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## BWW Reviews: Not Those Kind of Duets - Casebolt and Smith's O(h)

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by Mary Callahan

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It was the final Jazz class before fall break of my first year at Scripps College, a small all-women's liberal arts school in Claremont, California. While my Jazz professor usually structured our two-hour classes with floor work warm-ups, across-the-studio passes, and a final improvised or deconstructed combination, this day he unexpectedly asked the class if there was anything we specifically wanted to work on. Without thinking I shot up my hand and asked, "Can we just work on some technique?" *Silence.* The upper-class dance students eyed each other and smirked. "Like, you know, leaps and turns and stuff," I added, unknowingly digging myself deeper into a hole. "Technique..." my

professor began. Thus commenced an hour-long debate on the meaning of "technique-," a discussion that essentially shattered my previous definition of "dance" into a million tiny pieces, but thereby gave me the opportunity to rebuild it. I came out of Joel Smith's Jazz class not only a stronger dancer, but also-and more importantly-a thinking dancer.

Casebolt and Smith is a duet dance theatre company (made up of Liz Casebolt and my former dance professor, Joel Smith) hailing from sunny Los Angeles. They performed *O(h)* as part of the 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival, "Stripped/Dressed," curated by fellow choreographer, Doug Varone. A single word (or rather, an exclamation) with befuddling parentheses around the "h," *O(h)* is a work that incites audiences to rethink what they already *think* they know about dance.

*O(h)* performs in the 92nd Street Y's Bittenweiser Hall, a gymnasium-like space with a small stage to one side. A black Marley square covers much of the floor, pushing the chairs of audience to the edge so that they are on the same level as the dancers. The black Marley is decorated with spike tape of every color, organizing the stage space into an intricate pattern of arrows, lines, and squares. As the audience walks to their seats, Casebolt and Smith warm up on the floor without acknowledging the onlookers.



After their warm-up, Casebolt and Smith walk downstage and stand side by side in two of the white-taped boxes on the floor. They immediately address the audience and we really learn that this is not the sort of show we expected. And when it comes to describing their duets, no one can put it better than Casebolt and Smith themselves in their introduction: "You know *those* duets on *that one* dance show? We don't do *those* kinds of duets." "And *those* duets on *that other* dance show-we don't do *those* kinds of duets either."

"We think it's important to be clear," says Smith, tongue-in-cheek. Within the introduction Casebolt and Smith perform a series of gestures while standing stationary in their respective boxes. They repeat the phrase a few times, allowing the audience to come up with their own ideas before giving us a little help. And by "help" I mean literally telling us a number of possible meanings for each piece of movement.



*O(h)* forces the audience to find the clarity (that is, if there is any) amidst Casebolt and Smith's comical attempt at over-clarification. The hour-long performance is more than "just" dance. They interweave gestural phrases (that are in near perfect unison), popular song, modern choreography, scripted lines, and a six to eight minute closing improvisation exercise where the audience gets to be a "fly on the wall," watching the duo as they create and choreograph together.

The show made me anxious and a little uncomfortable-and not just because I was watching my former college professor strip down and dance in his Superman underwear and run around the stage to Casebolt's rendition of "Proud Mary". While obviously sexy and silly, *O(h)* also brings up some critical questions about dance. The show makes you laugh, but it also makes you think. *O(h)* explores gender representation, modern canonical choreography, artistic copyright, and the audience's insatiable search for a dance's meaning. Casebolt and Smith ask: Why do ideas of heteronormativity still dominate popular dance performance? Is there such a thing as "ownership" of a movement or style of dance? And what exactly do we mean by "contemporary" dance? *O(h)* doesn't leave the audience with any concrete answers, only with the exclamation, "Oh...I've never thought of it that way before..."

Photos by Julie Lemberger of the 92Y.