

Jenna Humphrey

Trans- Dance

A Cup of Tea
with Choreographer
Sean Dorsey



photo | Lydia Daniller

I READ A BOOK CALLED *What is Art?* for one of my undergraduate classes, long before that question had acquired, for me, the telling stink of a cliché. I was young and in a haze; blinking in corridors and trespassing under train trestles to photograph graffiti I could rarely interpret, though I liked to wonder what the heavyweights would think. (Tolstoy would approve; Kant would call this bullshit.) I left the course more confused than when I'd started, for the very reason that *What Is Art?* is an impossible question. Even bad art must begin by qualifying as art, so it obviously isn't an issue of quality.

The act of defining has become more elastic in the wake of postmodernism, losing much of its authority, but that doesn't change the intrinsic human urge to make sense of the world. Writers must continue to write, poets to muse, thinkers to postulate. Those who have invested in art often find themselves drawn back to that question of what it is or how it should function. Oscar Wilde claims that "All art is quite useless," and Benjamin Constant first coined the idiom, *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). Yet we've come far since Aestheticism and social advocates today don't think art has to stay free of an agenda to remain "pure." Purity be damned, the marriage of creative and social efforts can build community while lending cohesion to what choreographer Sean Dorsey calls a world full of "suffering and violence and disorganization and chaos."

Sean Dorsey, founder and Artistic Director of Fresh Meat Productions, settles down with *Tea Party* Features Editor,

Kim Vo, and me into Editor-in-Chief Esther Lee's elegant, bohemian apartment. Kim places a smoking white pitcher of Mighty Leaf tea and little cookies in front of us. We are having—you know—a tea party.

Modern dance is not an art form commonly associated with activism but Sean explains how he attempts, through his choreography, to fuse the two. He sits with his legs crossed, a Harley Davidson muscle shirt tucked into jeans. He exudes confidence as he speaks with the smoothness and coherence of a public speaker, his answers careful but frank. I take small sips of tea and otherwise sit still, oddly at a loss in the presence of someone so together and consider a dancer's secret: manipulating the body so as to move comfortably into gravity's fold. Sean explains how Fresh Meat Productions features programs that encompass an impressive cache of forms, such as modern dance, visual art, hip-hop, gospel music, and theater. In his own choreographic work, Sean "fuses modern dance and storytelling to create dance narratives that speak to the transgender and queer experience."

Sean, since a young age, seems to have begun life with great determination, describing himself as the child of progressive parents in Vancouver, "sitting at the piano hardly able to reach the keys and playing the same bar of music over and over again until I got it just right, and then I was satisfied and could move on."

He divided his youth between two seemingly disparate worlds: on one side, absorbed into the inward realm of theater, music, language; on the other, a preco-

cious campaigner for social rights within his school system and community. He mentions, "I am a ridiculously hard worker. I am very, very driven and I am pretty much always working. I do see myself as having agency in my path."

As an adult, Sean underwent graduate studies in community economic development, not surprising, considering that his mother was a feminist and fought for union rights. "There was one day in the midst of being so entrenched in activism and academia with my own graduate coursework that I sat down and pulled open my journal that contained mostly images I kept of cut-outs. And I looked through them and it struck me that every single image in this journal was of a dancing body or a body moving. So I started diving into dance classes. I took one class at the university where I was making the program and the teacher said, 'You've got to audition for our program. You've got to go into dance. You've got something. You have talents.'"

Sean told himself he would only take a year off from school. He never went back. Instead, he received a scholarship to participate in the Main Dance program and went on to pursue yet another year. "I got there and everything just exploded and opened up and blossomed," says Sean. "It just all fell into my path. It was amazing."

Here in San Francisco, Sean's artistic and activist worlds have finally converged. He fosters community through his artistic directorship for Fresh Meat Productions and his activist work for the Queer Cultural Center, therefore combining social and community-based awareness with dance,

which has been at times considered a disaffected, high art form. "Any time some-one offers beauty to their community, that is a good thing. But I would say that my particular interest is not in ever, ever—I hope *ever*—creating modern dances with a quartet of dancers in gossamer dresses making abstract shapes or geometric patterns on the floor."

Sean describes movement as the ultimate form of expression in that, "there's something so visceral about the body that goes deeper than what writing or film or theater can do for me." That said, he doesn't credit dance as being his main form of inspiration. "I devour texts when I want to find inspiration to create. I love beautiful writing." He cites everything, from the *New York Times Book Review* to academic texts about gender or a good novel. So the dance movements come to illuminate a story, one that "needs to be told." He mentions people approaching him after the show to admit they've never before cried or been so moved by modern dance. Even when choosing the music for a performance, Sean tries to figure out what it is about the music that makes it accessible and emotive enough to elicit a response from the body.

