

"O(h)": Casebolt and smith dance a dissertation

By [Jay Gabler](#), [TC Daily Planet](#), August 16, 2010



As a graduate student at Harvard, I took a class in women's psychology taught by respected British academic Helen Haste. The previous semester, many of us had taken Carol Gilligan's course on gender and society, and Gilligan had urged all of us to question the restrictive norms of conventional academia, to express ourselves fully and subjectively. Prof. Haste, then, was somewhat surprised when, on the first day of her class, a stout, balding male student raised his hand and asked—in all sincerity—whether she would accept his final term paper in the form of an interpretive dance.

The idea of an academic treatise in the form of a dance seemed a lot more absurd before I was introduced to casebolt and smith. Casebolt and smith, earning a rapturous reception at the Minnesota Fringe Festival for the second consecutive year, are becoming known as a couple of America's funniest contemporary dancers (that's not saying much, which is part of their point)—but in [O\(h\)](#), an examination of the composition process that's the first of their performances I've seen, they take the equally radical step of incorporating text into their performance directly rather elliptically.

The performers explain what they're doing as they're doing it, which feels deliciously subversive. In an art form that normally thrives on ambiguity—or, at least, *thinks* it does—casebolt and smith observe that most dances are built on simple elements that are all too easy to make sense of once you understand the movement language. (They dance that observation, but they also tell you directly.)

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith seem accustomed to being the smartest dancers in the room, and though they both strip down to their skivvies in *O(h)*, the really sexy part of the show is the way they flaunt their big, naked brains. That sounds a little obnoxious, and it is, but it's somehow obnoxious and lovable at the same time—like Bill Murray. Casebolt and smith have a point to make, but they have a gleefully ridiculous time making it. For all the pair's provocative antics, they're clearly passionate about their art, and ultimately they demonstrate that the power of dance is beyond literal explanation. They dance that demonstration, and—being casebolt and smith—they say it right out loud.