

'O(h)' review: Effortless teamwork from witty pair

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Photo:

Jeff D. Larson

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casebolt and smith's O(h) at ODC Theater, Thursday, August 8, Friday, August 9 and Saturday, August 10 at 8 pm
Photographed: Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt Photo credit: Jeff D. Larson

Los Angeles performance artists Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt perform in "O(h)" at ODC Theater, giving the local dance scene something it needs.

While casebolt and smith identify their artistic relationship in lower-case letters, what they do - a melange of dance and talk that's witty, instructive and eminently sane - is a capital entertainment all the way. The Northern California premiere of the Los Angeles-based team's "O(h)" Thursday evening at **ODC Theater** reignited a nice little bonfire in a month that needed something hot and tasty from the local dance scene. Those who welcome a helping of irreverence with their movement should have the best time of all at this 2010 opus.

Liz Casebolt and **Joel Smith** have been collaborating since 2006, and the effortless teamwork that permeates this well-traveled, hour-long self-referential wallow in modern dance cliches impresses most of all. The couple, by the way, while skewering conventional thinking about dance, glide

through the space with a blithe, airy quality that sustains them through the evening, and they integrate the spoken word and the gesture as well as anybody I have seen since **David Gordon** a generation ago.

The pair are incisive but kind to the pomposities of the modern dance movement. They confront the choreographic search for clarity in the opening number, as they launch into a unison of extended arms, stitching their patter to the routine with near perfection. They explain that they are only a working pair (he's gay, she's not), so there's no fear that art will intrude on life. And, they inform us, we shouldn't expect from them large-scale diversions like "Revelations" or "Petite Mort."

Casebolt and Smith prowl for cultural banalities. A raised arm signifying, "I represent the working class," is nonsense. A dancer may collapse on the floor because (as Smith proclaims), "my flesh needs to feel the earth," but it simply looks ridiculous.

Patrons desperate for meaning in dance should relax at "O(h)." As Smith demonstrates in an improvised solo, looking away from the audience and staring them down in rapid succession, for example, can be interpreted in any number of ways, none of them especially persuasive.

The pair then tell us something about dance that many of us might confess only to ourselves. The sight of bare flesh exerts a powerful allure for dance audiences. Cavorting in matching Superman briefs makes that point and then some.

But the pair muster their sharpest rapiers to puncture dances inspired by popular songs. Nothing in "O(h)" tops Casebolt, garbed in a pristine pink dress, demolishing "I Feel Pretty," line by line. Considering **Stephen Sondheim**'s rueful reconsideration of his "West Side Story" lyrics, she's right on target here.

Language, as much as gesture, comes in for a ribbing. You cringe as the team bats around performance studies jargon; you squirm when Smith uses "privilege" as a verb.

The finale, an improvised collaboration on being stuck in a "heavy, heavy fog," abounds in the expected gropings through space. The shock of recognition prompts chuckles. Casebolt and Smith really do appreciate modern dance. It's the accompanying narcissism that drives them to delicious excess.

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