What disconcerts him about dance is not the discipline, but the contrived boundaries erected. "I haven't gone to see a ballet in years because, although I could as a dancer watch and marvel at the technical virtuosity of the performers, I get so enraged and triggered and put off by the form, that it's so limited and for me, stifling. Even in modern dance, it's still

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such a highly gendered art form."

He considers the Bay Area the strongest and most highly evolved transgender community in the country. "Everyone I know here is almost always on the edge of burnout or just ridiculously busy because we were all called here to self-actualize and meditate. It's like, 'Sorry, I'm busy this week. I have to self-actualize.'"

But still, for Sean, the city of San Francisco hasn't fully arrived. "A lot of San Francisco is hip enough to be open to listening, watching, witnessing," he says. "But when it comes to internalizing the way people conceive of

their own work and choreography, that has not filtered down at all yet. And it's not like I'm advocating for, you know, 'modern dance must revolutionize and become completely gender-neutral,' but there is still not even a variety of gender expression on stage."

Sean has become a solid fixture in the dance scene, providing a space within traditional high society where transgender experience can be represented. Two very different scenes are now brought together in a way that's totally unique and interesting.

"The first Fresh Meat event was originally intended as a one-time event until there was this huge community response and then you knew there was a clear amount of need for an organization to step in." So, he founded one, establishing himself as the nation's first transgender modern dance choreographer, and founder of Fresh Meat Productions, which now offers year-round programs, including the annual Fresh Meat Festival. Fresh Meat Productions started in 2001 when a group of artists and activists came together to organize the first event. Among the round table was Jesselito Bie, Artistic Director of STEAMROLLER, a San Francisco-based guerrilla dance company that often performed in the streets to address, among other issues, the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

At their brainstorming meeting about what to call the show, Bie murmured, "fresh meat." Sean laughs. "We were all like, 'Did he really just say that?' It was a bold step to say, Yeah, we transgender and queer people are innovative and fresh and we are hot and strong and we are powerful and this is something new in town that hasn't been on the stage or at the table before. Everyone loved the name, and the name stuck."

This year's Fresh Meat Festival returned in 2007 for the sixth season to sold-outhouses. It included a roster of performances Sean calls "an extraordinary powerhouse lineup of artists who

