-1980s, when Tyrell was busking on the streets of New York with best friend Patti Scialfa, they sometimes ended the day at Smith's Chelsea apartment, where they would relax together

and share performances. Patti and Soozie would play and sing, then Joanie and boyfriend Danial Shapiro would dance. They imagined working together some day on a collaborative project. But life circumstances sent them in different directions.

Smith and Shapiro left New York in 1985, having worked with major dance companies there, and eventually settled in Minneapolis, where Smith now holds an endowed chair in the Dance Program at the University of Minnesota. The thriving Twin Cities dance scene with its strong audiences and funders supported their company, Shapiro & Smith Dance, founded in 1986. Since then, they have earned an international reputation for performances of breathtaking physicality, emotional depth, and wittiness that blend contemporary dance and dramatic theater.

In 2002, when Shapiro faced a life-threatening illness, he and Smith decided to focus their time and energy on what they had dreamed about in Chelsea. They talked with Tyrell and then Scialfa about using their music in a dance work. Patti put in a request to Bruce, who readily agreed to make his music available to them.

Anytown opens with a lively fiddle overture by Tyrell, signaling that the setting could be just about any American town and just about any time period, though the choreographers think of it as a compression of 1930s America and the present. The dance then launches into the first "movement," set to Springsteen's "Human Touch." For this piece, the entire Shapiro & Smith ensemble—dancers of various ages, ethnicities, and body types—share the stage. They slip among each other, sometimes dancing in unison, sometimes apart, one occasionally caresses another, grabs an arm, slaps a back, or offers a hand to lift another up. This opening act introduces the townspeople,



Soozie Tyrell, Danial Shapiro, and Joanie Smith (seated, L-R) and dancers Kelly Drummond-Cawthon and Laura Selle rehearsing the piece set to Tyrell's "Ste. Genevieve."

whose oblique stories unfold in the subsequent songs.

Fourteen songs make up *Anytown*. From "Human Touch" the piece moves into a new work by Tyrell, "Square Dance," featuring a smaller group performing a funny vignette of a family arguing around the dinner table. Scialfa's songs are taken from both *23rd Street Lullaby* ("Young in the City," "City Boys") and *Rumble Doll* ("Big Black Heaven"). Tyrell's title song from her *White Lines* CD is featured as well as "Ste. Genevieve," "Little Girl," and "ferdouganal." Excited about this project, which she and Scialfa saw in a workshop version in summer 2003, Tyrell wrote new music for *Anytown*. Besides the fiddle instrumental, "Square Dance," she wrote a series of fiddle pieces used as transitions between acts.

Anytown features an interesting mix of Springsteen's songs from different points in his career. After "Human Touch," "Youngstown" falls about midway through the work, followed by "The Big Muddy," "Ain't Got You," and "Countin' on a Miracle" (the acoustic performance from *The Essential Bruce Springsteen*, rather than the full band *Rising* version). The final song is the acoustic blues version of "Born in the U.S.A."

Commenting on how the piece evolved, Shapiro says that they immersed themselves in the music, listening over and over to Springsteen's work as well as Tyrell's *White Lines* and Scialfa's two releases. They also attended many concerts on *The Rising* tour in 2002 and 2003. They looked

for songs that "resonated" and slowly began to build a collection of songs they felt intersected with each other. Their first choice was Tyrell's "ferdouganal." The song's marching structure conveys feelings of strength and resilience, and the solo dance to this piece, performed by Kelly Drummond Cawthon, is muscular and stark, powerful yet vulnerable. "Youngstown" from *Tom Joad* was another early choice, to which Shapiro choreographed a duet for two male dancers.

