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# Explorations With Moves and Words

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith Explain Their Work ‘O(h)’

By **GIA KOURLAS** MARCH 2, 2014

Liz Casebolt and Joel Smith, two amiable Los Angeles choreographers who have worked together since 2006, have a mission: to demystify the choreographic process and make dance accessible. They strive to appeal, as Mr. Smith explained to an audience on Friday, to “non-highfalutin dance communities.”

But too much accessibility can be a turnoff. On Friday, the pair presented “O(h)” as part of the 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Festival’s Stripped/Dressed series, which is organized by the choreographer Doug Varone and is devised to reveal what goes into making a dance. The first half of each program is informal, as artists describe their inspiration to the audience, and the second half features the complete work.

As terrible as most question-and-answer sessions with choreographers are after a show, hearing from them first can be worse. What remains of a dance after its skeleton has been revealed? In works by this pair, who sign themselves **Casebolt and Smith**, movement is already layered with text. “O(h)” involves the choreographers pairing gestural movement sequences with words and proposing big-picture questions about appropriation in dance and what makes a work contemporary.

During the first half, Ms. Casebolt and Mr. Smith spoke about how overwhelmed they were at simply being in the Bottenwieser Hall at the Y, where Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations” and José Limón’s “Moor’s Pavane” were first performed. Since there was already a “Revelations” reference in “O(h),”

they chose to create a new section for this performance in homage to “The Moor’s Pavane,” Limón’s distillation of “Othello.”

They explained that they came up with key words — like envy, innocence and betrayal — to signify movement poses. For “betrayal,” Ms. Casebolt held one arm up and one arm down, while Mr. Smith, turning away from her, leaned forward with his leg bent behind him. The movement appeared in the later performance of “O(h),” which began with Ms. Casebolt and Mr. Smith performing a unison phrase of intricate hand-and-arm gestures while describing their swirly, sharp shapes.

Later, they offered solos, in which Mr. Smith opined the meaning of contemporary dance, and Ms. Casebolt sang “I Feel Pretty” while commenting on the lyrics under her breath: “I don’t want her to need a boy to make her feel pretty.” There was more talking to come — they needed to improvise an ending — but by that point, this game was played out. The 92Y Harkness Dance Festival continues through March 23 at the 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Avenue; 212-415-5500, 92y.org.

A version of this review appears in print on March 3, 2014, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: Explorations With Moves and Words.