SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2005

CHOREOGRAPHER OF MATTERS GENDER
-Rachel Howard

The hair is short. The makeup-free face is pretty by some angles but also handsome by others. You notice the small breasts, of course, but also the broad, low-slung pelvis. And the movement this long, rangy instrument produces is flowing and gentle, yet strong.

To watch Sean Dorsey in the studio is to surrender your urge to categorize.

"I don't feel my gender is fixed, or that I'm androgynous or at a place in between," Dorsey says after internment and with the air of a wait: "But there isn't a language yet, I don't think, to describe where I am."

So Dorsey doesn't use men's language. The 35-year-old choreographer, who was born female but now prefers the pronoun "he," uses movement and text, and the combination speaks more poignantly than any label.

In "Second Kiss," a duet with Mallory Callahan, the dancers tumble over one another as Dorsey's voice-over tells of a fourth-grader's flirtations with the class's most popular girl. In "St. Hour," the show's dynamic gross sexy tease and tease as Dorsey's tale describes the lovers' visit home.

The beast in both cases? The protagonist is an androgynous female who also identifies as male.

The move often masculinizes — transgender and not — to tears, and in just three years since moving to San Francisco, Dorsey has built up a large and enthusiastic following. He's founded a booming showcase of queer and transgender performance called Fresh Meat, won a San Francisco Arts Commission individual artist grant and has been named one of European magazine Sulu/Taste's most promising international choreographers.

His first full evening of choreography, "The Outside Chronicles," runs Friday and Saturday at ODC Theater. The newest work on that bill, a solo, describes the horror of "gender correction therapy," and Dorsey never had to suffer.

Though Dorsey's work speaks to people who have felt constricted by pressures to conform, Dorsey's own childhood was one of open-minded acceptance, which perhaps explains why he has felt free to make his trailblazing art.

Dorsey was raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, by a lesbian single mother. "So very early on I knew I had more choices in how to express myself," he says. "I didn't feel held in any way on other people's patience. I wasn't a girl-girl, but I wasn't worried about it. There wasn't a day when I looked in the mirror and had a breakdown."

He studied theater and writing, and didn't question his gender until, as an undergraduate in political science at the University of British Columbia, he took a dance class on the side.

"I was enamored a solo about gender," and my friend said, "Your body has totally changed," Dorsey says. "I don't take hormones, but my body has to be more evasive and feminine. And my friend said, 'Your body is manifesting something.'"

Exactly what his body has manifested is fascinatingly complex, and Dorsey — who has never contemplated hormone or an operation — thrives on it. In a town filled with boundary-pushing art, his dance informs politicalizing and theorizing by presenting specific characters in specific yet universal situations.

But despite the support of his family and community, living outside the strictures of gender is a daily challenge. Women are a public nervous whack. Well-meaning friends introduce him as a "drag artist." Even Dorsey's mother has difficulty letting go of gender classifications.

"She comes with her own perceptions as a certain-era lesbian who has a feeling of betrayal — how would these trans guys betray womanhood? Why would you want to be a man?" Dorsey says.

And, of course, obvious role models are few. "It is painful and lonely sometimes not to have peers," Dorsey says. "Other people can say, thank goodness for other African American dance communities. I don't get to say, thank goodness for the trans dance community."

But then, Dorsey's work is all about having the courage to make your own mold.

"When I do my work, it's totally intuitive, it just comes out of me emotionally," he says. "I want to create the visceral, punch people in the gut, shift their thinking.

SEAN DORSEY: "The Outside Chronicles" will be performed at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at ODC Theater, 3155 17th St., San Francisco. $15. (415) 863-9343 or www.odertheatre.org

Rachel Howard is a freelance writer.

DATEBOOK: Page 30-31
URL: http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/a-2005/11/13/P30/78041.DTL

©2005 San Francisco Chronicle