

Rewriting the Written

FTM Self-Making and the Performance of Possibilities in Sean Dorsey's Uncovered: The Diary Project

BY BO LUENGSURASWAT

June in San Francisco is undoubtedly the most Prideful month. The Annual Pride Parade, the National Queer Arts Festival, and the Frameline International LGBT Film Festival are merely a few of the million queer events listed on the city's June calendar. While such a variety of queer arts events and venues might speak to an increasing visibility of the LGBT community in general, certain populations—transgender and gender non-conforming people in particular—still remain largely underrepresented and marginalized. Among hundreds of films screened at Frameline each year, only a handful of them are concerned with transgender and gender-variant issues. Out of thousands of queer events and social gatherings,



Sean Dorsey. Courtesy of Lydia Daniller

gender non-conforming people could count the times when no one makes assumptions regarding their identities. Even at LGBT community centers, gender-variant and trans people often report having experienced harassment when using restrooms that correspond to their self-proclaimed gender. For them, the letter “T” in the LGBT acronym by no means guarantees that their identities and desires are respectfully acknowledged both within and outside the queer community.

Against this backdrop of marginalization, many gender-variant artists develop creative approaches to communicate their experiences, transforming and transcending the reality of gender, and connecting with others who share their journey of self-making and empowerment. One up-and-coming transgender and gender non-conforming artist is Sean Dorsey, founder and artistic director of Fresh Meat Productions, an internationally recognized cutting-edge transgender and queer arts organization based in San Francisco. Dorsey is a female-to-male (FTM) transgender choreographer and dancer, whose work is a powerful fusion of modern dance, spoken words, and theatrical performance, which positions gender non-conforming bodies and desires at the center of storytelling. Dorsey has performed at venues throughout the Bay Area, across the United States, and abroad. Fresh



Lost/Found:
Tales from the
Margins of
Masculinity.
Courtesy of
Lydia Daniller

Meat Productions has been named the Bay Area’s “Best Dance/Performance Company” by *SF Weekly*, as well as “one of the international dance scene’s most promising choreographers” by *BalletTanz*, Europe’s leading dance magazine. Dorsey’s most recent work, *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, premiered at Dance Mission Theater in San Francisco and performances ran from from January 29 to February 1, 2009.

Uncovered: The Diary Project is comprised of two performance pieces, *Lost/Found* and *Lou*. *Lost/Found* is a fifteen-minute excerpt of Dors-

ey’s 2007 show, *Lost/Found: Tales from the Margins of Masculinity*. In this piece, Dorsey explores the notion of masculinity from various male perspectives, namely transgender, queer, and straight, through his autobiographical childhood story. The performance begins by Dorsey narrating his frustration with the “Diary for a Young Girl” that was given to him as a child. Through dance and spoken words, Dorsey negotiates his way around the expectations of womanhood with a great sense of humor. One day, while strolling down an aisle of books at a thrift store,



**Louis (Lou)
Graydon
Sullivan.
Collection
of the GLBT
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of Northern
California**

Dorsey discovers the “Diary for a Young Boy,” an exact counterpart of the diary that he originally possesses. In this newfound diary, he meets the “Diary Boy” whose struggle with masculinity is written on the pages (performed by Brian Fisher). As Dorsey flips through this unfinished diary with an attempt to “find” his “lost” boyhood—in other words, to mold his sense of maleness after biological (queer) masculinity—he discovers that there is no one right way to embody masculinity and consequently reflects on his journey to self-acceptance. Dorsey notes, “More than being about masculinity, [the] show is also about being human—imperfect, hopeful, joyfully ambitious, resilient creatures that we are. We, all of us, can feel so lost out in the margins, but what (and who) we find there can be remarkable and marvelous. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

Dorsey continues to explore the margins of masculinity in *Lou*, the central piece of *Uncovered: The Diary Project*. This performance is an homage to Louis (Lou) Graydon Sullivan (1951–1991), a pioneer female-to-male transgender activist and scholar who significantly contributed to the establishment of the FTM community. Sullivan’s best-known accomplishment was to challenge the homophobic bias of medical institutions that prevented gay-identified transmen from obtaining medical

treatment, primarily due to the fear of “creating” homosexuals. As the first gay transman to physically transition, Sullivan made possible what was previously deemed impossible. Not only was Sullivan’s transition an actualization of his life-long dream to socialize with gay men as a man, but it was also a validation of homosexually identified transpeople’s gender identities—that gay transmen are not initially “straight women” and lesbian transwomen are not simply “straight men” as they are often believed to be. Unfortunately, Sullivan passed away from AIDS at the age of thirty-nine, shortly after completing his physical transition. Following his death, the San Francisco FTM community support network that Sullivan started was renamed the Lou Sullivan Society to honor his life and spirit.

