Fresh Meat rolls out the talent for 15th annual festival

by Sari Staver

The 15th annual transgender and queer performance festival, Fresh Meat, takes place later this month and will feature North America's same-sex ballroom champions, transgender opera stars, a gender-bending boy band, gay hula, and queer bachata dance.

Festival organizers said the event couldn't come at a better time, with transgender issues thrust into the national spotlight over discriminatory laws some states have passed.

"This year's festival is especially powerful and important in the face of the major anti-transgender backlash blazing across the country," artistic director Sean Dorsey said in an interview with the Bay Area Reporter.

"All across the U.S., right-wing groups are organizing and lobbying to strip transgender communities of our hard-won human rights protections, and passing bathroom bills that put trans and gender non-conforming people in grave physical and legal danger. Now more than ever we stand up and declare our trans bodies powerful, beautiful, and worthy of support and protection and self-expression."

Dorsey, 43, who is also artistic director of Sean Dorsey Dance, said that this year's festival is "our biggest lineup ever." He expects each night to sell out, as it has done in previous years.

Sean Dorsey Dance will be performing an excerpt from its show, The Missing Generation, based on oral history interviews with transgender and queer survivors of the HIV epidemic.

The all-new program includes a number of performers never seen before at the festival as well some returning individuals and groups presenting new work. Most are based in San Francisco, but three are from New York and one is from Seattle, Dorsey said.

This year's lineup includes:

Star Amerasu, whose music project is based upon her experiences as a queer black transwoman; Karen Anzoategui, a genderqueer writer, performer, and actor, who can be seen on the Emmy-nominated original Hulu series, East Los High; and AXIS Dance Company, an ensemble of performers with and without disabilities that has toured internationally and has been honored with seven Isadora Duncan Dance Awards.

Other performers include India Davis, a multidisciplinary choreographer and educator skilled in aerial, pole, and acrobatic arts and dance; and Jannah Fajardo and Angelica Medina, who dance bachata with Inessence Dance Company in San Francisco.

Trans opera singer Brenna Sinclair will perform at Fresh Meat, as will singer-songwriter StormMiguel Florez, ballroom same-sex dance champions Robbie Tristan and Ernesto Palma, and gender-bending a cappella boy band The Singing Bois.

Highlights include musician Shawna Virago, Dorsey's longtime partner; and Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu, a company of 40 dancers who present hula as a full theatrical experience blending traditional and contemporary forms of Hawaiian dance.

In the interview, Dorsey, a trans man, said the festival is the "first and only group that is creating, presenting, and touring transgender arts programs" on a year-round basis.

Fifteen years ago, when Fresh Meat began, "nobody was putting transgender artists on stage and there was no organization serving transgender artists," he said. While transgender artists occasionally performed in clubs and during the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival, "nobody was curating on main stages," he explained.
Dorsey said the performers thought their first festival would be a "one-time event." But there was such an "explosive response" that they decided to turn it into an annual showcase. In its sixth year, the festival moved from the ODC Theater on 16th Street to its current venue Z Space Gallery, which seats some 300 people in its 13,000 square foot performance space.

According to Dorsey, an increasing number of performers vie for one of the slots to perform at the festival. This year, there were at least three times as many applicants as there were spaces to perform.

Since its first year, the festival has always paid all its performers as well as its staff, Dorsey said. According Fresh Meat's 2013 Form 990, it has a budget of about $450,000.

The Fresh Meat Festival will be held Thursday, June 16 through Saturday, June 18, at Z Space, 450 Florida Street in San Francisco. Tickets are $15 and include a post-show reception every night with DJ Miz Rowdy and refreshments. Tickets and more information are available at [http://www.freshmeatproductions.org](http://www.freshmeatproductions.org).