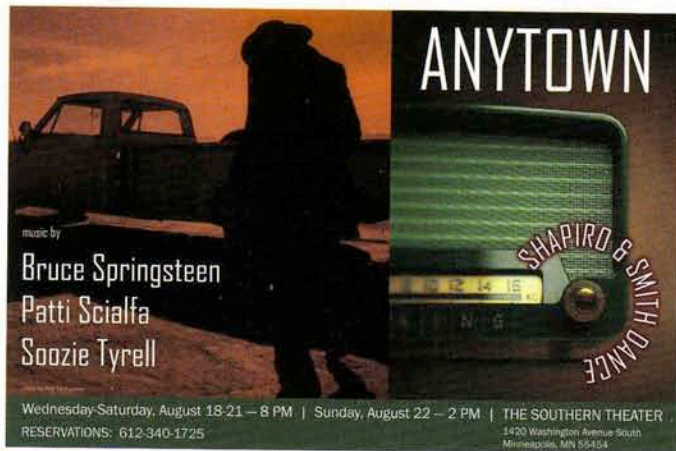
Trusting the abilities of their troupe, Shapiro & Smith developed the movements organically from the sensibilities of each song rather than from the storyline of the lyrics. The choreographers directed the dancers but also let them craft their own responses. Then they sequenced the songs to tell a layered story about human connections and frailties, love and loss, about people constrained by their hometown while also buoyed by meeting life's trials as a community. Speaking of their approach to choreographing to the songs, Shapiro says, "You can't be explicit in dance." Instead *Anytown* presents a poetic response to the music, telling a story "in peripheral vision," as Shapiro puts it.

Each song or movement exists as a separate piece, but together they follow a dramatic arc, at times poignant, humorous, mournful, or defiant. By the end of the closing song, "Born in the U.S.A.," with the entire ensemble again dancing together, the work feels satisfyingly complex and complete.

The dance to Scialfa's "City



"City Boys."



Anytown, U.S.A.— 2005-2006 Tour

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|-------------------------|--|
| Oct. 6-8, 2005 | Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Phila., PA |
| Oct. 13 | Performing Arts Center, Tampa Bay, FL |
| Oct. 15 | University of Florida, Gainesville, FL |
| Oct. 29 | Count Basie Theater, Red Bank, NJ |
| Jan. 24-29, 2006 | Joyce Theater, New York, NY |
| Mar. 3 | Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN |
| Mar. 18 | Community Theatre, Morristown, NJ |
| Mar. 23 | Duke University, Durham, NC |
| Mar. 24-25 | Thalian Hall, Wilmington, NC |
| Mar. 28-29 | Diana Wortham Theater, Asheville, NC |
| Mar. 31 | Appalachian State University, Boone, NC |
| Apr. 4-5 | Cal Poly Tech, San Luis Obispo, CA |

Boys" is a real audience-pleaser. While the lyrics sing the praises of boys, female dancer Jamie Ryan performs a fluid, sexy, club-style dance to this sensual, country-blues number from *23rd Street Lullaby*, making it all about women and the pleasures of movement and flirtation. The two male dancers—Carl Fink and Eddie Oroyan—can't keep up with Ryan, as she plays to the audience more than to them.

Laura Selle's performance to Tyrell's "White Lines" is a tour de force of athletic and emotional dance. The song begins quietly, with Selle and two other dancers—her sisters in the song—sitting on a couch, watching television, their feet keeping time with the music. As the song goes on, telling of the singer's restless urge to escape down the white lines of the highway, Selle bursts across the stage. Her flying leaps, flailing arms, legs, and hair move to the song's wild fiddle line rather than to the song's lyrical or rhythmic structure. Her antic movements embody the song's searching desperation, Tyrell's equivalent of "Born to Run." Dancer and audience are breathless by the end of it.

For audience members who know the music well, *Anytown* offers a new way to listen to it. The dance stories don't match the lyrics directly, and that elusiveness makes the union of song and dance more enjoyable. Paying attention to the structure and subtleties of the performance while also attending to the music offers a stimulating challenge. And it makes watching more than one performance of *Anytown* well worth the time.

Shapiro feels gratified by the positive audience response and the strong critical reviews for *Anytown's* preview performances in Minneapolis in August 2004. Yet the dance itself is the biggest thrill. He says, "The best part is standing on the stage at the beginning during 'Human Touch' and thinking, 'I can't believe we're doing this.'"

The dance group will take *Anytown* on the road in fall 2005, touring to the Eastern U.S. and further afield well into 2006 (see schedule above). For more information about bookings and tour schedule, contact Laura Colby at (718) 797-4577. More information is available at their website, shapiroandsmithdance.org.