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Sean Dorsey Dance in 'Boys in Trouble.' Photo by Kegan Marling

ARTS + CULTURE

DANCE

## Sean Dorsey Dance continues to shatter boundaries, 15 years on

# Celebrating his company's 15th season, the pioneering transgender choreographer speaks about the SF arts scene and what's coming next.

BY MARKE B. | MARCH 9, 2019

**DANCE** “I’m still pinching myself at this 15th anniversary milestone!” says **Sean Dorsey**, whose groundbreaking dance company celebrates a decade and a half this week, launching its 15th anniversary season with “**Boys in Trouble**” (March 14-16 at Z Space).

Dorsey and company have been performing and developing “Boys in Trouble,” which tackles the effects of toxic masculinity, for some time—hosting community forums, teaching free movement workshops for and recording interviews with transgender, gender-non-conforming, cisgender, gay, bi, and queer people on the masculine spectrum. It’s all of a piece with Dorsey’s method, which combines community outreach, personal dialogue, and visceral choreography to form a deep bond with audiences.

Dorsey himself is a pioneer of dance, bringing transgender issues and bodies alongside others to the stage in humane, poignant, visually stunning, and often funny ways. His company’s a local gem that spends a lot of time touring and researching (sometimes to unusual and heartening places, where I imagine his dances inspire younger generations hungry for this type of art), but bases itself in a changing San Francisco.

I spoke with Dorsey over email about his company’s breakthroughs, the SF arts scene, and exciting things in store for the future.

**48 HILLS** *First off, congratulations on your 15th season—that’s so huge! What are a couple highlights from the past 15 years that spring to your mind?*

**SEAN DORSEY** A few highlights that really stand out for me are:

— The life-changing experience of traveling the US between 2013 and 2015 to record 75 hours of oral history interviews with trans and LGBTQ longtime survivors of the early AIDS epidemic, to create my show “**THE MISSING GENERATION.**”

— I very fondly remember my first Home Season at ODC Theater in 2005 (“The Outsider Chronicles”). It was a breakthrough for a lot of reasons: I was the first-ever transgender dance artist to present a season at ODC Theater, and it was my first full evening of work. At the time, no one was really presenting trans performance, so it felt scary and important. Even today, you hardly see trans artists presented there; I am very proud of what I have accomplished, despite enormous obstacles.

— My first tour! Right before our first SF Home Season, [Sean Dorsey Dance](#) was presented in Salt Lake City(!) and the local LGBTQ community there was incredibly loving and welcoming to us. Since then, I’ve toured my work to [30 cities across the US](#) and abroad (most recently Stockholm Sweden).

— One of the most powerful things I experience again and again are the transgender and gender-nonconforming (gnc) people who come up to me after a performance, and who lovingly spill tears as they share their experience of seeing themselves finally reflected onstage. After a lifetime of never seeing MYSELF anywhere in modern dance, this one always gets me and affirms what I’m doing, despite the challenges I face every day.



**48H** *So much has changed in terms of trans and queer visibility and rights in the past 15 years. When you started the company, sodomy was just being outlawed in the US. And there have been some terrible steps backward as well. What are your thoughts on how valuable the arts, and specifically your contribution, are in the struggle for equality?*

**SEAN DORSEY** I am proud of the barriers I have helped shatter—and the new space and support I have created for transgender artists and communities. I know how life-saving the arts are: We ALL have a deep need to see ourselves and our stories reflected in the culture around us.

I am proud that I've been fighting for trans equity and justice in the performing arts for all these years—and that I've commissioned/presented/paid/supported more than 500 trans/gnc/queer artists through my arts nonprofit [Fresh Meat Productions](#).

I am also proud that Sean Dorsey Dance has left a swath of all-gender restrooms in theaters we've toured to across the US. Cisgender people often don't realize that gendered restrooms keep us gender-nonconforming people out of public spaces and theaters.

So it's a game-changer for my community to have all-gender restrooms, which Sean Dorsey Dance has inspired now in cities large and small—from New York's Joyce Theater to Whitewater Wisconsin's Young Auditorium Theater to Pittsburgh's Kelly Strayhorn Theater.

**48** *You tour the world, but your home is still in SF. What is your view of the arts scene here now compared to when you started?*

When I started presenting my work here 15 years ago, almost no one would present, fund, or support transgender and gnc performing artists. My own experience of this inspired me to choreograph work that lifted up

trans/gnc/queer bodies and stories; it also inspired me to found Fresh Meat Productions in order to build community, funding and support for trans/gnc arts.

Sean Dorsey Dance and Fresh Meat Productions have been an important part of transforming the Bay Area cultural landscape. Today, there are so many brilliant, innovative, and active trans and gnc artists across the Bay Area—who have in turn founded dynamic new projects and organizations.



Sean Dorsey Dance in 'Boys in Trouble.' Photo by Lydia Daniller

**48H** *What would you love to accomplish in the next 15 years?*

In the next 15 years, I want to continue creating dances that all kinds of audiences resonate with and find beautiful, powerful and transformative. I want

to continue teaching in communities across the US, and to keep touring my work widely.

My next project is called “The Lost Art of Dreaming” and will explore expansive futures for trans/gnc/queer people. At a time in America when our communities are under attack, I want to give my communities love and space to dream and imagine.

For the next couple of years, throughout the Bay Area and across the US, I’ll host DREAM LABS—creative spaces where we’ll support trans/gnc/queer people to dance, move, write, sing, craft, and/or creatively express what it is they most want and dream of. We’ll premiere a sneak peek of the new work in April 2020 at Z Space.

I hope that in the next 15 years I will look across the arts landscape and see many, many more transgender and gnc people—especially people of color and/including disabled folks—in cultural leadership, supported in their artistry, and in decision-making positions. These are the trailblazers and visionaries who will light our continued path toward justice.

**SEAN DORSEY DANCE 15TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON: ‘BOYS IN TROUBLE’**

**Thu/14-Sat/16**

**ZSPACE, SF.**

**[More info here.](#)**

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