

Performance review: 'O(h)' at the Actors Company Theatre

Care for a little deconstruction with your dance show? Wisecracking Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith take you under the tulle in "O(h)," their innovative if uneven hour of choreography and commentary now at the Actors Company Theatre in West Hollywood.

Part lecture, part striptease, part improv, "O(h)" plays like a TED talk with sweat. Smith's strapping physique is the evening's eye candy, but the subject matter is dance itself, that sublime, pretentious, elusive art form. If nothing else, Casebolt and Smith are cheeky enough to admit their chosen profession is rife with the ridiculous. That prima ballerina's penchant for overacting? Running around in circles to indicate a long journey? Martha Graham angst? Lame.

There's nothing like hearing dish from experts, especially on their elegant playground of a set, a pristine box mapped with glowing, colored EL wire created by architects Hadrian Predock and John Frane.

The show's best moments combine rapid-fire quips with beautifully executed moves, inviting your brain to fire on all cylinders. In one hypnotic sequence, the two dance to a recording of a man discussing how a certain jazz drum break was recorded, sampled and re-sampled down to its primary elements — a great metaphor for how dancers think about the building blocks of their art.

"O(h)" can feel underdeveloped, as with Casebolt's performance of, and meditation on, "I Feel Pretty." That catchy but saccharine-sweet "West Side Story" ditty creates an ideal occasion to dig deep into dance's often-perverse relationship with the female body. ("Black Swan," anyone?) Can't Casebolt, in her early 40s, reveal something more about her experience with this struggle? The moment feels like a major missed opportunity. The show overall could benefit from more emotion, more momentum -- at times, "O(h)" seems coy, as if all this analysis were a means of avoiding something deeper, more exposing.

Sometimes, performances are more valuable for the things they make possible than the things they achieve. Casebolt and Smith suggest there are more authentic and provocative ways of sharing the human body with a live audience. Let's see what they come up with next.

-- Charlotte Stoudt

"O(h)" The Actors Company Theatre, 916A N. Formosa Ave., West Hollywood. 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays. Ends Feb. 19. \$22-\$30. Contact: 800-838-3006 or www.caseboltandsmith.com Running time: 65 minutes.



Photo: Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith at the Actors Company Theatre in West Hollywood. Credit: Lawrence K. Ho/Los Angeles Times