



O(h) West Hollywood, with casebolt and smith

FEATURES by Amy Tofte | January 13, 2012

A six-weekend run for a dance production in a small LA theater? That's what casebolt and smith, AKA Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, are attempting with *O(h)* at Actors Company Theatre. They're defying expectations in other ways too, including features that "dance snobs" may not like and a collaboration with architects, Hadrian Predock and John Frane, in the design of the space.

Casebolt and smith sounds like a household name, something you should already know, mysteriously intriguing but somehow familiar. After touring the country with stops in New York, Santa Barbara and the Minnesota Fringe Festival with their latest project *O(h)*, this Los Angeles-based performance team brings it to Actors Company Theater in West Hollywood, opening a six-weekend run tonight. They're prepared to blast their audience's expectations for dance, theater and the sexual politics that can seep into any creative process—particularly the male/female dance partner scenario.

Self-producing in the final tech week of rehearsals would be enough to strain any production. But Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith are rock steady in their reflections on six years dancing together—exploring not just their personal relationship (which is just friends, by the way) but also their place in contemporary performance.



Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt in "O(h)"

Smith sums it up with a twist, "People will come up to us after a show and say, 'I don't like dance...but I like what you do.'"

"Umm...thank you?" Casebolt provides the punchline in perfect deadpan.

As in most great relationships, casebolt and smith ground each other with a shared artistic aesthetic, a mutual professional respect and plenty of quick humor. And like most dancers, they express with their bodies as much as their words.

"We don't care if the dance snobs like our work," Smith throws out with a laugh.

"Well..." Casebolt teeters on a more reserved opinion.

"Dance snobs aren't necessarily our audience," Smith continues. "We really are about those people who dread seeing the same old things when they see dance."

“Because we hate those same things,” Casebolt completes the thought.



Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith

Although this collaborative team has toured the U.S. and internationally as casebolt and smith, both call Los Angeles home and have found ways to balance their creative lives while earning a living in the classroom. Casebolt serves as an assistant professor at Los Angeles Valley College while Smith balances teaching at UC Riverside, Scripps College and UCLA.

With plenty of critical accolades for their dancing, the team’s performance style—which involves unabashed self-commentary about dance—was compared to the ‘60s sketch comedy work of Elaine May and Mike Nichols by Victoria Looseleaf in a 2008 *LA Times* article. Breaking the fourth wall and talking to the audience isn’t just part of what casebolt and smith do — it’s the foundation for their show and an invitation for the audience to have just as much fun as they’re having.

“The work we do has so much to do with who we are as people,” Casebolt reflects. “Our relationship, our friendship, is constantly present and we keep evolving that.”

The relationship Casebolt speaks of was discovered at a Los Angeles audition. More than six years ago, the two were both cast and became fast friends creating new work with Hassan Christopher’s Los Angeles-based dance troupe, Company of Strangers.



Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt

“He was such a blessing to work with,” admits Smith.

“We felt so lucky,” adds Casebolt. “He’s a developer of technique alongside creating productions.”

“We got to know each other in that atmosphere,” Smith says. “And it’s the way we still work together.”

Company of Strangers, known for its own brand of blended dance styles from contemporary hip-hop to more classical shades of modern dance, proved fertile ground for casebolt and smith to discover each other as dancers and build the mutual respect

that would keep them creating as a team. Something political emerged in their dancing relationship and in their determination to challenge the art form to which they had dedicated their lives. The result is something that straddles dance and theater, movement and dialogue.

“We just kept working together and creating little duets,” Casebolt muses, discussing how they eventually branched out on their own.

Those duets led to more performance opportunities and a deeper working connection. The official creation of the company of casebolt and smith seemed inevitable, and it happened in 2006. *O(h)* has developed over time and already received praise for its boundary-pushing, irreverent style and for its creators’ charisma as they deliver dance inspired by theater, with plenty of sardonic commentary.

While some might describe elements of their work as having a “meta-layer” or deconstruction



Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith in “O(h)”

elements, casebolt and smith are less concerned with labels and more interested in letting the audience in on the joke. Rules are not only meant to be broken, but defying expectations offers opportunities for humor and pragmatic observations on contemporary dance in general. Their one-hour performance culminates in a final 10 minutes of complete improvisation.

“We’ve had to convince people that none of it is planned,” Smith explains. “In Minneapolis we had people come multiple times just to test us. They couldn’t believe it would be different every night.”

They’ve been doing this long enough to know it’s not easy. “It’s thrilling, really,” Smith interjects.

