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## *For Pride Week at the Joyce Theater, a Painful Look Back*



The choreographer Sean Dorsey on Bernal Hill in San Francisco. He is a vocal advocate for transgender representation in dance. Credit: Jason Henry for The New York Times

**By Brian Schaefer** | June 15, 2018

The Joyce Theater is an Art Deco, neon landmark in the heart of Chelsea, long one of New York’s gay enclaves. Formerly a movie house (it opened in 1941), the Joyce was reborn as a dance theater in 1982, shortly after death moved into the neighborhood in the form of AIDS. In the years that followed, the Joyce presented both performances and memorials for artists lost to the disease.

Brian Fisher had just moved to the city to attend New York University when the Joyce became a dance theater. One of his first dance gigs out of college was there. And it was just around the corner that he had a commitment ceremony with the man who would become his husband. The streets around the Joyce were “where we went out, where we started losing people,” he said in a recent phone interview.

Mr. Fisher, who now lives in San Francisco, returns to the Joyce this week to perform in “The Missing Generation,” a 2015 documentary dance work by the Bay Area choreographer Sean Dorsey. Since its premiere, the work — based on oral histories gathered by Mr. Dorsey from L.G.B.T. people who lived

through the epidemic and whom he calls survivors — has toured to more than 20 American cities. This engagement, though, will be its first in New York.

For Mr. Fisher, dancing in this show at the Joyce is a source both of pride and pain — an achievement for Sean Dorsey Dance, but also a personal reckoning with the past. “I don’t know what it’s going to feel like going back,” he said. “I’m a little nervous about it.”

[Performances of “The Missing Generation”](#) coincide with New York’s citywide celebration of Pride Week. For the first time, the Joyce Theater is an official partner of NYC Pride, for which it is also presenting its first formal L.G.B.T. program, featuring Mr. Dorsey’s company and Madboots, a young, all-male queer company from New York. (The two groups, both making their Joyce debuts, will alternate performances, June 19-23.)

Though the Joyce has long presented gay choreographers, the Pride program came about because of a confluence of the right companies being available at the right time, said Martin Wechsler, the former programming director for the Joyce, who is responsible for the Pride shows. “Each June I would look up and down Eighth Avenue and see rainbow flags in every storefront,” Mr. Wechsler said, adding that he thought the Joyce, given its history and location, should join the celebration. Along with its thematic program, a rainbow balloon arch will frame the theater during the Pride parade.

“The Missing Generation” is the third part of a queer history trilogy by Mr. Dorsey, who has also explored the diaries of transgender people and looked at how gay people found romance in the first half of the 20th century. At first Mr. Dorsey thought “The Missing Generation” would focus on those lost to AIDS, but after he started conducting interviews he realized there was another story to tell. “I got that what I was actually being called to do was to show up for survivors,” he said.

Mr. Dorsey, 45, also set out to expand the scope of the typical AIDS narrative, with its focus on gay men. “It was profoundly important for me as a transgender person that I document and share trans and gender nonconforming experiences and life stories from the early epidemic,” he said. Mr. Dorsey scoured historical documents and interviewed activists in San Francisco, New York, Washington and Atlanta; he said he stopped counting after logging 500 hours of research.



From left, Sean Dorsey, Nol Simonse, ArVejon Jones and Brian Fisher in “The Missing Generation,” Mr. Dorsey’s documentary dance based on the oral histories of L.G.B.T. people who lived through the AIDS epidemic. Credit Kegan Marling

Then came the task of translating that trove of material into a cohesive piece of dance theater. Other contemporary choreographers might have taken a more abstract or academic approach to the subject, but clarity is essential to Mr. Dorsey. “It’s really important to me that my work exists for a reason and that it is deeply relatable,” he said.

Though he admitted that he was “terrified about how to proceed,” he started by identifying motifs from the interviews and setting them to movement that evoked corresponding moods, like using exuberant athletic phrases to illustrate the validation of pre-AIDS sexual freedom, or conveying the pain of losing a lover through intimate duets. “The movement vocabulary of the show takes performers and audiences on a journey from a very quiet, tender internal self-reflective experience to the experience of strength,” he said.

After editing down the hours and hours of interviews, Mr. Dorsey brought recordings into the studio for his dancers to learn monologues, which they deliver during the show. That took time, too, Mr. Fisher said, because “we couldn’t get through it without crying.”

The show has also had that effect on audience members, like Ken Kohlberger, who lost many friends to AIDS. As the artistic director of the Young Auditorium Theater at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, Mr. Kohlberger presented “The Missing Generation” in 2015. He said that hundreds of students in the small, mostly conservative college town attended the performance and stayed for a post-show conversation, where he observed that they “didn’t know anything about the AIDS generation.”

Bringing this kind of awareness to social issues through dance has long been Mr. Dorsey’s artistic aim, though he initially didn’t think they were compatible. He danced while growing up in Vancouver but assumed, he said, that activism and art were not be related.

So he put away dance to pursue degrees in women’s studies and political science at the University of British Columbia. While in graduate school for social and economic development, he returned to dance and found he could use it to give visibility to transgender performers and issues. “Oh, this is how I can forge change in the world,” he recalled realizing.

In 2002, Mr. Dorsey founded [the Fresh Meat Festival in the Bay Area to showcase transgender and queer artists](#) across genres, and is a vocal advocate for transgender representation in dance. The dance field, Mr. Dorsey said, has “yet to see, let alone address, the many barriers that are preventing my people from participation, let alone leadership.”

But Mr. Dorsey is nudging presenters in a more inclusive direction through conversations and contractual commitments. “We have left a swath of all-gender restrooms in theaters across the country as we’ve toured,” he said.

That includes the Joyce, which recently made one of its patron restrooms all-gender and is in the process of making its backstage dressing rooms all-gender in time for these performances. The change came after theater administrators heard Mr. Dorsey speak about the issue at a Dance/USA conference. “It raised our awareness and sensitivity,” Mr. Wechsler said. “It encouraged us to look at how we could serve our transgender artists and transgender audiences better.”

