

Forbes

19 June 2019

Meet Sean Dorsey, One Of The Nation's First Transgender Modern Dance Choreographers

By Jeryl Brunner



Sean Dorsey PHOTOS: LYDIA DANILLER

The 1978 concept album “Sesame Street Fever,” featuring Grover in his iconic white suit a la John Travolta, left an indelible mark on pioneering choreographer Sean Dorsey. Back in his native Vancouver, nothing would stop a toddler-aged Dorsey from reaching the turntable. He would rotate “Sesame Street Fever” with the “Fame” motion picture soundtrack. “I loved dance passionately with every cell in my body from my very earliest memories,” he shares. “As soon as I was able and bopping around as a little toddler, I was dancing!” And so began a happy childhood that kept Dorsey perpetually in motion for decades and “always spinning around my living room.”

Today, Dorsey is a rarity in the modern dance world. He is an openly transgender choreographer and activist with a professional dance company that has been thriving for 15 years. His company is more in demand than ever. A few months ago, [Sean Dorsey Dance](#) celebrated its anniversary in San Francisco where Dorsey built his dance troupe and full-length autobiographical dances. His mission has always been to honor the lives and stories of the forgotten and censored LGBTQ and transgender elders before him.

While Dorsey always loved dance, he didn't grow up with any formal dance training. "I never saw anyone like me in dance, so at a very deep, subconscious level, I figured it could never be my path. I believed I was destined to dance non-professionally," he shares. "It wasn't until I was 25 years-old and in a community justice grad school that I took the leap and dropped out of to go to full-time dance school."

Dorsey has been called a revolutionary pioneer, visionary leader, and creative arts advocate. He regularly tours his company and original dance works all over the country while leading transformative and educational workshops to promote acceptance and trans equity in dance.

In fact, Dorsey has achieved many significant firsts, including the the first American transgender artist to receive funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. Dorsey is also one of few artistic directors to have created jobs and featured hundreds of gender non-conforming artists on the stage. "I have worked really, really hard not only at my own art, but also to create opportunities for other trans and gender-nonconforming people through my arts non-profit Fresh Meat Productions," says Dorsey. "Through our year-round programs, we invest in the creative expression and cultural leadership of trans and gender-nonconforming communities."

Jeryl Brunner: As your dance company celebrates its 15 year anniversary, what is the audience reaction to your work today, versus when you first started?

Sean Dorsey: Today, dance audiences finally have more knowledge and familiarity with trans people and issues, even if they've never seen us onstage before. Fifteen years ago, there was no one like me and so I had to provide even more context for my work.

But something that has always been true about audience response to my work is that it is emotional. People, whether trans or LGBTQ or straight, line up after our performances to talk to me and share how moving and personal our performances are. They say they feel changed. That is when I know I've succeeded as an artist. Art should transform audiences.

Brunner: You often say, "I love being trans." At its deepest level, what does that mean to you?

Dorsey: I feel so lucky to be transgender. I literally give thanks every day. I feel deeply, deeply blessed to have a trans body, a trans spirit, a trans consciousness and a trans artistic aesthetic.

Trans people have to go through SO much to come out and live our truth: this requires and builds up a depth of consciousness, strength, resourcefulness, creativity and resilience that makes us beautiful and powerful. I also say “I love being trans” a lot to model it for other trans people – since the world throws a lot of hate and violence our way. So: I love being trans!

Brunner: When and where did you begin your formal dance training?

Dorsey: When I was a 25-year-old trans-queer social justice-loving activist, I threw myself headfirst into full-time dance studies at Main Dance in Vancouver, BC. I had a LOT to catch up on, but I was profoundly motivated and focused. I realized then that I could be of service, live my truth and pure the community justice worked I dreamed about through dance.

Brunner: Your dance work has such a distinct storytelling narrative and physical art form. Who were some of your modern dance influences?

Dorsey: As a transgender person, I grew up without seeing a single person like me in modern dance. I grew up without a single peer or mentor. I had to get creative in terms of my influences. So I looked to other art forms: writing, music, visual art, sculpture. My distinct artistic style is a fusion of my voice as a storyteller/writer, a dancer and a musician.

Brunner: Can you talk about, [TRANSform Dance](#), the program that you created?

Dorsey: TRANSform Dance is a national advocacy and education program that provides resources, education and leadership development in order to identify and remove systemic barriers, increase trans/gender-nonconforming participation and leadership, and advance trans equity in dance.

I created the program response to the continued crisis of the almost-total exclusion of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies, voices and leadership in dance. TRANSform Dance works to transform trans people’s access, experience and leadership, or lack thereof, in dance and to transform the national field in order to advance trans equity.

READ THIS ARTICLE ONLINE:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerylbrunner/2019/06/19/meet-sean-dorsey-one-of-the-nations-first-transgender-modern-dance-choreographers/#301e213b5cf8>