“Because we have no idea what’s going to happen, either,” Casebolt responds.

“And it’s satisfying to be at a point in our training and our careers where we can do something so daring,” Smith adds. Referring back to the audience, he says, “It’s every bit as exciting for us as it is for them.”

“And we can push each other in ways now that we couldn’t do when we were starting out,” Casebolt concludes, nodding readily.

For casebolt and smith, the unconventional continues making them feel right at home — even down to their latest adventure in collaboration, with architects turned set designers.

“They were familiar with our work and we knew what they did,” Casebolt explains. “But we had no idea what they’d say.”



Hadrian Predock John Frane

The LA architecture team of Hadrian Predock and John Frane (Predock Frane Architects) accepted the challenge of defining a physical space that could harmonize with the final evolution of *O(h)*.

With sustainability as a driving force, Predock and Frane operate a collaborative research and development design studio, with projects ranging from small-scale installations to large civic buildings. Their most recent installations were seen at LA Forum Gallery in Los Angeles, Pomona College Museum of Art and Glow Santa Monica 2010.

“We’re really engaged with how space is used,” says architect John Frane, standing on the half-completed set. “We wanted to see how we could create something that physically breaks down space for the audience and complements what [casebolt and smith] are doing.”

The spotless white stage is accented with colorful glowing EL wire angled from the ceiling and along the floor into precisely calculated paths through the empty darkness. Even under the work lights, it’s a magical void. And the architects have their own way of taking the known and shaking up expectations in design.

First order of business — to map casebolt and smith’s dance movements. These were put into a computer program, creating a visual analysis of their paths. Predock and Frane use this method—



Predock Frane Design Concept

called “generative repetition”—to study the sequence of actions and create a map of “hot spots” on the proposed set. This information helps the architects visually break up the stage to best accentuate the movement.

The set becomes an extension of the clinical analysis paired with inspired commentary, much like the casebolt and smith performance itself—a marriage of precision and motivation.

“I enjoy exploring multi-disciplinary work,” admits Smith when talking about the analytical process that feeds their creativity. “Working with [Predock and

Frane] was an easy fit for us.”

The collaboration fuels a common desire between dancers and designers to ask questions, without necessarily providing all the answers. The questions particularly ask about space -- and how dance, theater and live performance create inherent expectations from both sides of the fourth wall.

“As architects we’re also inspired by the work of [painter] Francis Bacon, [light and space artist] James Turrell and [sculptor] Fred Sandback,” Frane says, gesturing into the new theatrical home he’s building for the LA premiere of *O(h)*. “Artists of the ’60s and ’70s were very experimental about space.”

It all may sound a little heady. “But it’s really a drug,” jokes Smith. “And we totally get off on it. We have such a good time with the audience.”

Los Angeles dancers and Los Angeles designers in a six-week run that’s usually considered too long for the run of a dance show. But it’s not all dance, it’s also theater—and a risk casebolt and smith are hoping will pay off in reaching even more audiences.

“The thing about LA is there is so much that can happen here logistically that would be much more difficult in places like New York,” says Casebolt. She explains how touring has given them an appreciation for longer runs after going through all the headaches of producing, creating the full atmosphere of the show with set, lights and sound cues. “Eighteen performances may seem like a lot for LA, but it’s not necessarily in other places. It’s nice to have a chance to really perform the show several times.”

“And being spread out geographically with reliance on cars isn’t always a bad thing,” adds Smith. “Being able to park your car in an alley and load-in is a practical concern when it comes to producing.”

Collaboration, community, gender and defying expectations—these are the words casebolt and smith use to describe what they want to explore next, in tandem with reflections on where they’ve landed with this particular production.

“*O(h)* asks a lot of questions of our own longevity and the anxiety we have about our next big thing,” says Casebolt.

“What will happen to us in the next five years?” asks Smith. “I think we’d rather keep reaching the people who don’t think they like dance. We keep looking for ways to put what we do—putting dance—in an accessible context...”

“...and find a place for this kind of work alongside other kinds of dance,” concludes Casebolt.



Joel Smith and Liz Casebolt

***O(h)*, written and performed by casebolt and smith. Opens Jan. 13. Plays Fri.-Sat. 8 pm; Sun. 5 pm. Through Feb. 19. Tickets: \$30; students and seniors \$22. The Actors Company Theatre, 916a N. Formosa Ave, West Hollywood. 800-838-3006. www.caseboltandsmith.com. www.facebook.com/caseboltandsmith.**

All *O(h)* production photos by Jeff Larson