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JUNE 14, 2021

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Way back in 2001, the arts landscape for queer and trans performers was not that great! That was true even in San Francisco—perhaps especially in San Francisco—which was seeing its venues threatened by first a big gentrifying web boom, and then a big desiccating web bust (soon followed by 9/11), all of which sent the independent, experimental art scene reeling.

It was in this general atmosphere that trans dancer Sean Dorsey and his arts family launched the **Fresh Meat Festival** of queer-trans performance, staking a bold claim for those who already had trouble getting a toehold in local arts—and make space for terrific entertainment and thought-provoking expression. (As anyone who's attended the fest over the years knows, this is where many of those magical, groundbreaking “only in San Francisco” moments happen, and then spread around the world.)

In the 20 years since, “so much has changed” in regards to trans representation and queer opportunity, Dorsey told me in an email interview. But at the same time there are still stubborn obstacles in the way of getting our fabulous trans-queer performers recognized, supported, and funded. So Fresh Meat's work continues, while also making sure the BIPOC, disabled, and other marginalized performers and audiences are included in its purview. Where else are you going to see queer mariachi (courtesy of Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, pictured), gay cloggers, jaw-dropping voguers, trans rockers, and electrifying poets coming together?

This year, for the second year year in a row, the festival—which is completely free but donations go directly to performers—takes place online and is divided two weekends. The first weekend, **#superFRESH (June 18-20)**, on YouTube Live,

presents commissioned world premieres and other new and other new and recent work. The second weekend, **#reFRESH (June 21-27)**, features gems pulled from the archive that you can watch on demand.



Lafemmebear performs in program one of #superFRESH in the Fresh Meat Festival. Photo by Mary Ma

My conversation with Dorsey follows:

48HILLS *OK 20 years is incredible! I'm going to put you on the spot and tell me the first three things that come to mind as standing out to you in the past two decades of doing this. Highs, lows, obstacles overcome, whatever come to mind!*

SEAN DORSEY I love this question! Okay, three things in no particular order:

First thing I love: the overwhelming, visceral JOY I feel when I sneak out from backstage during the Fresh Meat Festival to secretly watch from the audience (in the aisle). Everything we've worked so hard all year long is manifesting there in real time—the thunderous applause, laughter, and hoots from the sold-out audiences, the exquisite and groundbreaking artistry happening right in that moment. It's goosebumps, it's tears, it's chills, it's elation. I can't express how amazing that feels.

Another highlight: the extraordinary privilege of getting to commission new work for our festival. As a performing artist myself, I know how powerful it feels to have an org or a presenter say “I love what you do and I believe in your work; I want to invest in your future.” Getting to commission trans and non-binary and queer artists is a huge, huge blessing and something we're proud of.

Another thing that stands out for me: every time an audience member or a festival performer comes up to me, in tears, thanking everyone who puts on the festival—saying they've never gotten to see themselves onstage like this, or they've never

gotten to BE onstage with other folks like them. There is so much palpable love in the theater, so much joy and healing.



JanpiStar performs in program one of #superFRESH in the Fresh Meat Festival.

48H *How has the world changed when it comes to transgender and queer representation in dance and performance in the past two decades? Fresh Meat has been such a huge part of that change on a local level...*

SD So much has changed about the world of trans representation and performance in the past 20 years. Twenty years ago, almost no one would present or fund trans artists. It was brutal. And I'm so grateful to my trans-cestors and elders before me who paved the way.

I want to stress that ALL of the progress and change we see today is a direct result of the hard work, artistry, organizing, and advocacy of trans and non-binary folks—particularly BIPOC and/including disabled trans/nb folks! I'm really proud that Fresh Meat Productions has been a big part of changing the landscape and what is possible now. We've paid, commissioned and presented more than 500 artists now!

So in one way, there's enormous change—as in, there are so many brilliant trans and gender-nonconforming dance and performing artists across the Bay and across the US ... making work and making waves.

At the same time, what has NOT changed very much is mainstream cis-het institutions' treatment and exclusion and tokenizing of us. We still don't get the support, grants, opportunities, commissions, residencies, and jobs in the Arts that cis-het and cis-queer folks do. And cis people in leadership are generally still not taking up Trans equity and justice as a priority.

This is part of the mission and work of Fresh Meat Productions—working intersectionally to [advocate for that change](#).



Luis Gutierrez-Mock and Ngoc Huynh perform in program one of #superFRESH in the Fresh Meat Festival.

48H *Running something like this has to be a family affair—can you give me a little peek behind the scenes at who has helped you put this on for so long?*

SD Yes! We talk a lot about the “Fresh Meat Family,” and it really, truly is a family. We have folks who have been involved from our inception, we have crew members who have been with us for 15 years, and every single day I give thanks for my Fresh Meat Family. I might be the person talking with you for this interview, but there is a team (tiny but mighty) behind Fresh Meat Productions’ year-round programs!

I am profoundly blessed by the GENIUS humans I get to work and collaborate with: Eric Garcia (Production and Communications Manager), Shawna Virago (General and Operations Manager), Den Legaspie (Graphic Designer), Gwen Park, StormMiguel Florez, Krista Smith, Ezra Unterseher, Emily Paulson.

Our amazing Board and community advisors, who champion our work. Our Community Partners! Of course, my beloved [Sean Dorsey Dance](#) company dancers

and collaborators. Fresh Meat’s DNA is heart and love and kindness (amongst the hard work!).



NEVE performs in program two of *#superFRESH* in the *Fresh Meat Festival*. Photo by Ron Rogers

48H *OK let’s get to the “meat” of it. Tell me what’s in store for this installment of Fresh Meat—give me some fabulous examples of what’s new in the #superFRESH portion, and what gems have you dug up from the archives?*

SD Well, we knew we had to [go big for our 20th Anniversary!](#) We are presenting more than 40 artists and ensembles—performing bachata, blues, bomba, vogue, hip-hop, mariachi, contemporary R&B, queer dance-theater ... along with award-winning wordsmith poets, disabled dance pioneers, world champion queer ballroom and lots more.

We’ve expanded the festival to two weeks this year (yes, it’s literally double the fun). It’s online, it’s FREE and it’s all closed-captioned for Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.

[Opening Weekend features 3 #superFRESH Programs:](#) these programs feature World Premieres commissioned especially for our 20th Anniversary by: Angelica & Jahaira, Antoine Hunter / Purple Fire Crow, DANDY (Randy Ford & David Rue), Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, J Mase III, and Mark Travis Rivera.

We're also presenting new and recent work by: Detour Dance, Gabriel Christian, JanpiStar, Kevin Gaytan, Lafemmebear, Luis Gutierrez-Mock and Ngoc Huynh, Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, The Monarchs, Mya Byrne, NEVE, Rotimi Agbabiaka, Sean Dorsey Dance, Shawna Virago, Star Amerasu, Toby MacNutt, Vanessa Sanchez and La Mezcla, and more.

Then June 21-27, we have a whopping 8 programs available all week on-demand. [To create these #reFRESH Programs](#), we've gone deep into the festival archives and are bringing audiences SUCH gems from the past 20 years.

In these past performances and gorgeous archival footage, we've got everything from queer hula to a 40-member all-trans/nb choir to gay cloggers to voguing to comedy to trapeze! Every program is unique and powerful.

I'll remind folks that tickets are free, but you have to register in advance. There's also an option to make a donation, and 100% of donations go to the artists!

FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL 2021 runs online June 18-27. [More info here.](#)