

48hills

Boy bands to bomba: Fresh Meat Fest shines with trans & queer performance

The 19th annual festival is free and online, with 31 performances that showcase a vibrant community.

BY MARKE B.
JUNE 15, 2020



Sean Dorsey Dance company performs at the Fresh Meat Festival. Photo by Kegan Marling

I'm writing this as I'm taking in the Supreme Court decision that [people cannot be legally fired for being LGBTQ](#), a momentous decision that was made possible by [the bravery of a trans woman](#)—even if laws are one thing, and reality often another—and also watching images of an enormous [Black Trans Lives Matter March in Brooklyn that brought out 15,000 people](#). But our community is also mourning the [murders of two more Black transgender women](#), Dominique

Fells and Riah Milton and fighting for Black lives as another Black man, Rayshard Brooks, [was killed by police](#).

It's the perfect time for an uplifting reminder of the resilience of the trans and queer community, and the annual [Fresh Meat Festival](#), Thu/18-June 27 delivers. The festival, from performance pioneers Sean Dorsey and Shawna Virago, is all online and free this year, and consists of five programs of powerhouse archive performances from the past 19 years of Fresh Meat's existence. As they themselves put it, "31 artists performing jaw-dropping vogue, gender-bending boy bands, transgender opera, sizzling hip-hop, gay ballroom stars, queer bomba dance & music, wordsmith poets, disabled dance pioneers, gravity-defying trapeze and MORE!"



Groundbreaking trans opera singer Breanna Sinclair performs.

I spoke with Dorsey last week over email about the importance of trans leadership, essential action for Black lives, what it's like to move a festival online, and 2020's wild Pride ride.

48 HILLS *Holy crap, this has been some Pride month already! How are you feeling right now—and as an artist and activist, how have the many events going on inspired you, driven you, or made your jaw drop?*

SEAN DORSEY The reason we celebrate Pride in June is because of STONEWALL. Stonewall was a rebellion and uprising against racist, transphobic and queerphobic police. Stonewall was a rebellion sparked and led by Black and Brown trans women, trans and queer people of color, and sex workers.

Black people, Indigenous people and people of color literally don't have time for the mainstream LGBTQI+ movement to continue ignoring state-sanctioned police murders, state-sanctioned police assault and rape of Black and Brown trans women, or the criminalization of Black and Brown and migrant bodies. There is no PRIDE without challenging the militarization of police, without naming that COVID-19 is killing and devastating our Black communities and communities of color.

What makes my jaw drop (in anger) are white queer and hetero people focusing on “looting” (I'm using airquotes here) instead of police MURDERS of Black cis men, Black cis women, and Black trans people including Tony McDade. What makes my jaw drop are white queer and hetero people pushing to “re-open” and going out walking/jogging without masks ... when Black and Brown communities are being most devastated by COVID-19.

My jaw also drops in a JOYOUS way as I watch the power, exquisite artistry and movement-building strategies of so many amazing local and national BIPOC / trans / disabled artist-leaders! We're super blessed to be able to feature some of these artists at our 2020 FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL.

48H *How do you think trans and queer history informs us about how to support the George Floyd protests, and hopefully bring about major change?*

SD Trans and queer history show us again and again that us white people so often f*ck it up: white people haven't done our own work and/or don't prioritize dismantling white supremacy, transphobia and ableism in our LGBTQI+ institutions or movements.

So through trans and queer history, you see the Movement start at Stonewall with Black and Brown trans women ... but then the movement gets whitewashed, corporatized, colonized and de-politicized.

BUT/AND!

We can look to gorgeous, successful, powerful models of community-centered organizing and change-making! There's so much incredible organizing labor and strategies by BIPOC / trans / disabled folks to build upon.

There is a lot to be hopeful for: but our Movement leadership must come from Black trans women, trans and queer people of color, gender-nonconforming folks, including/and disabled leadership (these are not mutually exclusive / separate groups).



kNOwshade Vogue Ensemble performs. Photo by Kegan Marling

48H *Moving the Fresh Meat festival online has been one major consequence of recent events—what was that process like, and how did the presentation need to be adjusted to bring about a full online experience?*

SD When COVID-19 first hit, the first priority for us was our community's wellness and safety—and then finding ways to immediately financially support artists and our teams, as well to as artistically connect us.