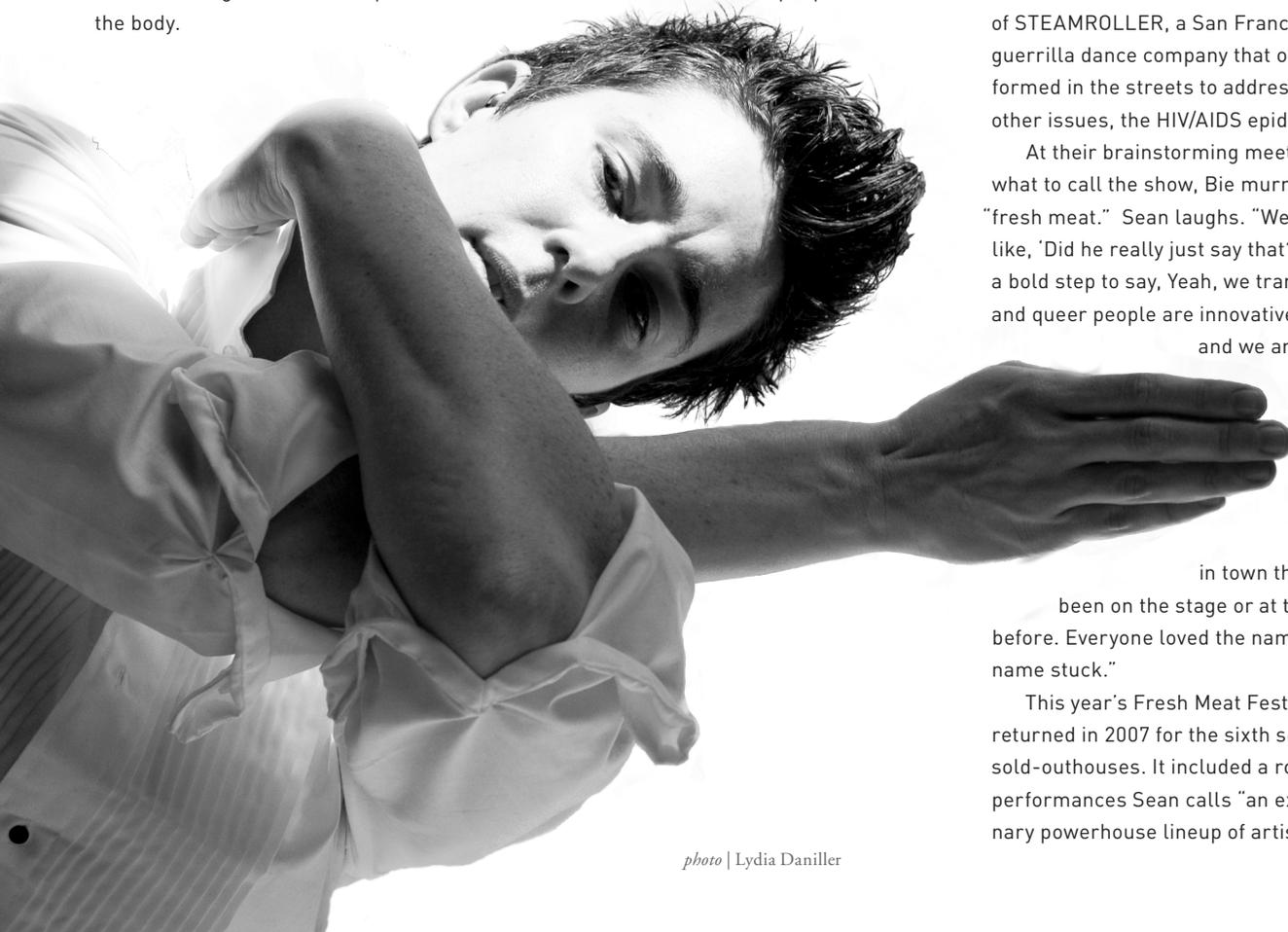


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Yeah, we transgender and queer people are
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are reclaiming tradition and blazing new paths with their art.” Imagine traditionally gendered forms such as Afro-Columbian and hip-hop through a trans lens, punctuated with spoken narrative, glam rock, aerial dance, taiko and hula. These pieces handle heavy stuff with the sort of positive fierceness that weakens people’s defenses against transgender and queer experiences.

About his artistic process, Sean says, “There have been pieces where I am a few weeks away from the performance and I know the ending to the text isn’t right or I know that a certain kind of movement isn’t right and somehow luckily it falls into place. But when it resonates with me as really honest, I feel like I’m done. The most important thing for me is to feel like I’m not allowing myself any emotional shortcuts or to fall back on any clichés or preconceived notions or next-logical thoughts to jump to in a narrative or with movement.”

Catherine Plato, managing editor of the lesbian magazine, *Curve*, went to Fresh Meat shows in both 2005 and 2006. Of the performances, she says she enjoyed seeing “a lot of trans artists, which are generally underrepresented in the LGBT society. The art was made subversive just by virtue of having someone perform a part not generally assigned to their gender, like the all-female break dancing part.” And it wasn’t all about the politics. She continues, “The quality of the performances were so good that just about anybody would be excited to see the really kick ass dancers.”

Sean also helps with the transgender/transgenre film festival, Tranny Fest, along with partner and Tranny Fest Director, Shawna Virago. Shawna’s own arts-related work seems dynamic and varied as Sean’s. She performs with her band; serves on the Board of Directors of San Francisco Against Rape; directed DIY black and white films, such as *Almost Human* and *Shut Up, Josephine!*; and has starred in underground movies. Sean says of Shawna, with whom he’s been with for five years, that “she has been an immense support by virtue of also being an artist and a public figure.”

In spite of mainstream culture’s marginalization of transgender and queer people, Sean stays positive. He was inspired by 848 Community Space (now known as CounterPULSE), a San Francisco arts organization that has, for over thirteen years, provided space for low-income and emerging artists to create socially relevant and cutting-edge work. One can easily see how such an eclectic group would inspire Sean to incorporate radically different elements in his own performances. “We really can create a very powerfully healing and positive community in spite of what everyone else or dominant culture tells us,” Sean says. “There’s something very instinctual about the idea of gathering in a community and getting vulnerable—which is a part of why I have hope.”

Sean reminds me after the interview to kindly refer to him in the article with the male pronouns of “him” and “he.” This prompts me to think about language,

its coercion and the way it forces us to sometimes make decisions that assign ourselves in prescriptive and reductive ways. After the interview, I climb into the car with Kim and she begins to tell me about her own two-year sojourn in China, where she went to teach English and to escape the post-911 tension. She says that she thinks people have a way of ending up where they need to be, unless, of course, they’re “lost souls.” I have always marveled at those who seem to maneuver life with a kind of sureness as Sean has while also navigating through complicated intellectual terrain with the aptness of a dancer. Perhaps all of the turning around in one’s mind about what art is gives way to the indisputable facts of the body, how it waits for those assignments to fall away like layers of cloth. Gender hits the floor with a muted thud, then race and age, even physical beauty, until you are left with yourself—perhaps the greatest truth you have found, though you haven’t a clue how to put it into words. ☕

For more info on Sean’s choreography and upcoming Fresh Meat performances, check out freshmeatproductions.org.

Photographs courtesy of Lydia Daniller and Candace L.T. Ho



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