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Fresh Meat Festival Goes Virtual

The annual celebration of trans and gender-nonconforming artists is free to stream.

by *Emily Zhang* • 06/18/2020 4:34 pm



The Fresh Meat Festival returns for its 19th year — online, of course. (Photo: Kegan Marling)

Almost twenty years ago, [Sean Dorsey](#) noticed that theater companies across the US, and even in San Francisco, weren't casting trans or gender-nonconforming artists in productions — let alone funding their projects.

Dorsey is a San Francisco-based award-winning choreographer, dancer, and activist. He's a trans man and the director of TRANSform Dance, a program providing resources and education for trans equity in dance.

In 2002, in an effort to address the dearth of trans and gender-nonconforming artists onstage, he founded San Francisco's Fresh Meat Festival.

“We know that trans, QTPOC, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming artists are brilliant, powerful visionaries — but we are generally denied access and resources,” Dorsey writes in an email to *SF Weekly*. “We wanted to create a groundbreaking, loving, celebratory space for us, with the highest production values... where our artists and crews are paid well, and lifted up with love.”

Trans, gender-nonconforming, and queer artists perform dance, theater, and live music at the annual Fresh Meat Festival, which is held every year around the time of the annual Pride celebration. The festival works to deconstruct the restrictive norms that mainstream society has built around art, gender, and sexuality. Last year's festival featured New Voices Bay Area TIGQ Chorus, a “gender-defying choir” with singers who identify as transgender, intersex, or genderqueer (TIGQ). Oakland-based The Singing Bois performed as a pop quartet — exploring themes like masculinity, as well as queer and trans stories, through song.

This year marks the 19th installment of the Fresh Meat Festival, and, due to the pandemic, the event will be held entirely online on Vimeo. Tickets are free, and there won't be any live performances or premieres. Instead, the festival's five programs will each broadcast a different mix of highlights from past festivals.

Programs Four and Five, which feature content from the 2019 event, will stream continuously from June 18 to 27. Program One will stream all day on June 18, Program Two on June 19, and Program Three on June 20. The festival will feature work from 31 artists performing vogue, trapeze, comedy, taiko, hula, and bomba.

Robbie Tristan and Ernesto Palma are an international-award-winning same-gender ballroom duo. #kNOwSHADE is a Pittsburgh-based vogue ensemble. Shawna Virago is a trans musician from San Francisco, singing folk and punk.

“Expect to be moved,” Dorsey says. “Expect to be energized. This is balm for our hearts and fuel for the revolution.”

Last year, Fresh Meat also launched their Fresh Works! program, in which they commissioned work for their festival by trans, gender-nonconforming, and queer artists of color.

Fresh Meat's support for their artists extends beyond the festival. "...We work to bring the attention of media and funders to support these artists; we create opportunities for our communities to gather in solidarity, in love, in joy," Dorsey explains.

He also acknowledges that there were losses in moving the festival online. Performers and audience members can no longer gather in person at the Mission District's Z Space, where the event has traditionally been held and the crowd creates a distinct energy.

"Those who have come to the Fresh Meat Festival know there is palpable, abundant joy and love and elation in the theater when we gather for this event," he says. "People look forward to it all year. It is a time of witnessing, uplifting and connecting with each other."

Fresh Meat encourages audience members to still applaud for performers during the online festival. And while DJ La Frida is no longer throwing an afterparty in the Z Space lobby, anyone who registers for a ticket can enjoy her custom-made Fresh Meat DJ sets.

The online format has also expanded the festival's reach and accessibility. Everyone gets a front-row seat. Disabled, sick, and chronically ill people who may not have been able to attend in-person performances can now tune in. Those not living in the Bay Area can as well. There's potential for the festival to have a much more diverse audience.

While previous festivals had tickets for sale on a sliding-scale, they're completely free this year. The closed-captioning also increases accessibility for many people, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

By uplifting historically marginalized voices, Fresh Meat shows that art is a tool for social justice. It also recognizes the intersectional nature of this social justice. "...We cannot celebrate trans, GNC and queer artists without

simultaneously fighting white supremacy, ableism and anti-migrant hate,” Dorsey says.

The festival is supporting the Black Lives Matter movement by taking voluntary donations from the audience. “One very small action in solidarity we are doing: while our festival tickets are free, we are accepting optional donations: 100 percent of donations will go to [TGI Justice Project](#),” Dorsey says.

The TGI Justice Project fights the human rights abuses against TIGQ people in California prisons, jails, and detention centers. It was founded in 2004 with a Soros Justice Fellowship. Janetta Johnson, a Black trans woman formerly incarcerated in a men’s prison, leads the organization.

“Fighting anti-blackness and fighting white supremacy are lifelong practices – our organization understands these to be practices of learning, action, course correction, learning, action and so on... not just a set of values or a single action,” Dorsey says.

[Fresh Meat Festival 2020](#)

June 18 – 27

[Register For Free Tickets Here](#)