

The Secret History of Love

By Caleb Pershan | March 27, 2013

The secret's out: Sean Dorsey's hit dance performance returns to San Francisco



Photo: Lydia Daniller

Little did Oscar Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas know when he wrote of a love that "dare not speak its name" just how long queer history would remain in the shadows. Sean Dorsey Dance's *The Secret History of Love*, a suite of dances that explores the underground ways LGBT people have survived and loved against tremendous odds, is an important reminder of the hidden pre-history to the current public struggle for gay rights.

Dorsey's piece, which returns to San Francisco March 28th-31st during a nationwide tour, features the voices and life stories of LGBT seniors gathered in a two-year national LGBT Elders Oral History Project. A cast of five dancer-performers interprets these historic narratives, expressing intimate accounts of violence, first love, risk, loss and enduring relationships.

We chatted with Dorsey—who has made history himself as the first openly transgender modern dance choreographer—about the project.

San Francisco magazine: What's it like to interpret the personal stories of LGBT elders?

Sean Dorsey: That's been a really profound experience. It's such an incredible responsibility to hold someone's life story, with all of its intense struggles and loves and pain and joys. It was nerve racking when we were first performing these works for the elders whose stories

are in the show: we've always brought [them] onstage for the bow. [They've] expressed again and again that their voices were captured and their stories were honored in a really deep way, and how grateful they were for that.

SF: Dance can seem like an art form based on gender, with strict roles for men and women. Does it have to be?

SD: As an openly transgender and queer dance artist I obviously think a lot about this in my life and in my work. It's a kind of a double-sided coin. It can be really difficult for people because dance is such a strictly gendered art form, so whether it's transgender people or gender variant people or queer people or anyone who doesn't want to conform to expectations of how they should express their gender in dance, it can be really painful. But I think the other side of the coin offers us a wonderful opportunity to liberate ourselves from narrow expectations and expressions of our gender and to use dance as a way to open up people's hearts and minds.

SF: The show premiered in SF in 2012 to rave reviews. What's changed since then?

SD: Since then we have talked to so many LGBT elders and youth and people whose real life experiences and stories have informed the work. We've been able to revisit the communities where I did the oral histories, so all the dancers have gotten to meet people whose lives and voices they've been expressing and dancing for these months. I think our own relationship with the work and the oral histories has just deepened so much. The core is the same, but the show has evolved so much since last year.

SF: Is part of your project connecting people across generational lines?

SD: Our own ages span over 3 decades. Especially in LGBT communities, there's a real disconnect between generations. So many LGBT people are excluded or even excommunicated from their biological families, [they] often don't have intergenerational relationships with parents or grandparents or mentors of any kind. So much LGBT history is left out of history books and family albums, and you end up with younger generations that I think are really disconnected from their own history and from their own elders. I'm really passionate about bringing together multiple generations. I think it's also important to say that this show and this history is American history. That's one of the reasons I would encourage all people to come to this: because I think it speaks to themes we can all relate to.

Tickets are available at www.secrethistory.bpt.me; learn more at www.seandorseydance.com.

***The Secret History of Love* will be at Dance Mission Theater (3316 24th St. at Mission Street) from March 28th to 31st.**