



## Uncovered: The Diary Project: Sean Dorsey's Fifth Home Season

by Heidi Landgraf  
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Most people already know that Sean Dorsey is a trailblazing pioneer in the modern dance world. He is the first openly transgendered choreographer to make work about his own life and the life of other transpeople. He's had a very successful run in 2009 in both San Francisco and New York of *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, a two-part program that includes a duet titled *Lost/Found*, and a suite of dances titled *Lou*. He's remounting this work for his 2010 Home Season at Dance Mission Theater so that all of those who were turned away from the sold-out shows last year can get a second chance to see the show. These are the facts.

What these facts don't mention is his attention to gender, politics and activism, three passions that permeate both his life and work. Rather than focusing on these themes, I want to look at how Sean Dorsey, the choreographer and artist, approaches making work. He has, after all, won numerous awards (including two Izzies and a Goldie) and has been compared to Mark Morris with his gift of shaping movement. So what does the process of making work look like for this Bay Area artist? Well, interestingly enough, with *Uncovered* it originated with questions about gender—the topic so deeply interwoven into Dorsey's work that it becomes impossible to leave out.

It all started with a diary that Dorsey was given as a child: Norman Rockwell's *Diary for a Young Girl*. Re-reading his own childhood entries led him to researching the diaries of other trans men and women, which became the backdrop for the piece *Lost/Found*, a humorous duet about boyhood adolescence and the search for masculinity.

"It's an intensely personal, heart cracking open process (that is) shared in a vulnerable way with the audience," says Dorsey.

Dorsey's work is always raw, honest – and comedic. He shapes his work through each story, quite literally, with his recorded voice backed by original musical scores (*Lost/Found*'s composer was Dorsey's partner Shawna Virago). He says of the process, "My work is always sparked conceptually, so even landing there can take awhile. Once I've landed conceptually, the first stage is always writing, writing, writing, and then music, music, music. I don't step foot into the studio or move outside my head choreographically until I have an entire draft of the sound score." Given Dorsey's background in music and theater as a child, this makes sense.

Dorsey says, "I've always danced and loved dance but I did not grow up at the ballet barre. In fact, my only ballet experience as a child was at the community center class, banging on a tambourine! It wasn't until I was a young adult that I turned my attention seriously to dance training. In grad school (Community Economic Development) I took a dance class and the teacher really encouraged me to audition for the program. I thought, 'Audition for the dance program?' But a little voice in the back of my head told me to do it. I struggled with the choice to dance because at that time my identity was so centered around activism, but I got into the University program and a full-time studio based program and then told myself I would 'take a year off' to dance. During that time I was already dancing with a company and then I got offered a scholarship for a second year, and started creating work and it snowballed from there."

Rather than creating what he calls "cryptic modern dance," Dorsey wants his work to be immediately accessible – human. His movement is gestural, sometimes in concert with the text, and at other times in contrast, but always graceful and well-crafted. Regarding shaping his movement, Dorsey says, "I did not study choreography. The work just started pouring out of me and it really came from wanting to see myself and my community onstage – our stories. And yet everyone has a gender identity and a way of expressing that identity – not just transgender people. In fact, I would argue that it's non-transgender cultural icons that are the most hypergendered—look how uber masculine or feminine pop and film stars have to be! I believe we all struggle with gender—everyone has huge pressures to conform and deliver, whether it's masculinity or femininity.

Straight men, gay men, queers, transpeople – the thing with gender is, almost no one is told we're 'doing it right.' Transpeople's experience of gender is the most visible simply because we don't align with what's expected of us at birth – we come to define our gender in a conscious and thoughtful and personal way."

Living in the questions of gender and identity as he inherently does, and creating his work to raise awareness around these issues, Dorsey's art has become his activism.

Dorsey's artistic process eventually led him to the journals of Lou Sullivan, a pioneering female-to-male (FTM) gay trans man who died from AIDS in 1991. Lou, born a woman, knew he was actually a man who was attracted to men. During his journey, he battled with the medical system, founded groundbreaking support groups and started an FTM newsletter, among other things. Before he died, Lou bequeathed his diaries, lifelong papers and medical records to the GLBT Historical Society. Dorsey began to transcribe them by hand and compile them thematically around the different sections of the dance that he saw in his mind. "Lou was sparked by two things. First, my curiosity about history: what about all the transgender and queer people that get left out of family albums and recorded history – how do we find and tell their stories? Second, I wanted to tell the story of Lou Sullivan, a largely forgotten hero: I wanted to uncover this pioneering transgender man's revolutionary life, rule-breaking activism, and glorious love affairs. [This story is] about our ancestors, outrageous love, devastating loss and the courage to live your truth, even in the face of great suffering and enormous odds." As the themes became clear, so did the images. Dorsey continues, "I am really visual and am so influenced by art and sculpture – so I often see a lot of images – which could be bodies in space, or movement vocabulary, or lighting, or the tone or feel of the movement."

One of the most powerful images in *Lou* is the moment Dorsey removes his shirt and stands nobly before the audience, bare-chested. He says, "It's one of the 'non dance' parts of the piece that has had the biggest impact on the audience. I work very intuitively and I knew that that's what that moment in Lou's journey called for: taking off my shirt. As a transperson I definitely struggled with that choice. A lot of trans guys, after they get their top surgery can't wait to take their shirts off and show off their new chest, you know, after years of hiding and binding, but that's actually the first thing I struggled with. My inner truth is that I am private and shy and wouldn't normally just strip off my shirt. It is vulnerable to show off 12 inches of scars and it was a vulnerable choice for me but it comes through in the moment. I'm not being Sean Dorsey in that moment, I'm embodying Lou's story, but I think Sean Dorsey's honest vulnerability also reads. But I didn't want it to read as Sean, I wanted Lou's courage to really come through."

Anyone who has seen the piece would tell you that it does. In fact, when performed at its premiere, at the Fresh Meat Festival last June, as well as in New York, this piece garnered Dorsey standing ovations.

Though *Lou* tells the tale of an FTM queer activist, it has touched many. "I was blown away to receive a handwritten personal letter from a lesbian in her 80s who was deeply moved by the work; had a straight, church-going couple in their 70s who were moved to tears; have had non-trans gay men really connect and have also had many people tell me that the show changed their life. Audience feedback is huge in helping me to sustain as an artist."

"When I am talked about as a pioneer I am humbled and it totally affirms my path and the impact of my work...but then I am even less likely to admit how hard this journey can be. It can be very isolating and sometimes lonely not having peers, not having a community of trans dance artists and dancers. So the question of what sustains me becomes more and more important to me. Hearing how deeply my audiences are moved by my work is truly important," says Dorsey.

"I'm really proud of the body of work I have created and am especially proud of *Uncovered: The Diary Project*. I'm excited to celebrate my fifth season by remounting *Uncovered*. Last year, even when we extended the run, every show sold out in advance, so lots of people didn't get in. This is a beautiful, visceral, human show...I can't wait to share it again!"

*Uncovered: The Diary Project* runs February 4– 7, 2010 at Dance Mission Theater. Advanced purchase of tickets is highly recommended. To purchase tickets call 415-273-4633 or visit [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com).

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