

Dance Flash: The Evocative Sean Dorsey

Sean Dorsey has been hailed as a choreographer to watch (*Dance Magazine*), one who creates "intelligent and evocative" (*CriticalDance*) and "trailblazing art" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), and named as having the San Francisco's best dance/performance company by *SF Weekly*. Oh, and he's also recognized as the nation's first out transgender modern dance choreographer.

Last week, in between last minute costume fittings and other interviews, I chatted with Sean as he was entering the final stages of prepping the remount of his well regarded *Uncovered: The Diary Project*.

Talking with him, though, I never got the feeling that this soft spoken, humble guy is anything but. Even with accolades thrown at him from every which way, he still remains true to himself, his art, and his community.

Becca Hirschman: I'll preface this by saying that I'm very familiar with dance and arts, but I'm not as familiar with transgender and queer and the community itself in San Francisco, so if I say something that's awkward or wrong, please let me know!

Sean Dorsey: Thank you so much, and no worries. I just say go for it, and I'll let you know if anything...

You'll yell at me? Ha!

(laughs)

I guess what I'd like to start with are your personal experiences, how you've explored your identity through your work, your awareness of yourself. Have you explored any specific outlets or ways that you've felt have really helped you carve out who you are? Or what's brought you to where you are today?

I think that making my dance work as exploring transgender and queer themes has been a really important part of my own personal journey as a transgender and queer person. A big part of the drive to make this work, for me, was that I did not see myself or my community on stage or in dance, ever. And so that's part of what motivates me as a choreographer, but the other part that motivates me is really about making dances that are also universal and human, and I think that's why my audiences are an amazing blend of transgender and queer people, and also totally mainstream dance lovers and theater lovers because the work does speak to everyone. It uses a specific transgender experience, but it does it in a way that I think really articulates universal themes that resonate with everyone.

And you had a background in economics?

I have a BA and I was in graduate school for community economic development, and that was a time when I told myself that I'd give myself just a year off to pursue what I thought was a very selfish endeavor, which was to go to dance school for a year and then, you know, return to my serious activism. My whole identity was very much wrapped up in being a traditional activist and community organizer, and I really struggled for many years with the idea of giving myself over to being a working artist. It felt like it would be selfish, but it was through the process of being in dance school and starting to make work that I got that actually this was the way that I could, I think, affect the most change in my community: through my cultural activism as a choreographer and artistic director.

You have **Fresh Meat Productions, which is your umbrella organization. What exactly, well, just looking at the web, it seems like you do **everything**. What... doesn't it do?**

(laughs) We do a lot (laughs some more). Yeah, so Fresh Meat is the non-profit that I founded and direct. And we do—we do everything. So my dance company, Sean Dorsey Dance, is the residence dance company. We have a very popular annual festival of performance, the Fresh Meat Festival, and then we also co-present and present other events like visual art exhibitions and film events and other community events.

Do you ever collaborate with other organizations in the Bay Area?

Does Fresh Meat Productions ever? Yeah, Absolutely! For example, we co-present the annual **Tranny Fest Film Festival**. Tranny Fest is an organization that's has been around for 12 years, and they founded the nation's first, basically the world's first transgender film festival. So we co-present that with them, and we are one of the community sponsors that works with **FrameLine** and the **Trans March**. We recently worked with the **Asian and Pacific Islander Wellness Center**; we were one of the community sponsors for the first annual **Glitter**, which was a ball, you know, a voguing ball, a runway event for youth. A huge part of our roots is in community, and so that's an really important part of our programming is still working with other community nonprofits and organizations to share programming.

You're presenting *Uncovered: The Diary Project* next week, and it's been performed before here and in New York. Would you tell me a little bit about the work and how it came about?

I may have a million sparks, and it's really spending the time to flesh out one of those concepts and move forward with one project.

Uncovered: The Diary Project is an evening of dances that incorporates text from actual, real life diaries by transgender and queer people to reveal life stories and experiences that have either fallen between the pages of history or that history has tried to ignore or erase. It's the culmination of about a year and a half-long research process where I researched diaries of transgender and queer people, whether they were famous or unknown, and had conversations with people about their lives and their diaries. (Um, that was a very long sentence. Period!)

And I was driven to make the work out of my passion and curiosity for the histories and life stories of my community that are just being lost or forgotten, even within my community. For example, "Lou" which is straight-up dance, is based on the lifelong journal of transgender activist Lou Sullivan. Even a lot of transgender people in the Bay Area, younger people, have never heard of Lou, while he was one of the nation's, if not the world's, most important transgender activist and the figure. (Period.)

It's the magic of the semi-colon; you can use it anywhere!

Semi-colon! I love me a semi-colon! Should I keep talking about the dances?

I'm actually a little curious about the research process. You said that you looked at diaries and also spoke to people, right?

Yeah, so I had conversations. Like for "Lost/Found," it's the story of Mary, a transman. It's kind of a vicarious look at the boyhood he never had when he finds a boy's diary in a thrift store. For that piece, I also not only used found diaries, but also had conversations with a spectrum of people who negotiate masculinity in childhood, whether that is gay men, transgender women, transgender women. So the piece is really about struggling with masculinity and confidence in childhood, which is something that a lot of people can relate to. Actually, it's not. Let me rephrase that. It's about performing gender adequately in childhood. That's something that everyone can relate to: women, men, trans people, queer people alike.

For funding support, you work off of grants, right?

So I work for about three cents an hour. But I was very blessed to received commissions that were funded from the Gerbode Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation. I've also received a commission from the San Francisco Arts Commission and support the Queer Cultural Center. Because of the scope of the project and the length of the research process, that's what really allowed me to make this work. It was over a year and a half long process with research and working with four dancers, four different composers. So I was very, very blessed to receive this funding because I could not have done this scale of a project without this support.