Lou is the culmination of a year-and-a-half research process, in which Dorsey intensively researched transpeople’s personal writings and meticulously hand-transcribed Sullivan’s journal entries from library archives. For him, the process of writing Sullivan’s words was an important part of internalizing and embodying Sullivan’s experience. In this performance, Dorsey and the three supporting dancers—Brian Fisher, Juan de la Rosa, and Nol Simonse—remarkably portray Sullivan’s moments of struggle and joy. The constant questioning of identity and the drive towards an actualization of desire are the themes that weave

through the piece. From the initial attraction to gay men and confusion over self-identity, to the corporeal embodiment of maleness and sexual involvement with gay men, Dorsey embodies the intense and powerful shifts in Sullivan's sense of self until the moment of his death.

One of the most memorable scenes in *Lou* is when Sullivan (Dorsey) and his lover (Simonse) lie side by side on the dimly lit stage caressing and quietly making love. Both of them giggle while reading through Sullivan's diary, especially at the part where Sullivan wrote about the start of their relationship: "Here's you and me...almost a year ago... December 18th: He just kept going... So then we made love...again, passionately...and slept (a little). He is everything I'm looking for...and this was the first time I wrote: I love him." Sullivan's lover teasingly wonders, "Him'...Me?" Sullivan whispers, "Yes, You." The scene ends with Sullivan and his lover wrestling for the diary.

The climax of Sullivan's life (and Dorsey's performance)—the ability to fulfill his dream of becoming a gay man—is immediately followed by Sullivan's discovery of his HIV-positive status. In this subsequent scene, the performers appear on stage one by one in formal white clothes and mourn over Sullivan's "short-lived" dream. The feelings of regret and despair are strongly suggested by the dialogue, yet meditative back-



Uncovered: The Diary Project. From left, Brian Fisher, Sean Dorsey, Juan de la Rosa, and Nol Simonse. Courtesy of Lydia Daniller



ground music, warm magenta lighting, and the performers' slow and solid movements rather evoke a sense of hope for Sullivan's remaining time and the future of the FTM community.

While Lou Sullivan helped shape the FTM community through laying an organizational foundation for support networks, advancing knowledge about FTM identity, and connecting FTMs cross-continently, Sean Dorsey transforms the landscape of FTM and gender-variant communities by artistically narrating the possibilities of life beyond the conventions of gender and, therefore, powerfully bringing together those who share similar experiences and desires. Although Dorsey's performances speak to the struggles often faced by gender non-conforming people, the themes of self-discovery, uncertainty, non-belongingness, and marginalization in his work also resonate with the experiences of a conventionally gendered audience. Dorsey's ability to connect with both trans and non-trans audiences is crucial, since such a connection illustrates that gender-variant and trans people do share certain insecurities and desires with the conventionally gendered majority and that they, too, are human.

Author's note: For more information on Sean Dorsey's work and upcoming Fresh Meat performances, please visit <http://www.freshmeatproductions.org>. For an extensive interview with Sean Dorsey, see Jenna Humphrey's "Trans Dance: A Cup of Tea with Choreographer Sean Dorsey," <http://www.freshmeatproductions.org/press/0710teaparty.pdf>.

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A SYMPOSIUM Processing the Lesbian Archive: The "Access Mazer" Project

Ann L. Cvetkovich
Professor of English,
University of Texas, Austin

TUESDAY, MAY 5

Library Conference Room,
Young Research Library
1:30 pm - 3:30pm

This event will celebrate the completion of a two-year project and will feature a keynote by Cvetkovich and a panel discussion with some of the graduate students who worked on the project: T-Kay Sangwand, James Hixon, and Candace Moore.

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