Awesome dude

Sean Dorsey’s ‘Fresh Meat Festival’

by Paul Parish

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It could have been predicted that the transgender community might take up the most imaginative and intriguing dance artist in the Bay Area. Who has a more complex perspective on life than a person who feels he’s in the wrong body? In any case, there may be some more gently spirited, imaginative choreographer-storyteller than Sean Dorsey. If you’re not a trans person, it’s a little hard for us to explain how it is that they take such risks. The Flesh Probe, for instance, is a moving narrative about the trans community, telling the story of a trans woman who makes her way through a series of challenges to find her true self. The audience is taken on a journey of discovery, empathy, and growth.

Dorsey has certainly won the allegiance of the dance community and the critics, who have given him two Isadora Duncan Dance Awards and a Goldie (from a local newspaper), a large audience outside the gay community, and a big mention in European dance magazines. His signature “Outsider Chronicles” unapologetically addresses identity issues (“who am I, and what do they think of me?”) and straight to the awkward facts of relationships, in a series of short stories, stories of Dorsey’s “Hollywood Girl,” first love, first kiss, first love. And we get the details right: whatever their sexuality, people saw it and said, “Yeah, that’s about it.”

Dorsey already had the transgender community behind him, and for the 7th year now he has put together a festival of monologues, dances, and songs that express many facets of trans consciousness. This year’s Fresh Meat Festival opened to a packed, excited house at Project Arterial Theater last Thursday and played through the last weekend. Fresh Meat is one of the few productions that make the community’s arts scene truly recognizable. This year’s show included a new work by a Bay Area artist, the world premiere of a new piece by a Bay Area artist, and the world premiere of a new piece by a local artist. The show was a great success, with both patrons and performers alike. The audience was taken on a journey of discovery, empathy, and growth.

Some of the acts appealed to me more than others, but everyone was following in the crowd. The little bit of a role is in the ensemble. Dorsey understands that a rising tide raises all the boats, and that LGTB’s have allies among traditional cultures if we only seek them. Nearly half the artists were somewhat representing traditional cultures. He commissioned new work from the Barbary Coast Cloggers (who did an old-time Western for, whom they paid homage to), a world premiere by a local artist, and a world premiere by a local artist. This was a new work, reflecting a trans perspective from the stereotypical baystate bistro tune (O Le Li Hoo Ka Weken), and from a folkloric group based in California culture. News of this led me to hope for more — perhaps an Inca dance in honor of hermaphrodites, or an old-West dance for two men setting up housekeeping, or a bistro in honor of a gay king. No, none of that, but what we got was sweet. The Colombian set started with a religious procession, but before long, segued into a dance with same-sex couples cuddling — with traditional modesty, thank you, but no backdowning — and a rousing communal finale that made me feel that our relationships get honored in this community. Which is, I’ll add, saying plenty.

Similarly, the cloggers and the bistro folks endeavored themselves with “we like your music” gestures that brought roars of gratitude from the crowd (mood: egg plant ::30, mostly) — the same-hood, and very creative. The mister and the good-guys reveal the joy they take in dancing. The all-clothes jitterbugger and churn with tremendous gusto. The bistro dancers sink deep into their lips, and sway in union of waves of the sea — especially the women, in their dark-green satin gowns — while the men show the power in the petals in a different way, with their tangled legs separating around their locomotives at sharp angles, and with more striking attack. The lovely thing about the Colombians was how gracefully they were to their partners.

Dorsey showed a poignancy, poignancy, in which former ODC star Brian Freeman mirrored Dorsey’s moves as the boy he might have been. As usual, Dorsey voices-over the story, based on a diary he actually had written in as a child: a big, gold-leather Diary for a Girl, with sentimental illustrations by Norman Rockwell. Turns out that not long ago, Dorsey actually found a second-hand copy of Rockwell’s Diary for a Boy, a coming-of-age document he hoped to learn something from — which, alas, revealed many similar anxieties (“I’m the biggest dork in the school,” “New outbreak of zits,” “Wish I were more like Josh”). The big montage is that both kids devoted pages to their crush on George Michael. Dorsey will likely perform this again in his show in November.

It was a fascinating coming-of-age story. A big irony is that I find myself wondering if Dorsey doesn’t owe some of his big-hearted generosity, decency and modesty to Norman Rockwell.