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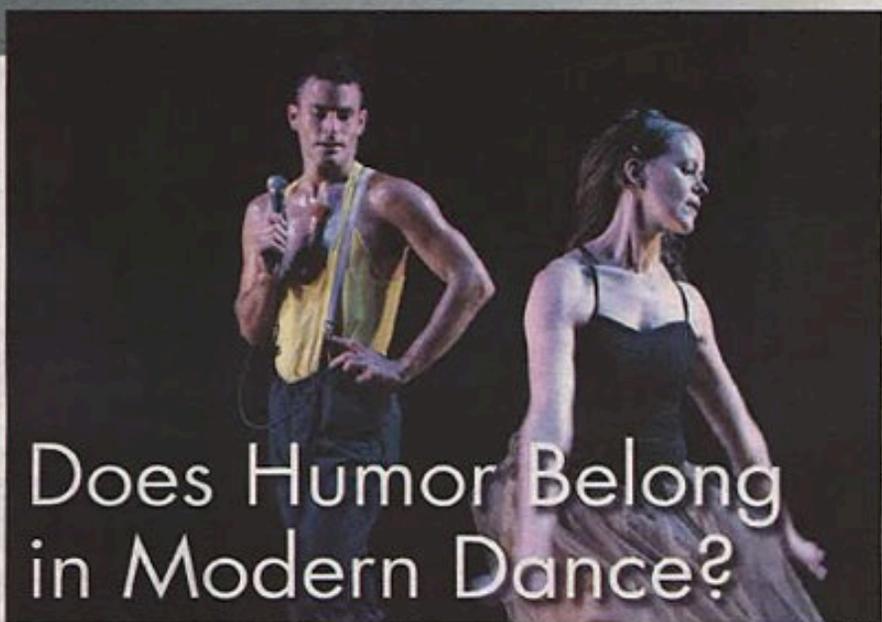
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Jeff Larson photo

## Does Humor Belong in Modern Dance?

Casebolt and Smith puncture the pomposity of performance art

IF YOU GO

### CASEBOLT AND SMITH

When: 7 p.m. Thursday  
Where: Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, 653 Paseo Nuevo  
Cost: Free  
Information: 966-5373 or sbcaf.org

BY TED MILLS  
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

If you've ever sat through a modern dance performance and felt it was pretentious, over-serious, or a series of arcane symbols, you are not alone. Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, who have been in partnership since 2006, started making their own dance-works together and found that criticism of the artform to be part of their performance.

They come to CAF next week during First Thursday to let us know it's OK to laugh at modern dance. The performance is called "O(h)," and you just might be saying that several times that evening.

Casebolt and Smith met at an audition for Hassan Christopher's dance company in

Los Angeles. Casebolt had just moved from Arizona, and Smith was just out of grad school. They danced for the company for four months and became strong friends.

"One of the reasons why we got along so well is that we couldn't enjoy anything we'd go and watch," he says. "We had a two-block rule; we couldn't talk about the work in the lobby, but we'd be elbowing each other all the way through a show. It's not that the dances weren't enjoyable, but it was taking itself way too seriously."

When opportunities arose for both of them to choreograph a short piece outside their main work, they decided to collaborate. A year and a half later they had an hour-long show, "Popped." The performance questioned their own working methods, asking out loud why dancers and choreographers make certain choices. And it was funny.

Smith is gay and Casebolt is straight, and they explore this dynamic in several ways, especially in the loaded world of romantic duets. Smith also takes on gay stereotypes, taboos and more in "O(h)" and other works. (Their website warns: "Casebolt and Smith are not responsible for any children who turn gay as a result of watching this performance.")

"We poke fun but in a way

that illuminates our craft," he says. "We're over-indulgent in ways that we do recognize. We spend more time talking about what we can't and won't do than what we want to do."

For all the humor of their work, Smith is very careful with his word choice, and his speech is laden with grad school buzzwords. Asked to describe the absolute worst performance they've seen, one that embodies everything they criticize, Smith is recalcitrant and, in the end, fair. He's here to wag fingers, but not point directly at anybody. (For the curious, the worst was a work by Hofesh Shechter at UCLA's Royce Hall that assaulted the audience with loud, distorted rock music).

The criticism is a corrective, really. Casebolt and Smith want dance to be fun, and not hampered by seriousness unless it really requires it. Smith conjectures that because of the rigorous training needed for modern dance, choreographers delved inward, producing a lot of pieces about personal struggle, pain, and suffering. "A lot of it became 'victim art,'" he says. "And it's almost sacred. And that's what the public perceives modern dance to be."

Well, no longer.

"We have been told we have destroyed some people's experience of dance," he laughs. "And that's a good thing and a bad thing."

But you'll never look at dance the same way again.

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