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Casebolt and Smith's comic dance theater

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith have asked themselves if what they do falls under the definition of “being a dance company. We’ve been calling ourselves ‘dance-theater,’ but where do you draw the line between dance and theater?” asks Casebolt.

Since premiering as a company in 2006, the Los Angeles-based choreographers and performers have created a series of narrative-driven duets informed by a postmodern, deconstructive

aesthetic in which they analyze what they’re doing onstage as they’re doing it and where movement and speaking assume equal prominence. Over the years, they’ve also worked hard on their comic timing and at creating carefully scripted material that’s intelligent, entertaining and accessible to a variety of audiences.

“There’s a lot of crossover in our work between dance and theater and part of our strategy now is to see if we can cultivate a larger audience,” Smith says. “Yes, our work has a lot of dance references but theater people might enjoy it because of the form our work takes.”

For these reasons, Casebolt and Smith have targeted theatergoers who might not normally see dance in the marketing of their latest show “O(h),” where they spend an hour humorously dissecting their creative process and which will run for six weeks at the Actors Company Theatre in West Hollywood.

“We’ve seen the response we’ve gotten from theater audiences,” says Casebolt, referring to the duo’s success performing for two years in a row at the Minnesota Fringe Festival. “People would come up to us and say, ‘I don’t get dance but I really like what you’re doing.’”

Though much of contemporary dance today features speaking dancers, textual elements and other narrative devices in order to create the “theater” in dance-theater, Casebolt and Smith observe that many artists don’t succeed in intertwining the two mediums to create a cohesive whole.

Often, “the dance and the theater is separate ... you see shows where it’s like they do this ‘theater’ thing and then they do a dance that’s reacting to the theater thing,” Casebolt says.

In their own work, Casebolt and Smith believe that movement and conversation “inform each other simultaneously. Liz might disagree with me but I think we’re deflating the notion that movement can speak as clearly as words,” says Smith. “There are so many times I’ve wanted to shout out during a dance performance, ‘just say what you mean!’ I know there are a lot of



scholars out there who would argue that dance speaks for itself but I'm just saying that moving and speaking achieve different things."

-- Susan Josephs

Photo: Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt. Credit: Jeff Larson