



Sean Dorsey takes the middle road

Queer Poetry in Motion

Sean Dorsey brings it. ★ By Zak Szymanski

"People who hear the words modern dance are like, *aagghhh!*" says Sean Dorsey, mimicking the cry of skeptical audience members who have difficulty relating to anything they perceive as abstract.

But this 33-year-old choreographer is already known for making powerful connections to emotional and physical realities with a popular repertoire of mixed media narrative dance that has its finger on America's queer pulse.

"My goal is to make dances that people can actually understand and relate to," Dorsey explains. "This is why I use storytelling in my work — because it contextualizes dance in deeply felt personal experience."

Last year, Dorsey became the first openly transgender artist to be commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission to create, perform and produce new pieces that reflect the world of the "gender outsider." His \$10,000 commission paid off with *The Outsider Chronicles*, which premiered last fall at the ODC Theater and featured five modern dances that explored the intersections of gender, family and love. *Red Tie, Red Lipstick* was one such piece, a vulnerable pas de deux about police brutality set to the poetry of hip-hop artist Marcus Van. Another dance, *Six Hours*, was a tender, humorous depiction of the tense road trip journey of two lovers on their way to visit estranged family.

The Outsider Chronicles opened to critical acclaim. *BalletTanz* magazine called the show "exquisite ... poignant and important," and the *San Francisco Chronicle* said it was "trailblazing." A critic for *DanceView Times* said, "I can't

remember the last time I saw so much tenderness, romanticism, delicacy of feeling, tentative grace, truth of gesture, human longings for loyalty, affection, and abiding relationship surrounded by such claims to be shocking, bold, futurist, subversive."

The show — which will run again in November 2006 — cemented Dorsey's reputation for being accessible to a general audience without sacrificing refined artistic quality. But Dorsey's work has always been considered groundbreaking: Aside from being the only modern dancer doing professional work rooted in queerly gendered bodies, Dorsey is the founder and artistic director of Fresh Meat Productions, an organization widely credited with fostering San Francisco's thriving transgender performance scene. This multicultural community includes the vocal, writing and dance talents of transsexuals, genderqueers, dykes, fags, intersexed people and allies. Dorsey, who identifies simply (or complexly) as trans, views the overlap of all these various populations as crucial to his creative and political process.

"I definitely see the dyke and trans movements as related for the same reasons that I see dyke, trans, feminist, anti-racist, disability rights and fat-positive movements as related," Dorsey says. "We are all working for the creation of new, positive, empowered public understanding of who we are, and for the civil rights that accompany that understanding. Art is an incredibly powerful tool to do that work with. Art is my activism: By exploring

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the transgender experience through movement, I'm challenging perceptions about dance, the dancer's body and physicality at its core. I'm challenging the very instrument we dancers rely upon. I'm pushing at the walls of who traditionally is and isn't allowed to be onstage. I want to bring entirely new stories and content to modern dance and bring modern dance to entirely new audiences."

Dorsey seems to be succeeding beautifully: The artist has graced the stages of LadyFest and TransArt events as well as theaters across the United States and Canada, and is anticipating a European tour in late 2006. This June he will perform as part of New York City's Fresh Fruit Festival. Dorsey also was nominated for a 2006 Isadora Duncan Dance Award for ensemble performance of his choreography, and was awarded a prestigious Wallace Alexander Gerbode Choreographer's Commission to create his next concert of work.

Even though he's worked hard at his craft, he says, he feels lucky to be in a position to give back to his audience. "I get to do what I love, and it moves people deeply," Dorsey remarks. "I can't tell you how many people have come up to me after a show having cried because they were finally seeing their story told, or because they related to the work and understood trans a little better." ■