That was going to be my comment, that these days, many artists are receiving smaller grants that are really just a small amount of time as opposed to doing a lot of in-depth research and prep.

Well, like I said, I work for three cents an hour! But we've also been very lucky to have some very generous donors to Fresh Meat who also support our projects.

You perform in *Uncovered* as well. As you've performed it many times by now, are there things that you tend to gravitate to night after night or do you find that there are different pieces that tend to speak to you as you're performing it?

I think that what's amazing about performing the work is that it really feels very much alive to all of us and it keeps deepening and expanding as we perform it. There are certainly moments that always hit me really hard, and are really intense performing. There's a section, in Lou, where we're dancing to diary entries where Lou emotionally distressed with HIV and then is declining with AIDS, and that is always a really emotionally intense and powerful section to dance. Also, parts of the dance where there's this explosion of joy and liberation and happiness when he really makes his decision to transition and embrace his authentic self and starts his difficult transition and emerges in the world as a gay man and has a fabulous time in gay San Francisco. He [static in recording...] had quite a ride here. And unfortunately, as an adult, contacted HIV.

But also, there are different things every show. What are the challenges...

Maybe there aren't challenges!

As a dance, there are always certain parts of the movement, a certain balance or a turn, that are going to be physically more challenging.

I wouldn't say it was difficult, but at the beginning, it was a challenge for me. there's a part of the dance where I take off my shirt as I'm looking in the mirror, which is the audience, and that was a very vulnerable position to make. It still feels vulnerable to do, but it felt especially vulnerable when I first started performing the piece.

When you create works, what motivates you? Is there something sparks a flame in your mind? How do you find your inspiration?

I actually find my inspiration in a million other places along with dance. Certainly a lot of my inspiration comes from language and lighting, but it may be visual art or sculpture or conversations in my community around political organizing or a particular part of history in my community. I really feel like inspiration is lurking everywhere, thank goodness, but my process is very long. Really, for me, part of the challenge is that I may have a million sparks, and it's really spending the time to flesh out one of those concepts and move forward with one project. My creative process is pretty labor-intensive because before I start movement vocabulary invention or choreography, I have already at least a draft, if not a final recording, of the sound score, but all of my movement is rooted in not only the music and rhythm of the music, but also the cadence and rhythm of language and the sound score because I use text and story telling in all of my sound scores. I'll spend anywhere from two months to ten months working on themes and concepts and writing and sound score and recording and recording of the sound score and then I'll begin the multi-month choreographic process. It's a loooooong process!

What brought you to San Francisco?

I had long wanted to visit San Francisco, and I actually came here and performed here, visiting for about two weeks, and immediately knew, basically as soon as my feet hit the ground, that it was totally home. It wasn't as simple as that this is San Fran—the queer/trans mecca! It was just an amazing energy here, an amazing community, and it just felt like the right home for me. It felt really full of possibilities, and a place where I would really be able to make my artistic home.

Did you get a chance to see DV8 Physical Theater when it visited late last year?

Yes, I did!

So I'm curious what you thought of *To Be Straight With You*. I spoke with Lloyd Newson beforehand, and then caught him in an in-person interview. He was very firm in his thought that in activist work, the dance needed to be literal. It shouldn't be modern dance or contemporary. It should really be gestures, short and quick movements, with more emphasis on text than visual (dance) imagery. And I'm curious what you think of that and his work.

I didn't quite hear all that. Let me be sure. You said he was quite firm in that if you were going to use text, like literal, narrative text, then he would say you needed to use short, gestural movements.

He was very firm that if it's activist work, where you're really trying to make a point, that the dance should really be stripped down to gestures or very small amounts of dance. He was, I think he was trying to suggest that abstract movement, or more modern or contemporary dance, doesn't have a place in work that has some kind of activist purpose.

Interesting! Because certainly he does such a brilliant job of marrying activist-driven, text-based work with beautiful sharp, quick, like you said, more gestural movements. And that's interesting that he feels very firmly that that's the only or best way to express political content because in my work, I certainly use a lot of gestural movement, but I'm also really interested in a full bodied movement. Large sweeping movements, partnering, and I think that that can also very powerfully move the audience, seeing bodies on stage who from head to toe are swept up and moved by language as well as political themes. So while I think he does a brilliant job, I think I would argue that there is room for many physical ways of expressing political content.

I do understand what he means; I think a lot people just tend to slap text on top of traditional modern dance, and I don't think there's any relationship between the text and the movement on stage. That might be why a lot of people feel alienated or just don't get it. But I think if you're really rigorous and honest about the relationship between every word of text and every piece of movement, I think it can be done really successfully and powerfully. And I don't mean word-for-word physicalizing or interpreting text or language, but whether it's literally or abstractly interpreting the spirit of language or a phrase or a sentence or a theme. I think it can be absolutely full bodied.

What's next for you?

Well, I have started my next project, which I will perform a sneak peak of at our June 2010 Fresh Meat Festival at **Project Artaud Theater**, and this will be another long-term project. Right now I've been very inspired and immersed in love letters and love notes and stories of love in transgender and queer communities, both contemporary and historic. We're wrapped up in love right now?

Are you part of Erika Chong Schuch's *Love Everywhere* project?

I started this project last year, and then I saw that and clearly, we're all feeling ht need!

I'll be featuring her next week, so it seems like love is in the air!

What: Sean Dorsey Dance's *Uncovered: The Diary Project*
Where: Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th Street @ Mission
When: Feb. 4-Feb. 7
Tickets: \$15-20 sliding scale (advance tickets highly recommended; Th-Sa performances are almost sold out.); **online** or 415.273.4633