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[Sponsored Projects](#)

[Staff & Board](#)

CONTACT

[Directions](#)

[Partner Contacts](#)

[Staff Contacts](#)

EVENTS

[Community Calendar](#)

[Bay Area Dance Week](#)

[Dance Advocacy Day 2015](#)

[Dance Discourse Project](#)

[ONSITE](#)

[Rotunda Dance Series](#)

[Submit an Event](#)

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[Fiscal Sponsorship Resources](#)

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[California Dance Network](#)

[CA\\$H Grant](#)

[Dancers Choice Award](#)

[Della Davidson Prize](#)

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Health Care Resources
In Dance
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Lighting Artists in Dance
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Summer Workshop Guide
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Sean Dorsey Reveals the Stories of a Missing Generation

by **Claudia Bauer**

WHEN WE LAST SPOKE with award-winning dance maker Sean Dorsey, in the March 2013 issue, he was about to launch a nationwide tour of his last show, *The Secret History of Love*. Based on several years of research, residencies, oral-history interviews, composition and choreography, *Secret History* was about the courage of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning people to live with pride and forge loving relationships against all the odds. It brought hope, insight and contemporary dance to thousands of people, and established Dorsey as an archivist of the LGBTQ experience.

After another two-year odyssey of research and development, Dorsey is about to mark the tenth anniversary of Sean Dorsey Dance with another historically-inspired work, *The Missing Generation*. To be performed by several of his longtime collaborators, Brian Fisher, ArVejon Jones, Nol Simonse and Dorsey, *Missing* looks back at the first wave of the AIDS epidemic and bears witness to those who not only survived it, but also those that responded in other ways that led to the founding of organizations that provide needed resources and the activism on which today's LGBTQ community stands.

Dorsey took a break from rehearsals to share his thoughts on the show and the meaningful community work that has sustained him through a decade of dance.

Claudia Bauer: Congratulations on your tenth anniversary.

Sean Dorsey: Thank you so much. It's been a really amazing and interesting journey. I feel so, so blessed.

CB: Your works have become so theatrical and research-based. Was that your original vision?

SD: Of course, my deepest drive was to make dances that resonated with audiences and were meaningful to me. But an important part was that I didn't see anybody like me, as a trans person, in dance, on stage or in theater here. That was a big part of my initial drive, and still is. I certainly hoped and planned to be making work ten years down the road, but the work now is a living creature, and it's being reinterpreted and reinvigorated by our residencies and teaching.

CB: Yes, because along with performing, you do so much outreach. the enthusiastic response must reaffirm your work.

SD: I think it does. I continue to be astounded by the creativity and resiliency, audacity and revolutionary nature of our community. I have the opportunity to see the best in people and the best in humanity. I mean that in a really broad sense, because my audiences are both totally mainstream dance audiences and people deep in the heart of the LGBT community. This journey has allowed me to bring them together to sit or talk side by side. Again and again, we show up for each other and bring our best selves.

CB: You've taken on heavy, emotional topics on behalf of the LGBTQ community. It's different from creating abstract movement for its own sake.

SD: It's an intense artistic process, because my work is rooted in actual human experience. It is an extraordinary honor and very, very taxing at times. For *The Missing Generation*, I did residencies in San Francisco, New York, Atlanta, a couple of cities in Maine, and Washington DC, researching the local history about the early epidemic. I also recorded twenty-five oral histories of two to four hours each, about people's experiences through the '60s, '70s and '80s, when AIDS first hit, and how we responded, and what we feel today. I think a lot about how to hold someone's story, how to ask for it and how to receive it, and how to offer support on top of just listening. I heard from many people that the interview was the first time in twenty or thirty years anybody had let them speak openly about their experience, because it's so painful and people just don't want to hear about it.

CB: How do you cope with the emotional ripple effect?

SD: I'm still navigating that. I am blessed to have an amazing partner [musician Shawna Virago] of 13 years, and a close circle of friends who have been very supportive. I meditate and start my day at an altar space. And there are just days when I'm totally exhausted, and I need to just crash and have a bubble bath.



