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Casebolt and Smith to Perform at CAF December 1

Dance Theater Duo Demystifies Dance

By Elizabeth Schwyzer

“We get a lot of compliments on the way we use gesture in our work,” Liz Casebolt explains. As she speaks, she smiles broadly at the audience, waves, then clasps her hands together and draws them over one shoulder, as if preparing to slug a baseball. “Not because those gestures are incredibly dynamic,” she continues, shimmying her shoulders forward and swinging her arms behind her like a ski jumper, “but because we tend to reveal what they mean at the end of the dance.”



Photo: Jeff Larson

This Los Angeles-based dance theater duo explodes preconceptions about dance, and has a great time doing it.

Beside her, Joel Smith has been following the same movement pattern. Now he chimes in: “We feel that even though our audiences enjoy coming to their own conclusions about what the work means,” he says, shaking his hands rapidly, “they’re still going to have that burning desire to know if they’re right.”

Welcome to *O(h)*, the latest creation of Los Angeles-based dance-theater duo casebolt and smith. Since 2006, these two dance artists have been collaborating on shows that explode preconceptions about dance and expose the processes of questioning, negotiating, and meaning making that lead up to a performance. Tonight, Thursday, December 1, casebolt and smith bring *O(h)* to Santa Barbara’s Contemporary Arts Forum.

Like its title, *O(h)* is more about surprise, confusion, and revelation than it is about answers. Smith and Casebolt use not only movement, music, costumes, and lighting, but also singing and conversation to explore a range of questions about the artistic process. The result is a unique blend of dance and theater that eliminates the proverbial fourth wall and invites the audience to be part of a conversation, rather than struggling to figure out what the dance “means.”

“I think a lot of people are jaded about dance,” Smith explained in a telephone interview last week. “They’ve tried a class or been dragged along to a performance and turned off by it. We want to collapse the pretentiousness with which dance tries to carry itself.”

Both Smith and Casebolt are experienced performers who are deeply engaged in both creative investigation and the academic study of dance. Casebolt is a full-time dance faculty member at L.A. Valley College; Smith teaches at Scripps and UCLA. They each hold an MFA in experimental choreography from UC Riverside. And while the study and practice of dance is central to both of their lives, they’re determined not to take themselves too seriously.

Instead, they work to bring audiences “onto their team.” In their performances, they acknowledge the various ways in which dance is problematic, and they laugh about it in the process. “I think audiences respond to our friendship, and the casualness with which we speak to them and to each other,” Casebolt noted. “It puts people at ease right away, so there’s less anxiety around whether they’re ‘getting it.’”

Yet while humor, familiarity, and candor are central to their work, shows like *O(h)* are also carefully crafted over months of collaboration. Most of the dialogue and movement has been methodically planned just as in a more traditional play or dance performance. What’s different is that while conventional performance leaves the audience out of the investigative process, *O(h)* invites the audience to participate in the same inquiry that the performers live with on a daily basis.

Even in a short phone conversation, it’s evident these two get a kick out of their work together. Despite occasional tensions, Smith and Casebolt describe their relationship as one characterized by ease and make it clear that friendship comes first. And while they do like to poke a little fun at the way some people make dances, they also implicate themselves in the same problems.

“We do make fun of choreographers who do stuff like have their dancers scratch themselves as if they have a disease,” Casebolt added, giggling a little. “But it’s lovingly done ... for the most part. We’ve all been in those dances.”

This Thursday, December 1, at 7 p.m., casebolt and smith bring *O(h)* to the Contemporary Arts Forum (653 Paseo Nuevo) as part of the Forum Lounge series. The show is free and open to the public. For info, call 966-5373 or visit sbcaf.org.