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**Topic: Queering Modern Dance: Sean Dorsey expands queer dance at ODC Theater**

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Queering Modern Dance  
Sean Dorsey expands queer dance at ODC Theater  
by Jessica Robinson

Last weekend, ODC Theater presented two starkly different choreographers in Migrations, a program for emerging artists. The program featured modern choreographer Sean Dorsey and ballet choreographer Amy Seiwart. Both choreographers push the boundaries of their forms—Seiwart through fiercely athletic movement and unexpected duets, Dorsey through the exploration of gendered movement and the inclusion of texts, music and costumes sourced in queer culture. Although many contemporary dancers are queer, few choreographers are actively exploring gender in performance. As a self-identified genderqueer performer, Dorsey offers a fresh perspective on modern dance.

Poised at the intersection of the contemporary dance world and the queer performance world, Dorsey aims to draw in a diverse audience—including queer people who do not often see themselves represented in mainstream modern dance. This effort seemed successful on Friday night as the lobby filled with a combination of ballet aficionados, dykes and gender-queer folks. The queer people in the audience were probably more likely to appreciate "Hero," Dorsey's opening piece. Performed with text by Sini Anderson of Sister Spit, the piece riffed on the humor in gay male personal ads. Dorsey played a queer cowboy in search of a sexual partner. The piece felt like a bit of an 'in-joke' and the choreography was underdeveloped, especially for the second dancer on stage, Ami Student. However, it was refreshing to see such a blatantly queer piece mounted in a modern dance venue, and it will be interesting to watch Dorsey further explore what it means to assume a "masculine" identity through movement.

The highlight of the evening was "a small class of words," a solo which Dorsey



previewed at the San Francisco LGBT Center and which debuted at Fresh Meat, part of the 2002 National Queer Arts Festival. Dorsey designed the sound score for the piece, an exquisite mix of music and language—the text presenting a list of bird names and words relating to taxonomic classification. The score refrained from making the connection between scientific classification and gender boundaries a hard-hitting one. Instead, it provided a richly textured backdrop for the choreography.

Delicate, precise gestures defined the movement in “a small class of word,”— a quick hand gesture echoed the flutter of birds, a slice of the arm through space marked a defining line. Dorsey’s choreography displays clear intention through articulate and beautifully-executed movement. This was particularly true in this piece—each motion seemed designed to highlight either the act of classification or the body’s reaction to it.

The lighting design by Matthew Sarena highlighted the themes of definition and exclusion. The stage was defined by two sharp paths of light crossing the space horizontally and vertically. Dorsey danced at the intersection of these two planes, departing only for small forays into the dark areas of the stage undefined by the light.

Dorsey’s final piece, “Red Tie, Red Lipstick,” was a duet set to a poem by Marcus Rene Van about police brutality against a butch-femme couple. The choreography enhanced the experience of the narrative—focusing on the chemistry between the couple on stage. The effect of the tender, sexy movements of the performers, set against the violence in the text, was devastating. During this piece, I found myself reflecting on the fact that much of the choreography I see refuses to recognize the dancer as a sexual being. Even duets present bodies in a de-sexualized way. “Hero” and “Red Tie” addressed the sexuality of the body in palpable, yet subtle and complicated ways. This is an area where Dorsey’s sensibility as a queer performer is valuable.

Watching Dorsey dance, I am constantly aware of the choices that are being made about movement in relationship to gender. Modern dancers are equipped with a vocabulary of movement possibilities that define a specific (usually mainstream) reality. Much of the movement performed, especially in duets, is gender-specific in subtle ways. Dorsey is clearly no stranger to modern dance training. However as a transgendered performer, Dorsey engages the question of how to create movement that pushes the boundaries of gender presentation. Each piece in Migrations answered the question in a different way. In “Hero,” Dorsey’s playful choreography highlighted traditionally male movements, especially in the pelvis area. While male performers such as Joe Goode and the dancers in Steamroller have brought “feminine” gestures to life with exquisite irony, it’s new and unusual to present “masculine” gestures in the same way. In “Red Tie, Red Lipstick,” Dorsey played with masculine and feminine movement in a more gentle way, and the interplay between Dorsey’s butch and Linda Case’s femme made for one steamy duet. Even within the butch-femme dynamic, Dorsey’s choreography highlighted gender fluidity—Case executed her movements with striking muscularity, while Dorsey moved through the piece with fluid grace. In “A small class of words” Dorsey attempted entire departure from gendered movement. This was the most difficult task, but it also produced the most complex and chorographically satisfying results.

Dorsey’s intelligent and evocative work helps build a frame of reference to enable viewers to experience dance outside of gender. At the same time, Dorsey is helping create a movement vocabulary to signal a newly gendered body. These conscious choices form an important contribution to the process of queering



modern dance.

[ 30 April 2003, 03:08 AM: Message edited by: Jessica Robinson ]