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

by Heidi Landgraf
In Dance, January 2010

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 duct-taped chair. The Diary Project was a remounting of this work for his 2010 Home Season at Dance Mission Theater so that all of those who were turned away from the sold-out show 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 his work. Dorsey is a well-known photographer and artist, approaching making work. He has, after all, won numerous awards (including two Izzies and a Geddie) 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, the work that originated with questions about gender—the topic so deeply intertwined 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 diatribe 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 poetic. 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 Shanne Virago). He says of the process, “My work is always sparked conceptually, so even lending there can take awhile. Once I’ve landed conceptually, the first stage is always with drafting, 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, dancing 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 go to summer dance workshops. I thought, ‘Audition for the dance program?’ But I had a little voice in the back of my head that said, ‘Don’t 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 had a full-time studio based program and told myself I would ‘take a year off to dance.’ During that year I got into a union 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 to human. His movement is gestural, sometimes in concert with the text, and at 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 was non-linear. I used photo albums and images of our stories. And every once in a while I would come across 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 howuber masculine or feminine pop and film stars have to be! I believe we all struggle with gender—everyone has huge pressures to conform and define, whether it’s masculinity or femininity.

Straight men, gay men, queer, transgender—we all have to do this right. Transpeople’s identity really doesn’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 collected the letters, diaries, and medical records to the GLBT Historical Society. Dorsey began to transcribe them by hand and compile them thematically around the 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 got left out of family albums and recorded history? And second, to find and tell their stories.” I wanted to uncover this pioneering transgender man’s revolutionary life, rule-breaking activism, and glorious love affairs. I wanted to uncover the man and the dancer, and the man who had a life so full of love, fighting and blood and struggle 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—in spite of a lot of images—which could be bodies in space, or movement vocabulary, or lighting, or the tone or the movement of the body.”

One of the most powerful images in Lou is the moment Dorsey removes his shirt and stands nobly before the audience, his body bathed in a soft light, his head raised. He is a moment that has the biggest impact on the audience. I work very intuitively and I know that that’s what that moment in Lou’s journey called for taking off my shirt. As a trans person 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 hiding, 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 Dorsey’s honest vulnerability also reads. But I didn’t want to read it as Sean. I wanted Lou’s courage to really come through.

Anyone who has seen the piece would tell you that it’s raw. 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 transwoman in her 60s who was deeply moved by the work; had a straight, church-going couple in their 70s who moved to tears; had non-trans gay men really connect and have also had many people tell me that the show changed their lives.”

Audience feedback is huge in helping me to sustain as an artist.

“arlier when I’m talking about as a pioneer, I’m humbled and I totally affirm my path and the impact of my work—but then I am 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 I 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 415-273-4629 or visit brownpapertickets.com.

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