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'O(h)': Duo transcends dance while explaining it

Rachel Howard Published 3:54 pm, Wednesday, August 7, 2013

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Liz Casebolt says she and dance partner Joel Smith are "like the kids in the back of the class."

Four years ago, as a smash hit at the Minnesota Fringe Festival, the performing duo casebolt and smith (the company name uses modest lowercase) found themselves with an enviable branding conundrum.

"We kept hearing 'I don't really like dance, but I love what you guys are doing' from theater people," **Liz Casebolt** recalled.

"But we're both college dance professors! We want people to see dance and understand it," **Joel Smith**

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said.

The quirky comic pair - 44-year-old Casebolt is a straight girl-next-door type, while 36-year-old Smith, who is gay, could pass for an Abercrombie model - gradually found their niche. Their show "O(h)," running through Sunday at **ODC Theater**, makes loving fun of the ponderous and inscrutable side of dance through dialogue, show-tunes and even a little break dancing.

"Our goal is to expose the contemporary dance tropes that choreographers rely on without questioning," Smith said, speaking between tour gigs in Toronto.

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"Sometimes our field needs a little more levity," said Casebolt, who cites **Joe Goode** among her influences. "We're not super-heavy and personal. We're interested in loosening up our field and pulling it apart a bit."

Indeed, the L.A. friends can't seem to help it. They met as dancers in Hassan Christopher's **Company of Strangers** where, Casebolt said, "We were like the kids in the back of the class."

"If my head ended up in her crotch because of some complicated move, I'd say, 'Never mind my head right here!'" Smith said.

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Both graduates of UC Riverside's MFA program in experimental choreography, they discovered not only critical acclaim, but the benefits of an extended run at the Minnesota Fringe Fest - and decided to borrow a few theater-world strategies for their next show. "O(h)" premiered in a 30-minute version at New York's **Joyce SoHo**. But to develop the full-length work, Casebolt and Smith rented a small **L.A. theater** for six weeks - unheard of in contemporary dance.

"Doing three shows a weekend for six weeks, every show wasn't so precious," Smith said. "It allowed more time to relax and let things change in the moment."

They hoped L.A.'s theater audience would adore them as much as Minneapolis' - and they were right,

"O(h)" attracted full houses, a spate of rave reviews, and \$23,000 in fundraising. Now "O(h)" is booked through 2014 at places like New York's Harkness Dance Festival. But Casebolt and Smith know the secret to their success is keeping the chemistry fresh.

"The work is not about us, but the way we deliver what it's about is through our rapport and our personalities," Casebolt said.

"Every time we go on stage we hug and remind each other: 'Have fun. Be patient, '" Smith said. "Be listening to each other and to the people in the room. Respond."

If you go

O(h): 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. \$23-\$28. ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F. (415) 863-9834.

www.odctheater.org.

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