

May 10, 2019 at 7:02 am PDT | by John Paul King

The 'Trouble' of modern dance



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

Some arts arenas — even those devoted to contemporary art — aren't as progressive as you might think.

Choreographer Sean Dorsey is dismayed at the lack of trans representation in modern dance. He leads an acclaimed, five-person, multi-generational, eponymous dance ensemble that will perform his latest creation "**Boys in Trouble**" at Highways Performance Space in Santa Monica, May 17-18.

"Boys in Trouble" is being presented as part of Behold!, Highways annual queer arts festival designed to roughly coincide with Pride. It continues throughout the months of May and June and includes many significant highlights, including works by longtime Highways alumni such as solo theater legend Tim Miller, eminent artist/activist/playwright Michael Kearns, and Black Lives Matter Co-founder Patrisse Cullors (highwaysperformance.org).

“While other performing arts are starting to celebrate trans artistry,” he says, “modern dance continues to totally exclude trans and gender-nonconforming people. Sadly, even some of our own rainbow flag family is complicit. I can’t count the number of cis gay and queer choreographers who continue to make only hetero duets and dances. Why? Queer and trans bodies, love and creativity are gorgeous.”

Dorsey has worked hard throughout his career to create space for other trans, gender-nonconforming and queer artists in the dance community. Fresh Meat Productions, which he started 17 years ago, organizes a variety of year-round events, including education programs, community engagement, free community forums and workshops.

With Sean Dorsey Dance, he’s tried to lead the way in the charge toward inclusion. When “Boys in Trouble” had its premiere in San Francisco earlier this year, he told an interviewer he was “really proud” of “paying, commissioning, hiring and supporting over 500 artists in the Bay Area.” He called it “activism,” something he’s well-versed in after a long history of fighting for social justice causes. In between rehearsals, he has spent a fair share of his time going to coalition meetings, blocking traffic with protests and lobbying at City Hall.

That first-hand community involvement is part of what has energized him in carving out a career for himself in the face of prejudice and exclusion. It took time to build the reputation he now enjoys.

“The first thing I had to overcome was misconceptions about my work’s quality,” he says.

“Presenters and funders had never seen anyone like me. Before they’d see my work, they’d dismiss me and be like, ‘Sooooo... you do drag?’”

In those early years, Dorsey and his company worked hard against the assumption that work from a transgender artist must be amateur or be experimental. He takes great pride in pointing out that after 15 years of receiving national awards, “we’ve kind of obliterated that misconception.”

Even so, he says it’s still not easy to be a trans dance artist.

“I tour constantly and I can’t even go pee in some of the airports or theaters I tour to, because of mounting anti-trans ‘bathroom bills.’ I have to navigate harassment and potential violence wherever I go.”

His latest show, co-commissioned by Highways, makes its L.A. debut as both he and the enduring queer-centric alternative art space celebrate milestones. Sean Dorsey Dance turns 15 this year; Highways marks the 30th anniversary of involvement with LGBTQ arts patrons through its prolific co-presentation of up to 250 performances and 50 new works per year.

“Boys in Trouble,” conceived by Dorsey as an urgent and timely commentary on toxic masculinity, was built upon material gathered from visits to communities across the country, where Dorsey hosted forums on masculinity, recorded interviews and taught free movement workshops for transgender, gender non-conforming, cisgender, gay, bi and queer people on the masculine spectrum. Designed to “move seamlessly between dance and live speaking for an evening of super-vulnerable storytelling,” the piece is described as “an extravaganza of full-throttle dance, raw emotion, irreverent humor, exquisite queer partnering ... performed with signature precision, guts and deep humanity.”

“I developed each of my last three shows in collaboration with Highways,” Dorsey says, “and it’s significant that this beloved institution generously invested in my work as a trans artist long before most American theaters would even consider presenting trans artists.”

“In fact,” he says, “most of them still aren’t.”

Leo Garcia, executive director and former artistic director of Highways, says Dorsey first came to the organization’s attention in 2002, and they felt, “the work Sean was producing reflected the work of our transgender and queer artists.”

“Sean’s work is our work,” Garcia says. “It is truth telling. He works within the communities and tells their stories. He serves compassionate historical accuracy along with beautiful dance. And he’s irresistibly enthusiastic. He includes me in the conversation, and he collaborates well. And for me, personally, he flips gender identity on its head so my understanding of my own binary, cisgender evolution catches me short. His work helps me figure it all out.”

Dorsey says he thinks of his work as “deeply human and accessible.”

“I don’t make ‘abstract’ modern dance,” he says. “My dances are meant to be understood, and to be felt. It’s a fusion of full-throttle dancing, theater and storytelling. We get feedback constantly from our audiences that people leave the theater transformed.”

His company’s audiences are as diverse as one might expect.

“It’s beautiful seeing this diversity of communities sitting shoulder to shoulder in the theater and in the lobby after the show.”

Dorsey says being transgender affords him, “a level of self-awareness and consciousness” that “profoundly” affects his work.”

“My journey as a trans person informs my choreography, enriches it,” he says. “I consider it a tremendous blessing to be transgender.”

**BOYS IN TROUBLE | HIGHWAYS PERFORMANCE SPACE LEO GARCIA | SEAN DORSEY
SEAN DORSEY DANCE**

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