

## Grade A

*THE QUEER ISSUE: Fresh Meat serves up a diverse evening of performance*

By Rita Felciano

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It was a gathering of tribes with more tattoos and partially shaved heads per square foot than anywhere else in San Francisco. The sartorial imagination at times rivaled the one on stage. In other words, it was the eighth Fresh Meat Festival, celebrating transgender and queer performance, and Project Artaud Theater packed them in.

Announced as the largest festival of its kind in the country, Fresh Meat is the brain- (and heart-) child of Sean Dorsey. A smart organizer and good artist, he programmed a lineup that showcased not only gender but ethnic diversity: a Latino singer, an African American rapper, and a Sri Lankan theater artist, among others. Differences extended to quality; not all the performers were equal in either craft or talent. But this was a theatrically pungent evening whose concurrent themes couldn't be missed. Joyful affirmation of self and the pain of not fitting in went hand in hand.



Sri Lankan spoken word artist D'Lo

The evening opened on a note of female assertiveness. Taiko Ren's exuberant women embraced those huge drums — for centuries restricted to the male of the species — as their birthright. Planting their hips and focusing their energy into the hard-hitting batons, they set the air humming with overlapping and shimmering resonances. Hip-hop closed the two-and-a-half-hour show. Allan Frias' high-camp and razor-sharp Mind over Matter Dance Company's *Bring it to Runway* exploded the fashion world's dehumanized body as a clothes-hanger. Seen as manipulated mannequins, the dancers revolted into a brigade of hard-hitting, furiously stepping males and females whose individuality was as strong as their sense of common purpose.

Coming fresh from the Ethnic Dance Festival, the Barbary Coast Cloggers' footwork and the body slaps in *Hambone* didn't sound as finely synchronized as they have in the past. However, the marvelous *Wind It Up*, to Gwen Stefani's yodel-infected song, highlighted the sly note of urbanity that's always present in these dancers' take on rural traditions. Another reminder that common dance traditions often exclude non-heterosexuals came from North American same-sex ballroom champions Zoe Balfour and Citabria Phillips. Their spacious *Ballroom Blitz*, a suave and light-as-air foxtrot, went by too fast. I would love to see what else they do.

Most of the solo performers came from Los Angeles. Ryka Aoki de la Cruz' *Alternator Domme* was a little heavy-handed in its use of metaphor, but she is witty writer and quick-change artist who times her material — paying for car repairs with a gig in a dungeon — well. In the hilarious excerpt from *Ramble-Ations: A One D'Lo Show*, D'Lo transitions from a traditional Sri Lankan mother into an Angelino "tomboy". The work dove deeply into the poignancy of not wanting to be put into a gender — or any other kind of — box. Rapper Deadlee's in-your-face "We Serve it Up Nasty" — with audience participation — was a rebellious rant against homophobia in hip-hop. Yet I wondered whether its transgressive tone didn't strike a note of simple-mindedness with this audience. StormMiguel Florez has a beautifully flexible voice, yet his family-inspired songs sounded bland. SF's own Shawna Virago — edgy, elegant, elegiac — premiered a lovely new work dedicated to Sean Dorsey.

Dorsey's substantial *Lou* is his finest work yet, and the festival's highlight. The excerpt (performed beautifully by Dorsey, Juan de la Rosa, Brian Fisher, and Nol Simonse) stood well on its own. Some of the verbal links between memory and history probably could be tightened, but the simple yet eloquent choreography opens up Dorsey's language and Lou's life remains simultaneously tender and powerful. As for the next Fresh Meat Festival: less between-the-acts talk and tighter tech, please.