

Queer company Sean Dorsey Dance preps weekend D.C. performances



The cast of 'Boys in Trouble,' a Sean Dorsey-choreographed work. (Photo by Lydia Daniller)

Transgender choreographer Sean Dorsey had a love for dance from a young age but was always surrounded by cis-gender dancers. He became discouraged by the lack of representation and decided to shelve his dream.

"I never saw a single person like me, namely a transgender person, in dance. I think a part of my brain kind of shut that off as an option for my life's journey," Dorsey says.

At 25, Dorsey, who was pursuing a career in social justice community organizing, decided he could fuse his love for social justice with storytelling through movement.

Now 45, Dorsey is the first transgender modern dance choreographer in the U.S. The Vancouver, British Columbia native spearheads Sean Dorsey Dance, an all-queer dance company, that uses dance to tell LGBT stories. It's a privilege Dorsey says is not given to many LGBT dancers. While Dorsey is the only transgender member of the dance company, he notes that cis-gender, LGB dancers have their own struggles.

"There is a great and tragic irony that there are many, many LGBQ in the dance field but very little work that allows those LGBQ people to be their full, authentic, out-of-the-closet selves on stage," Dorsey says. "While there are many cis-gender gay, bisexual, lesbian, queer professional dancers and choreographers, what they mostly create or perform is work that's rooted in heterosexual narratives with very binary movement, costumes and roles. Our company is really celebrated for breaking out of those things."

One such work the company is performing is "Boys in Trouble," a project Dorsey started working on three years ago. Dorsey's choreography for the dance formed through his experience teaching free movement workshops to cis-gender, transgender, gender-non-conforming and other members of the LGBT community who identify on the masculine spectrum. He also traveled the U.S. and recorded interviews with people on the topic of masculinity.

Dorsey learned through speaking with people that there was an artistic hole for the issue of masculinity.

"We've really heard so loudly from communities that people's struggles with things like toxic masculinity and peer pressure from within trans and queer communities to be the right kind of man or to be trans enough and the continued struggles of black communities and communities of color dealing with a nation founded on white supremacy," he says. "We hurt so passionately in these communities that people are so hungry not for just dialogue about these issues but also an artistic conversation that would allow them to respond to the work and also to begin their own healing around these issues."

"Boys in Trouble" will embark on a two-year, 20-city tour across the country following its two-night engagement at Dance Place. This is the first time the project will be on tour but Dorsey has toured with other LGBT-focused performances before.

"The Missing Generation," which the company will simultaneously tour with along with "Boys in Trouble," received a positive response from audiences ranging from large cities to rural areas. The performance "gives a voice to trans and queer longtime survivors of the early AIDS epidemic," according to Dorsey. He recorded 75 hours of oral history from these survivors which was used to inspire the work.

Dorsey says that even though his projects are LGBT-focused, they can be enjoyed and understood by straight audiences as well. He believes the performance's key themes can resonate with anyone regardless of gender identity or sexuality.

"Straight audiences are deeply moved by the work," he says. "They tell us that seeing transgender and queer bodies on stage feels extremely resonant to them and really succeeds revealing truly

universal themes and narratives like difference, loss, love or all of our deep longing to be connected to other humans.”

It’s a process Dorsey works hard to conceptualize for that exact response. Dorsey uses storytelling as a key element to bring emotional themes and social justice issues to life on stage.

“I don’t create modern dance that is just dance for dance’s sake and it’s not just random, abstract, movements. Everything that I create is driven by the themes and concepts that I’m working on.”

Sean Dorsey Dance members have a busy summer ahead of them. The company will perform at dance festivals including Fresh Meat Festival, a festival of transgender and queer performances, in San Francisco June 14-16. Fresh Meat Festival is produced by Fresh Meat Productions, a transgender and queer arts production company started by Dorsey.

The company also booked its first European gig in Stockholm, Sweden this summer. Dorsey says all these bookings are notable for a transgender choreographer.

Whether it’s introducing marginalized communities to audiences or giving a voice to audiences that felt silenced, Dorsey wants everyone to leave the theater connected by the same emotion.

“I hope that audiences will leave with a heart full to overflowing and a feeling in their body of having been altered or changed in some ways and to have experienced some kind of loving shift in their mind,” Dorsey says. “This is a work so far that has just really cracked open people’s hearts and minds.”



Sean Dorsey says there are too many binary strictures in most contemporary dance. (Photo by Lydia Daniller; courtesy SDD)