

Dancing Machine

Joel Smith, of the performance troupe casebolt and smith, discusses stalking hot guys in dance class, floppy wrists and the importance of Chaz Bono on *Dancing With The Stars*.

By Christopher Donaldson

No matter where you look, dancer Joel Smith compels attention. By day, he teaches dance theory and modern critique at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif. And by night, he glides across a stage in a white butcher's apron and a pair of Superman underwear that lend themselves to various interpretations from his performance partner Liz Casebolt, the other half of casebolt and smith, the theater/dance company the two founded in 2006.

In the duo's new show *O(h)*, a fast-paced, multi-layered meta-theatrical work, which opens January 13 for a six-week run at The Actors Company Theatre in West Hollywood, Smith turns the framework of dance and the creative process inside out with his zany repartee on everything from gender and sexuality to pop-culture and what you can and cannot do when making dance. He also offers fresh and irreverent choreography that doesn't overwhelm the audience, which is to say, no one will turn gay while under the influence of his performance. Smith tells *The Advocate* about floppy wrists, the future of modern dance, and the importance of Chaz Bono on *Dancing With The Stars*.



***The Advocate:* In *O(h)*, you infuse the performance with an explicitly campy, gay voice. Is it safe to say that you don't take modern dance too seriously?**

Joel Smith: Well, the show definitely pokes fun at the dance community and all of the many ways it uses clichés to represent even the most basic gestures onstage. It's nearly impossible to take dance, whether concert or commercial, seriously when many of the works out there come off as too literal, abstract or pretentious. Before audiences come to our show, they usually don't expect modern dance to have a sense of humor.

But you also treat *O(h)* as a serious study of sexuality and gender politics. Why bring these elements to the stage?

If we don't talk about these things, as a community, nothing will ever change. In "*O(h)*" we interrupt the whole show every night just so I can come out as gay via a rendition of "Proud Mary." It fits the moment and gives the audience permission to acknowledge my sexuality, as opposed to creating an entire show that doesn't acknowledge that.

Is *O(h)* taking dance in a new gay direction?

I certainly hope so because I'm consistently dismayed at how many professional dancers are told to act more masculine and less gay on TV, in film, dance and theater. Look at shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*. Openly gay performers are consistently told by the judges that their wrists are too floppy and that they need to butch it up. That said, I still feel like it's an important show in that it makes dance accessible to wide audiences. Also, all of those kids are brilliant dancers.

Did you watch Chaz Bono on *Dancing With The Stars*?

Yes. It was a huge step forward for the LGBT community. In this country, especially on television, audiences look at dance as this historically iconic art-form that has always been based around heterosexual couples. But that's the sort of balance the industry has to create, I guess, in order to stay mainstream. We can take five steps forward, but simultaneously take two steps back. Still, we have to applaud the steps being taken.

Do you think *O(h)* holds appeal for a wide audience?

Absolutely. The piece is very accessible. Even jaded dancegoers, people who have seen a lot of dance and have decided that they just don't get it, will have something concrete to grasp onto.

How does *O(h)* differ from other multi-layered dance performances?

Unlike most other performances out there, we risk being accused of pointing fingers unnecessarily at the dance community. I don't think that many choreographers implicate themselves, like we do, about what is problematic in our field.



What is problematic in the modern dance community exactly?

Too many dance artists think that their work is going to save the world. With that type of attitude, the final product usually dissolves into arrogance and public masturbation. That's not to say work can't be self-indulgent.

You formed casebolt and smith with Liz Casebolt in 2006. What made you decide to open a dance company in Los Angeles, a city where few institutions will produce local artists?

I wanted to have creative control over my work in a city that I love. When I was in college, I lived in New York City for a summer and thought, well, maybe I could move there. But it was a sort of love/hate relationship every day. I felt that if I was really going to dance professionally, I'd rather be close to my family.

Did you grow up in Los Angeles?

No. I'm from a small conservative town called Yucaipa, which sits about 70 miles east of LA.

What led you into dance?

One day many years ago, as an undergraduate at UC Davis, I followed a hot guy into a dance class.

Stalking a hot undergraduate led you into dance?

Yes. I had been following him around campus for several weeks before I found out that he was going to take the class. Soon after I enrolled, we started dating. He was my first boyfriend and if anything else, my first introduction to the world of dance.

There is a time to love and there is a time to dance.

Exactly.

For more information, visit caseboltandsmith.com