

Casebolt and Smith

By Victoria Looseleaf

Actors Company Theatre
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Reviewed by Victoria Looseleaf

O(h), the hour-long dance/theater piece created and performed by the Los Angeles-based duo Casebolt and Smith could very well be subtitled, “Modern Dance for Dummies.” With Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith chattering, singing, and gamboling about the stage while poking fun at the genre, the work, in its L.A. premiere, rarely takes itself seriously as the duo seeks to expand the contemporary dance audience.



Founded in 2006 by Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, the company of two has had success outside of Los Angeles, filling theaters in Minnesota and even at the Joyce Theatre, but in presenting 18 shows during a six-week L.A. run, the question remains as to how their quirky act will fare, within and outside of the dance scene.

On a cool minimalist set of luminescent EL wire created by architects Hadrian Predock and John Frane, the pair begins deconstructing the “mysteries” of modern dance: Executing sped-up gestures while talking about “clarity,” the dancer’s “breath as soundscape,” and how they are limited as a duo, they also run in circles, toss off high kicks, and attempt intentionally awkward lifts.

Gender politics come into play, too, with Casebolt spouting phrases such as “gay,” “not gay,” and “still gay,” while Smith (lean, elastic—and gay) manipulates his body to both parody and impress. In full-throttle soprano, Casebolt belts out, “I Feel Pretty,” questioning Sondheim’s lyrics and the objectification of women.

Demonstrating how choreography is made, the couple goes into unison “dancey” mode, with the duo expanding on a step-touch move set to the sounds of “Proud Mary.” And yes, sacred cows are lampooned—hello, Martha Graham—with Casebolt offering her take on contract and release, in a tutu skirt, no less.

For those aching for unadulterated dance, that’s part of the show, too. Unfortunately, the pair’s movement vocabulary is limited and redundant, with Smith, 34, out-dancing Casebolt, 43. The finale, in which they construct a dance based on their own improvisation-like utterances (“trapped,” “confused,” “a bitter mess”) drags on through various permutations. Casebolt and Smith, potentially a breath of fresh terpsichorean air, would benefit from a director and some judicious editing, insuring the stuff they spoof does not sink under their own self-involved, albeit clever, machinations.

Photos by Jeff Larson, courtesy Casebolt and Smith.