

Flatiron Hot! Critic: The Missing Generation Remembers LGBTQ+ History



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Reported for the Flatiron Hot! News by Katherine Jin

Disease running rampant through the streets. People dying by the dozens every week. Terror seeping through every nook and cranny, hanging like an inescapable fog. Discrimination and disgust in the eyes of passersby. And strength and solidarity among the most vulnerable.

This isn't a scene from some third-world country or a time hundreds of years ago – it was New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in the early 1980s, during the AIDS epidemic. Gay and trans kids had come to the cities to find others like them, only to be ambushed by a plague no one saw coming. Thousands of LGBTQ+ individuals – most of them incredibly young – died fighting for their right to exist. Yet despite (or rather, because of) the immense suffering of the time, very few young people today know about the early AIDS epidemic.



The Missing Generation by Sean Dorsey, showing at Joyce Theater from June 20-23, is a powerful and important dance-theater work that gives voice to these “swept-under-the-rug” survivors of the eighties. It is a love letter to the forgotten generation of LGBTQ survivors who witnessed and experienced the loss of an entire generation to a disease the country did very little about. Weaving connection, loss and bewilderment with dance, storytelling and theater, the show brings a roller coaster of smiles and tears in just over 60 minutes.

The music introduces the audience to the show, led by a rich layering of voices and real-life stories of survivors, Dorsey’s own writing, and an incredible original score

from a team of composers: Alex Kelly, Jesse Olsen Bay, Ben Kessler, and Jeffrey Alphonsus Mooney. It is pulsing yet meditative, and the combined effect makes the words really stick in your mind. Days after stepping out of the theater, you still can’t help but recall the litany of loss – the story of a 90-pound man who asked to be carried to the roof of the hospital and thrown off; the fact that people would get sick over the weekend and die that same weekend; the way you knew that someone you hadn’t seen for a week was gone forever. A particularly harrowing line admitted, “Every week there was another funeral. I stopped counting after 100.”

One word that kept repeating was “terror”. The disease struck without warning – you would just wake up one day with blue spots. Before the disease was diagnosed, you were haunted by something that had no name, and after it was diagnosed, there was still no treatment, so getting sick meant a death sentence. In one account, a male survivor recalls a doctor informing him he was HIV positive and giving him a prescription for Demerol: “He thought I was going to swallow the bottle and die. I was 25.”

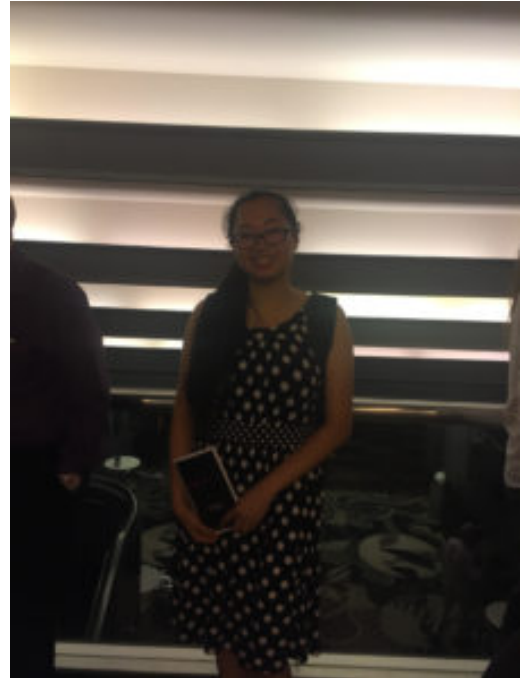
While the survivors talk, Dorsey and his dancers (Brian Fisher, ArVejon Jones, Nol Simonse) pour their blood, sweat, and tears into their performances. The movement evokes corresponding moods, and takes us on a journey from a very tender, internal self-reflective experience to the experience of strength. Exuberant, athletic phrases illustrate the validation of pre-AIDS sexual freedom, one dancer runs his finger down the backbone of another to display affection, a limp body resembles a corpse and the burden of extreme loss, sharp angles and flat feet demonstrate anger and resistance, and intimate duets convey the pain of losing a lover.

However, the three most striking images all show the dancers' support for one another. They come together in a tight, collective embrace, faces turned toward each other and foreheads touching. A dancer, body limp and feet dangling close to the floor, is carried by another single dancer. They lift a dancer up, each person counterbalancing and supporting each other to accomplish something greater. The message is clear – the LGBTQ+ community must maintain their solidarity and compassion to survive.

