

## Trans Dance Artist Sean Dorsey's 'Boys In Trouble' Is An Urgent Commentary On Contemporary Masculinity: WATCH

FEBRUARY 22, 2019 BY SAVAS ABADSIDIS

The Sean Dorsey Dance Company today announced its 15th anniversary home season – a return engagement of its acclaimed dance work, *Boys in Trouble* at Z Space (March 14-16) – along with a 20-city U.S. tour, a full-length documentary, the 18th annual 'Fresh Meat Festival' of transgender and queer performance (June 20-22, San Francisco), and other celebratory achievements to mark the modern dance company's 15th anniversary.

Over the last 15 years, Dorsey, the award-winning transgender dancer, choreographer, writer and activist and his highly-regarded dance company have had a profound impact on the performing arts landscape. Recognized as the nation's first transgender choreographer, Dorsey has left an indelible mark in modern dance for the creation and staging of powerful, deeply human dances and his tireless, trailblazing activism.



**Towleroad spoke to Dorsey about his upcoming show.**

**TLRD: Tell me a bit about *Boys in Trouble* and how it's evolved.**

**Sean Dorsey:** *Boys in Trouble* is a full-bodied, high-velocity takedown of toxic masculinity. The show is a mixture of gorgeous full-throttle dance, theater, raw emotion and exquisite queer partnering. Sean Dorsey Dance is known for our signature fusion of dance and theater, and for making modern dance that people can actually UNDERSTAND and relate to.

We're an all-queer company, and I'm transgender: the show puts a trans and queer lens onto themes like gender, body shame, violence, Black queer love, whiteness and posturing. We engage in a LOT of humor onstage, like our sendup of all things "macho" and an irreverent take on "butch" queerness.

I made this work in response to this moment in America. Contemporary American masculinity is profoundly unhealthy – for all of us, including (even especially) LGBTQ people. We're not immune from the brutal pressures of gender and masculinity, whether cis or trans or nonbinary; bi, lesbian, gay or queer. We inherit and perpetuate these toxic models of how to perform gender.

Like all my dances, I created the show while working closely with trans and LGBTQ communities: I spent a couple of years traveling the US and meeting up with folks, holding community forums, and teaching trans-supportive dance workshops. All the themes that arose in those rooms and conversations inspired the final show onstage.

Right now, we're on a 20-city international tour of BOYS IN TROUBLE, bringing us from Stockholm to Los Angeles to Atlanta to Maui. And the audience response is extraordinary, just extraordinary. People tell us they are moved so deeply, and really see themselves and their experience in the work.

The show itself is a total marathon physically and emotionally to perform – it's 90 minutes of sweaty, sweaty dancing and vulnerability.

**What's been the most significant change (or changes) you've seen since beginning your dance company 15 years ago?**

I grew up never seeing a single person like me in dance. I never knew or heard of a *single* transgender modern dance choreographer, dancer, teacher, anything. So it was a lot of lonely years of making my own path without peers, without a mentor.

Young people today can't imagine what it was like only 15 or 20 years ago for trans people. So one of the biggest changes I've seen is in culture: there are so many out and proud gender-nonconforming, trans and non-binary artists and activists receiving a level of recognition and support – which is beautiful! 15 years ago that was unthinkable.

And 15 years ago, almost no one was putting transgender artists on the nation's stages. That's one of the main reasons I founded my nonprofit Fresh Meat Productions in 2002: while I myself struggled against the transphobic glass ceiling, I saw other trans artists around me struggling too.

I wanted to create a movement of trans artists – and a vehicle for us to work together and lift each other up in solidarity. All these years later, I'm so proud that under my artistic direction, Fresh Meat Productions has commissioned, presented and paid over 500 transgender, gender-nonconforming and queer artists. Sean Dorsey Dance is Fresh Meat's resident company, and one of our signature events is the annual June FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL of trans and queer performance, which centers trans/gender-nonconforming/queer artists of color.

## **What sort of headwinds did you face as the first [openly] trans artist in your profession?**

From the beginning, I have had to work 10 times as hard and prove myself twice as much just to get in the door. Because there was no one else like me, cisgender presenters and dance critics had no context to understand me and my work. Just because I was trans, they'd dismiss me and assume I was a "drag artist" without ever bothering to see my work or realize that I actually made professional concert dances that had won me many awards.

When I went to dance school in my 20s, I started choreographing. From the beginning, my work was openly queer, and featured my trans body with elements of story and text and theater. Early on, I got called into the Director's office and was chastised for making people "uncomfortable" with my work; later the director withheld my graduation certificate.

I have had to endure dance "critics" writing "reviews" that focused not on my choreography, but instead scrutinized my transgender body: writing about how I have wide hips, how my reconstructed nipples are larger than cis men's nipples, just crazy stuff.

And because virtually all dance studios/spaces have zero trans awareness, there is almost never a bathroom or changing room that trans and gender-nonconforming people can legally or safely use. This keeps us out of dance spaces, and this keeps us from dancing.

I've toured to 30 cities, but still today I am at risk because in some cities, as a transgender person I can't pee legally or safely in an airport, restaurant or even backstage itself.

Today, trans artists are still challenged by the fact that everyone with power and decision-making control in the dance field is cisgender. Cisgender leaders have yet to step up and call the continued total exclusion of gender-nonconforming bodies, voices and leadership in dance the CRISIS that it is. My program TRANSform Dance names and responds to this crisis with education, engagement and advocacy.

I feel so, so blessed to be living the life I want to lead, making the art I am passionate about, teaching dance to trans and gender-nonconforming folks, and supporting other artists. We have a long way to go, but I count my blessings every day. I love my life.

Watch the clip to *Boys in Trouble* below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdArIcoD934&feature=youtu.be>

*Photos by: Lydia Daniller*

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