We're really excited to be cracking open the [FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL](#) archives for the FIRST time—and actually *expanding* the festival this year by offering up these five #reFRESH programs.

The process itself was both joyful (we got to go back and re-live hours of past festivals in order to curate these programs), and included grieving not being able to gather in person. Our audiences know what a deep LOVE fest it is when we gather for this community event.

The joy, the rising-up energy, the heart, the LOVE in the lobby and the theater is FOOD for so many of us that really nourishes us and re-charges our batteries.

Although the festival is online and features excerpts of past festival performances, as *always*, all of these artists are being paid for their work. I say this because right now during COVID-19, a lot of orgs are re-posting artists' work/videos without compensating them for their work!

Some fun aspects of the online festival are that folks can still post pics of themselves in their FRESH MEAT tshirts, or enter to win our annual door prizes from Good Vibrations, and hearing folks can listen to and enjoy custom, exclusive SoundCloud DJ sets from our brilliant festival House DJ, Frida Ibarra! These things will help surround the online event and give us some of those awesome familiar vibrations.

All festival programs will be featured on Vimeo and will be closed-captioned for Deaf and Hard-Of-Hearing audiences. I am Hard-of-Hearing and use hearing aids and lip-reading for communication, and so really notice how much video content is being put out without closed-captions right now.

Even when the shelter in place mandate ends, Fresh Meat Productions will not jump into in-person events. We see and know that COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting Black and Brown and disabled communities. The safety and well-being of our communities is FIRST for us.

So we're in this online work and exploring other ways of connecting for a pretty long haul. We're excited to announce and roll out some NEW online programs this summer and Fall, including:

- **#stayFRESHatHOME** is a free video series that features amazing artist-activists leading folks through all kinds of wonderful practices: like Lev White leading folks through guided meditation; Tajah J leading a vocal and singing warmup; Jahaira and Angelica leading Bachata for beginners; NEVE Mazique leading us through song and rhythmic and movement sequences.
- **House Concerts!** We had an amazing FREE online House Concert in May that featured Tupili Arellano, StormMiguel Florez, Rosco Kickingstone and Lazarus Letcher. We'll be doing more this Fall!
- **Free online workshops** with Fresh Meat Festival artists and Sean Dorsey Dance.



Robbie Tristan and Ernesto Palma perform. Photo by Kegan Marling

48H *OK you are doing a lot and I love it! What are some of the things you're particularly looking forward to most in this edition of the festival? Who are some performers we may not be familiar with but shouldn't miss?*

SD The main thing I'm excited about is that audiences are having this incredible opportunity to see performances that they may have missed OR that they loved so much and thought they'd never get to see again. These are BRILLIANT artists—[31 of them](#)! I can't name any favorites because all of these artists are working at such a high, exquisite level.

I encourage people to check out all five programs if they can—programs 1, 2 and 3 are each only available for viewing for one day (June 18, 19 and 20 respectively), but programs 4 and 5 can be viewed ANY time between June 18 and June 27!

48H *Is there a message or feeling from the festival itself that you think will inspire people to amplify needed voices and keep working together for change?*

SD Oh my gosh, I am so deeply in love with the entire FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL family. These stunningly talented artists, crews, volunteers and our tiny but mighty staff. There is tremendous care, generosity, focus, skill and heart in this family.

We are offering the entire festival as a completely FREE event, but folks must register in advance to get “tickets,” that way we can send you the private links.

During the ticketing process, we are collecting optional donations. 100% of donations will go to [TGI Justice Project](#)—a Black transwoman-led group of transgender, gender variant and intersex people—inside and outside of prisons, jails and detention centers—creating a united family in the struggle for survival and freedom.

We also encourage folks to check out the great work of [The Okra Project](#) and [The Transgender Law Center](#)!

2020 FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL

June 18-27, online, free

[Click here for more info.](#)