This lesson is especially important considering the way society has largely forgotten about the struggles early LGBTQ+ activists and survivors went through to give us the rights and representation we have today. I have learned about the AIDS epidemic multiple times in school, both in science and in history class, but I am in the minority. Most people watching the show know little to nothing about the AIDS epidemic, and I commend Dorsey for bringing it into the light in a way that makes everyone understand the pain and hurt of an entire generation that our country has turned a blind eye to. In the post-performance curtain chat, Dorsey explained how when he first started work on the piece, he thought “The Missing Generation” would focus on elevating stories of those lost to AIDS, but after he started conducting interviews he realized that he was actually being called to show up for survivors: “When I talked to folks, everyone said that you were so struck at how nobody had asked you to talk about this for all these years. Nobody wants to talk about it.”

In the performance, we are greeted and parted with the sentence, “Welcome to the most visited place in the landscape of the American imagination – our inexhaustible capacity to look away.” Dorsey apologizes to the long-ignored generation of survivors for neglecting their needs and abandoning them in their grief, and welcomes them to finally share their story. He reminds us to not look away as the political leaders of the time did, and to really hear the old LGBTQ+ generation. Younger people today who came of age in the era of AIDS cocktails need to understand that the reason these cocktails are now available is because of the thousands of people who were literally dying, but chose to spend their remaining time and energy fighting for a better future. This intergenerational sharing is crucial to remembering that everything we benefit from and take for granted now is a result of that early mutual care and activism. The anecdotes about how doctors refused to treat AIDS patients, Reagan wouldn't acknowledge the AIDS crisis, legislation was proposed to place the sick in concentration camps, and patients starved because others were unwilling to deliver food to them strike home the importance of never forgetting. “I don't know how we'd ever prove it, but I think people did die from neglect as much as they died from the opportunistic infections.” We must acknowledge and comprehend the past, so as to prevent it from ever happening again and be grateful for what we have now.

Further expanding on the intergenerational theme, the four-person cast is made up of a multi-generational ensemble of dancers. Besides Dorsey, all of the other three dancers are from different generations, from ArVejon in his 20s who wasn't alive during the crisis, Nol, who was very young at the time, and Fisher, who experienced first-hand the epidemic of the 80s and 90s. Fisher was especially powerful during his monologues because he brought his own experience of moving from Maine to NYC as a young man in search of a future into the performance, and it was evident that returning to NYC to do this show brought him both pride and pain.



Beyond sharing the story of LGBTQ+ survivors, Dorsey paid special care to include trans narratives in the show, aiming to expand the scope of the typical AIDS narrative with its focus on gay men. As a trans man himself, it was profoundly important for him to document and share trans and gender nonconforming experiences and life stories from the early epidemic. Trans people, especially trans women's, experiences of the early AIDS epidemic are completely absent from any mainstream or recorded AIDS narratives, even though they were completely decimated by the disease. In that era, it was nearly impossible to change your name legally, and most friends of trans people only knew them by their street name. When they were admitted to the hospital under their legal name, no one who cared for them could track them, and they disappeared forever. Trans individuals were also discriminated against in most forms of employment, and they had no choice but to starve or do survival sex work, where many of them contracted the virus. Even today, trans women have some of the highest rates of new infection and some of the least access to resources.

So let us remember and honor those who came before us, those who built the world we have today. Let us understand and help them heal, and let us learn from the past. In the words of Dorsey, "Welcome hurt, welcome grief, welcome rage. Welcome heartbreak. Welcome curiosity. Welcome beauty. Welcome love."

Dorsey is widely acclaimed as the United States' first transgender modern dance choreographer, and has won many prestigious awards for his trail-blazing work. Using dance as a medium to bring awareness to social issues, he has nudged the arts and LGBTQ communities in a more inclusive direction. The Joyce is but one example of an institution that

was persuaded to open all-gender restrooms and dressing rooms to better serve their artists and audiences. Learn more about Dorsey's dance [here](#), and his nonprofit Fresh Meat Productions [here](#). See clips of "The Missing Generation" on [the Joyce Theater's site](#), and in their [trailer](#).

"The Missing Generation" is part of the Joyce Theater's Pride Week program, which also features three performances from Madboots, a queer, all-male contemporary dance group. As a first-time official NYC Pride Partner, the Joyce aims to bring intriguing companies to the stage to celebrate distinct LGBTQ perspectives. Learn more about the Joyce on [their website](#) and in our last [blog post](#).