Acclaimed Transgender Choreographer Sean Dorsey Tells Our Story Through Dance

Trailblazing transgender choreographer and dancer Sean Dorsey recently won a prestigious Isadora Duncan Dance Special Award for his production “The Secret History of Love.” It should be no secret that Dorsey is one of the most talented and articulate choreographers of our time, using both athleticism and text to deeply connect his projects with audiences, and particularly with those of us who are LGBT. What we also appreciate is that the works of Sean Dorsey Dance—the company he founded—are accessible to all. Go in with an open mind and you will likely come out bursting with ideas and inspired to put on your own dancing shoes.

We are happy to report that Sean Dorsey Dance’s Home Season for this year is just days away. Check out a performance! And find out here, as we did, what a well-spoken, thoughtful and good-natured soul Dorsey is.

Bay Times: As a choreographer, you are known for creating dances that are full-bodied and sensual, with your unique pairing of storytelling and movement. How would you describe your work?

Sean Dorsey: All of my dances feature both movement and text. It’s full-throttle, athletic, high-energy dancing, with clean lines and luscious queer partnering, but it’s all based in story and narrative. I’m passionate about making dances that people can actually understand and relate to. My work is very human; it’s not abstract.
Bay Times: Congratulations on your recent Isadora Duncan Dance Award! What does this recognition mean for you and for the LGBT community?

Sean Dorsey: The “Izzie” Awards are like the Oscars for dance here. As a choreographer, I was absolutely thrilled, and as an openly transgender/queer artist I was so proud. The Award was for my show The Secret History Of Love, which reveals the underground ways that LGBT people managed to survive and find love and community in decades past. I created the show through archival research and by recording oral histories with LGBT elders across the US. These elders’ voices and stories are heard and seen in the show. It is significant that a dance project rooted in LGBT love/history gained such high-profile praise with this award. It’s really exciting.

Bay Times: You are currently touring The Secret History Of Love to 20 US cities – a feat enjoyed rarely by a dance company, let alone an LGBT dance company.

Sean Dorsey: We’ve toured to 15 cities so far, and every experience is extraordinary. We’ve visited big cities like Boston, Chicago and Miami – but also smaller cities like Chico and Whitewater, Wisconsin. We’ve been blessed with sold-out audiences almost everywhere we go. There’s a lot of national buzz and excitement about the project. In every city, we work directly with the local LGBT community, doing workshops and residencies. A huge treat for me is that it’s my first performance collaboration with my partner, brilliant transwoman singer-songwriter Shawna Virago (who performs in the show).

Bay Times: At your Home Season, you are performing a short “sneak peek” excerpt of the new show you are working on. Tell us about the project.

Sean Dorsey: My new show The Missing Generation will explore the contemporary impact of the loss of so much of an entire generation of gay and transgender people to AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. This sneak peek is exciting, because the whole show won’t premiere until 2015.

To create the show, I am traveling to cities across the US to record oral history interviews with longtime survivors of the early AIDS epidemic: people who have been living with HIV/AIDS for 25+ years, early AIDS activists, people who lost partners/friends/family, early healthcare providers. It’s been life-changing. It’s also really important for me as a transgender artist to bring transgender stories from the early AIDS epidemic into the picture. I take the honor of holding and sharing these stories very seriously and with great respect, tenderness and love.

Bay Times: Why did you start this project?

Sean Dorsey: I came to this project with a real sense of urgency. Most people my age and younger have no idea what the early AIDS epidemic was like, nor understand the profound ways it shaped our community. During my lifetime, we will see the passing of the last survivors of the early epidemic. We must capture these experiences and histories before they are lost forever.

Bay Times: I am excited that your Home Season will also include the exquisite piece Lou. Can you tell us about this work?
Sean Dorsey: *Lou* is a suite of dances based on the lifelong diaries of trailblazing transgender activist Lou Sullivan (1951-1991) who lived and died in San Francisco. Before his death from AIDS in 1991, Sullivan bequeathed 30 years of his diaries to the GLBT Historical Society. To create *Lou*, I researched this collection, compiled and distilled 30 years of Sullivan's diary writings into an original soundscore, and choreographed a piece based on his remarkable journey. It's a powerful work to perform and to watch. I can't wait to bring it back.

Bay Times: What's next for you this year?

Sean Dorsey: Wow – a lot! I'll tour to 6 cities, launch LGBT Community Creation Residences throughout California, travel and record oral histories, and make a new show! I also produce the Fresh Meat Festival of transgender and queer performance June 19-21. I cherish my life and feel profoundly blessed to get to do what I do.

Sean Dorsey Dance — 2014 Home Season Thurs-Sat April 24-26 (8pm)
Z Space, San Francisco Info/Tix: www.seandorseydance.com