

Fresh Meat Like No Other

By **Sondra Solovay**

Founder and Artistic Director of Fresh Meat Productions, the nation's leading transgender arts organization, and producer of the acclaimed annual Fresh Meat festival of transgender and queer performance, choreographer Sean Dorsey recently completed his phenomenal full-length dance performance, *The Outsider Chronicles*. An intuitive storyteller, Dorsey breaks boundaries by putting the transgender body on the dance stage and by translating queer/transgender experience into dance. On a crisp December afternoon we discussed his vision, methods, and goals.

(SF Bay Times:) How do you create dance that is appreciated both by dance-enthusiasts and non-dance folks?

(Dorsey:) I want to create work that is completely accessible and has an impact on the audience. I am not interested in abstract movement for its own sake. All artists make work from the identity we inhabit. I don't mean that everyone makes 'identity art' (God forbid!) — I mean that who we are informs every single element of the work we create. Straight choreographers choreograph heterosexual love duets. I make queer ones. Non-trans choreographers depict non-trans life stories. I tell trans stories. I am passionate about bringing our trans bodies, stories, lives to the stage—and I do it in a way that non-trans people can not only learn from these new stories, but also identify with them. My artistic drive is to find the universal in the specific. This is why my audiences are composed of trans and queer folks, but also the straight dance crowd and the artsy crowd.

How did you get into dance?

I always loved dance and dabbled in it in my youth, but didn't start my formal training until I was 25. My focus was creative writing, theater, and music. Then I spent six years in University—undergrad in Political Science, and then post-grad in Community Economic Development. My whole life at this time was devoted to activism and community organizing. For a long time, I felt that choosing to be an artist would be selfish, so I resisted the fierce pull I felt toward dance. I sat down one day and looked from beginning to end through a journal of images I'd been keeping for several years—you know, clippings and pictures. And every single image without exception was of the body

in motion, of dance. I decided to go to dance school within the month.

How does your creative process differ from other choreographers?

Many choreographers start with a

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piece of music or with dancers in the studio. I start my pieces four months to a year before ever stepping into the studio. I start with concepts, abstract text, pages and pages of notes, and a blank notebook. I fuse the ideas in my head, and usually the ideas or story elements inspire my music choices. Then, once I have the skeleton of a sound score, I start to visualize the movement vocabulary and start choreographing.

Talk to me about gender.

Gender is complicated. On one hand having a binary system of gender is troublesome and dangerous for people (genderqueer and gender-ambiguous people) who don't fit neatly into either category. On the other hand, the gender binary can be an important part of affirming some people's gender journey, like people who choose to transition or who are transsexual. The safety of these trans people may rely on living within the very binary categories that are so hard for others. People assume we trans folks all have the same needs, priorities, and strategies, which is just not true.

How does your gender status come up as a dancer?

I identify as transgender and am not in the process of any physical transition. I am sure my appearance has cost me many opportunities, but I have to hand it to the local dance community because I feel very respected. My choices are honored, though certain challenges go along with not always "passing"—like reminding people again and again about appropriate pronoun usage. The companies I have danced for offered me spots based on my abili-

ties as a dancer, though I have never received a gendered invitation. There are fewer non-gendered roles out there. If there were queer, trans, or ambiguously gendered male roles I would be drawn to them. I don't identify as a man, but I would be interested in performing in a male role and have audiences experience that.

What impact has your involvement had on the dance world?

A local choreographer was watching me and could not figure out if she was watching a man or a woman. By the end of the piece she decided it did not matter and, as a result, she questioned her own gendering of dancers and roles. She realized that in casting her own work, she could look less for "men" or "women" to fill particular roles but look instead for a certain energy and that she had been limiting herself creatively because of her preconceptions about gender. She did not need someone with a penis; she needed someone with a certain presence.

Despite the fact that trans people have been completely absent or even excluded from modern dance, the dance community has been extremely supportive of my work. I don't make 'victim art', which I think actually alienates and excludes people—I try to make work that welcomes people into understanding my experience, uses humor to open people's hearts and minds, and is framed in such a way that people can relate to that, and say 'yeah, I know what that feels like' or 'I totally remember feeling like that'.

You frequently share the stage with your long-time sweetie, local performer and all-around rock star Shawna Virago. What is it like to be in relationship with a trans performer?

It's nourishing, validating, and empowering to be in this relationship. We are a huge source of strength and affirmation for each other. It is exciting that we are both trans artists but work in different disciplines because it allows us to lend a unique perspective to each other's work.

(Shawna Virago:) Sean and I are artists who happen to be trans, but being trans is just one part of our identities. Our work intersects in some areas of the trans experience, mostly around issues concerning oppression and violence. At the same time there's a lot of joy and

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PHOTO BY A. EVER BOLLEN

Nafis, Sean Dorsey, Johnnie Pratt & Shawna Virago

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Sean especially helps me keep my demons at bay. I hope I do the same for him. As for our art, our work helps change culture. People want to know someone is interested in their stories. I like the responsibility of making art.

(Dorsey:) I feel urgency as well as responsibility because trans people are still fighting for our basic civil rights and the threat of violence is still very real. I have a responsibility both to my trans community and also to the mainstream. My life looks nothing like it would have looked like had I lived even 15 years earlier. I feel

like I am in a very unique and privileged position, poised at this crossroads between the historic discrimination against trans people and a changing tide that is slowly bringing us more visibility and rights. The best way I can help create change is through my art. And I create strong work—my last show moved the audience to tears: they gave me long-standing ovations. How often does that happen? I want that talked about too, more than the trans stuff.

What is one of your favorite things about performing?

I am honestly awed by the feedback I get. I never knew modern dance could make people cry, move them so deeply. People

thank me again and again for my work. I'm just doing what I love to do, and yes I work damned hard at it, but doing what I love moves people to tears? To their feet? Wow. I'm 33. Is this my life?

What's next?

Next up is touring *The Outsider Chronicles* in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. (If anyone has any contacts, let me know!) This year marks the fifth anniversary of Fresh Meat! It will be amazing! (June 15, 16, and 17 at ODC Theater.) Also, in January I will be performing *6 Hours* at the Women on the Way Festival in San Francisco. (Jan. 12, 20, and 27) Visit freshmeatproductions.org for updates.▼