DeeDee Chamblee and Sean Dorsey
Photo courtesy of Sean Dorsey

CB: Bubble baths always help [laughter]. And then you go into the studio and make art about it.

SD: Working with my dancers is such a beautiful support. It's such a loving collaborative atmosphere. The same is true with my composers. I spend many, many hours sitting with twenty-five oral histories and a foot-tall pile of transcripts to distill an idea for a section and find the right expression to pair with another one. At the end of an eight-hour day, I might have come up with another minute of the score. The sound score is really rich and multi-layered, and features many voices and stories from these oral histories and beautiful music that my composers have created. It's a fusion of tech and story and movement that is grounded in the melody and the emotional trajectory of the story. It's still a Sean Dorsey Dance show, so god knows there's plenty of humor and theatricality [laughter], but there's also some really hard stuff.

CB: Yes. how does that resonate artistically?

SD: It's definitely not a literal reenactment of history; it's not leaning on meaning. Sometimes the story of one of the survivors is so intense that it needs really minimal movement. Sometimes it needs extreme movement to the point of exhaustion. My job as an artist is to reveal to audiences the ways that each person's experience is relatable. We all know what that feels like to be terrified and looking to lean on the community or a partner. We know what it's like to feel rage in the face of injustice.

CB: Why is it important to look back to the first generation of survivors? and why now?

SD: There is a sense of urgency about capturing the history while we can. But also the urgency of intergenerational sharing, so that younger people today, who come of age in the era of AIDS cocktails and can't imagine anything otherwise, can not only know the early history of the epidemic, but also understand that the reason that those cocktails are available now is because there were people who were literally facing the last days of their lives, who knew for a fact that they would die, but who devoted much of their remaining energy and time to being part of drug trials or street action and activism. Even while they were declining, they were taking care of friends who were going to go first. Our community showed up for each other in the most heroic and most human way. Everything that we benefit from now is a direct result of that early mutual care, activism, political strategizing.

CB: Who are some of the people you interviewed for *Missing*?

SD: Some of them have been living with HIV or AIDS for thirty-plus years. They are very early hospice workers, and people who lost a lover or three lovers or five lovers to AIDS. They were the first people to respond by building resources, like the nation's first black, gay, HIV/AIDS organizations of any kind, or San Francisco's first major healthcare response. It is really important for me in this project to bring forward transgender experiences of the early AIDS epidemic, especially trans women's. Because as limited as our recorded history is of the time, trans women's experiences of the early AIDS epidemic are completely absent from any mainstream or recorded AIDS narratives—yet they were totally decimated by the early AIDS epidemic. In fact, trans women still have some of the highest rates of new infection, and some of the least access to resources. As a transgender person and a trans activist, this is so important and close to my heart.

CB: It's also about caring for each other.

SD: Absolutely. I hope that coming together as an audience for this show will give people an opportunity to share some of that caring. It's about removing this illusion of separateness and remembering that my struggle, my grief, my happiness are tied [to] your struggle, your grief, your happiness. This is the shared human experience.

CB: Once again, you'll be touring the show with extensive outreach.

SD: Over the next couple of years we are going to visit 20 cities across the US, starting in San Francisco and then going to Bates Dance Festival and then Boston, Atlanta, Washington DC, Pittsburgh, Maui. We're also going to smaller communities like Whitewater, Wisconsin; when we took *Secret History of Love* there, we expected forty people and had six hundred people come from across Wisconsin. In all of these places, we'll do teaching and master classes and movement-based story-sharing workshops, and I'll record some of those to archive. We're incredibly excited about the next two years...but first I have to finish the show!

[The Missing Generation: May 14-17, Dance Mission Theater, SF, seandorseydance.com](#)

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About Claudia Bauer

Claudia Bauer is a dance writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Visit her blog at speakingofdance.com
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