

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2005

CHOREOGRAPHER OF MATTERS GENDER

- Rachel Howard

The hair is short. The makeup-free face is pretty by some angles but also handsome by others. You notice the small breasts, of course, but also the broad, low-slung pelvis. And the movement this long, rangy instrument produces is flowing and gentle, yet strong.

To watch Sean Dorsey in the studio is to surrender your urge to categorize.

"I don't feel my gender is fluid, or that I'm androgynous or at a place in between," Dorsey says after rehearsal, humid with the smell of sweat. "But there isn't a language yet, I don't think, to describe where I am."

So Dorsey doesn't use mere language. The 33-year-old choreographer, who was born female but now prefers the pronoun "he," uses movement and story, and the combination speaks more poignantly than any label.

In "Second Kiss," a duet with Mair Culbreth, the dancers tumble over one another as Dorsey's voice-over tells of a fourth-grader's flirtations with the class' most popular girl. In "Six Hours," the same duo's dynamic grows testy and tense as Dorsey's tale describes the lovers' visit home.

The twist in both cases? The protagonist is an anatomical female who also identifies as male.

The works often move audiences -- transgender and not -- to tears, and in just three years since moving to San Francisco, Dorsey has built up a large and enthusiastic following. He's founded a booming showcase of queer and transgender performance called Fresh Meat, won a San Francisco Arts Commission individual artist grant and has been named one of European magazine BalletTanz's most promising international choreographers.

His first full evening of choreography, "The Outsider Chronicles," runs Friday and Saturday at ODC Theater. The newest work on that bill, a solo, describes the horrors of "gender correction therapy," an ordeal Dorsey never had to suffer.

Though Dorsey's work speaks to people who have felt constrained by pressures to conform, Dorsey's own childhood was one of open-minded acceptance, which perhaps explains why he has felt free to make his trailblazing art.

Dorsey was raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, by a lesbian single mother. "So very early on I saw I had more choices in how to express myself," he says. "I didn't feel boxed in early on as other people might. I wasn't a girly-girl, but I wasn't worried about it. There wasn't a day when I looked in the mirror and had a breakdown."



Chronicle / Kurt Rogers

Mair Culbreth and Dorsey rehearse 'The Outsider Chronicles'.

But despite the support of his family and community, living outside the strictures of gender is a daily challenge. Women in public restrooms gawk. Well-meaning friends introduce him as a "drag artist." Even Dorsey's mother has difficulty letting go of gender classifications.

"She comes with her own perceptions as a certain-era lesbian who has a feeling of betrayal -- how could these trans guys betray womanhood? Why would you want to be a man?" Dorsey says.

And, of course, obvious role models are few. "It is painful and lonely sometimes not to have peers," Dorsey says. "Other people can say, thank goodness for other African American choreographers. I don't get to say, thank goodness for the trans dance community. I'm it."

But then, Dorsey's work is all about having the courage to make your own mold.

"When I do my work, it's totally intuitive, it just comes out of me emotionally," he says. "I want to create the visceral, punch people in the guts, shift their understanding."



Kurt Rogers / The Chronicle

He studied theater and writing, and didn't question his gender until, as an undergraduate in political science at the University of British Columbia, he took a dance class on the side.

"I was rehearsing a solo about gender, and my friend said, 'Your body has totally changed,' " Dorsey says. "I don't take hormones, but my body used to be more curvy and feminine. And my friend said, 'Your body's manifesting something.' "

Exactly what his body has manifested is fascinatingly complex, and Dorsey -- who has never contemplated hormones or an operation -- thrives on it. In a town filled with boundary-pushing art, his dances sidestep politicizing and theorizing by presenting specific characters in specific yet universal situations.

SEAN DORSEY: "The Outsider Chronicles" will be performed at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., San Francisco. \$15; (415) 863-9834 or www.odctheater.org.

Rachel Howard is a freelance writer.

DATEBOOK: Page 30-31

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/11/13/PKGJ6FI90M1.DTL>