



Twenty Years of Investing in Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Dance

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An Interview with Sean Dorsey about Fresh Meat Productions' 20th anniversary

BY EMMALY WIEDERHOLT

Sean Dorsey is a San Francisco-based choreographer, dancer, writer, teaching artist, cultural activist, and the artistic director of [Fresh Meat Productions](#), an organization that invests in the creative expression and cultural leadership of transgender and gender nonconforming communities. This year marks the 20th anniversary of Fresh Meat Productions and its accompanying FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL, and to celebrate, Sean and the team at Fresh Meat Productions have programmed a whirlwind of events. Here, Sean shares how the festival got started 20 years ago, what folks can look forward to during the festival and throughout the year, how the field has changed over the past two decades, and how the field still needs to change to accommodate transgender/nonbinary/gender nonconforming dance artists.



Sean Dorsey, photo by Annalise Ophelian, Visual description: Sean is pictured lunging in a field. His face and torso are open toward the sky. His right arm extends straight along his ear and his left arm reaches across his torso to hold his right bicep. He is shirtless with a billowing deep red skirt.

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Can you briefly share a little about what the FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL is for people unfamiliar with it and the context in which it was created 20 years ago?

The [FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL](#) is an annual festival of transgender, non-binary, gender-nonconforming and queer performance. We present the festival each June at San Francisco's Z Space theater.

We present dance, music, and theater or storytelling-based work. In terms of movement-based work, we present everything from: bachata, bomba, ballroom, vogue, hip-hop, taiko, modern dance, dance theater, experimental work, mixed-dis/ability dance, and more!

The FESTIVAL is a cherished, beloved gathering – it's totally a huge love fest. There is palpable heart energy and exquisitely-abundant love in the theater – onstage, backstage and in the audience. People look forward the festival all-year long, and travel from all over to attend. Lots of folks consider the FESTIVAL to be their "Pride" event. And we call it all the "[Fresh Meat Family](#)."

Twenty years ago, almost nobody was presenting transgender and gender-nonconforming artists on the nation's stages; it's really important for folks to know and remember this history. And that didn't change by happenstance: it changed because of so many hardworking, daring, bold and visionary artists and activists fighting for change. I'm proud to have been part of that legacy. I'm also mindful of the many, many trans-cestors who came before me, and who made everything possible for me and my life today.

Back to 2002... although presenters and theaters wouldn't touch us, there was this amazing groundswell of incredible trans/nonbinary/gender nonconforming artistry around the Bay Area. So I brought together a group of artists and activists and said, "Let's do it for ourselves!" And we put on what we thought would be this one-time festival. But the overwhelming, ecstatic community response quickly led us to realize that this needed to grow, this needed to be an annual event, and in fact, we could become a year-round organization supporting trans/queer artists, communities and culture.

Today, [Fresh Meat Productions](#) invests in the creative expression and cultural leadership of trans and gender-nonconforming communities through our programs: we organize the annual FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL; commission new work through our [FRESH WORKS! Program](#); offer free trans-supportive dance education and community engagement programs; do national advocacy for intersectional trans justice

through [TRANSformDance](#); resident dance company [Sean Dorsey Dance](#) performs, teaches and tours; and we co-sponsor all kinds of community arts events.

We know and believe that the arts are a powerful engine for justice, and we work to uplift and celebrate BIPOC, trans, non-binary, disabled, gender-nonconforming, Deaf, and queer artists, aesthetics, culture and community!

Reflecting on the past 20 years, what are some key moments/highlights/lessons that stick out to you?

A few gorgeous moments stick out for me: I'll never forget the festival artists who, upon arriving at the (13,000-square-foot, gorgeous) theater for the first time (for festival tech rehearsals), are stunned and profoundly moved to be performing in that enormous, high-end, fancy space, as a trans person. We get taught we don't belong in these spaces (as audiences or artists).

Our commissioned artists are transformative: our current FRESH WORKS! artists, and also our past commissioned artists through our Queering Traditions Program (which awarded commissions to BIPOC master artists working in folkloric and traditional art works), led to the creation of incredible new works in hula, taiko, Afro-Columbian dance and more.

And I am so, so grateful for the deep friendships/familyships of our tiny but mighty staff team – these are my dear friends and family, and their brilliance, vision, hard work and talents are a gift to the world!

What does this year's 20th anniversary FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL have in store? What can folks look forward to?

We figured we had to celebrate in a big way for our 20th Anniversary! We've expanded the festival to two weeks, made the entire festival free and online, and are offering world premieres, new work, and exclusive archival past performances from the past 20 years. It's so exciting for us!

The festival opens [June 18-20 with three “#superFRESH Programs”](#) offering world premieres, new work, and recent work by more than 20 artists and ensembles. These programs will be on YouTube Live (and closed-captioned).

Then the festival continues [June 21-27 with eight programs available on-demand!](#) We'll offer the three #superFRESH Programs from weekend one of the festival on-demand, plus we are sharing five “#reFRESH Programs” that feature exclusive archival footage from past performances from the past 20 years! (We'll keep sharing archival performances all year long, since there are so many amazing ones to share!)

Who are some of the artists Fresh Meat Productions is commissioning world premieres from and why were those people selected?

The first weekend's #superFRESH Programs features world premieres by our FRESH WORKS! commissioned artists: Angelica & Jahaira, Antoine Hunter/Purple Fire Crow, DANDY (Randy Ford & David Rue), Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, J Mase III, and Mark Travis Rivera. This weekend also includes 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, and Vanessa Sanchez and La Mezcla.



The six artists/ensembles commissioned to create new work: (top L-R) Jahaira & Angelica, DANDY, J Mase III, (bottom L-R) Antoine Hunter / Purple Fire Crow, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, Mark Travis Rivera, photos courtesy the artists, Visual description: a square divided into six rectangles each featuring a photo of one of the artists.

These FRESH WORKS! artists are each visionary, brilliant, bold and boundary-pushing. This year's artists are based in the Bay Area, Seattle, WA and Washington DC. Our amazing production and communications manager Eric Garcia coordinated theater rentals, tech rehearsals and COVID-safe filming of these six artists in three cities during this pandemic! Eric is a hero (for so many reasons).

I understand the festival is being made available online. Are all the artists commissioned making digital works, or is it a broadcast (or a mix)? More generally, how have the pandemic restrictions transformed how Fresh Meat produces its programming?

Yes, this year's festival is all online. The FRESH WORKS! commissioned artists have created a real mix of digital works and live-performance-captured-on-film. Most of these artists performed work live in a theater, which was captured by teams of videographers and editors; other artists used this opportunity to work more digitally – and all the results are gorgeous!

Something that we will hold onto after the pandemic is continuing to offer online and video programs and programming. It's so important for disability, economic and geographic access.

I miss being in person with our Fresh Meat Family of audience/community, stage crews, front of house team, and our artists, but I'm also really proud of how our team (Eric Garcia, Shawna Virago, StormMiguel Florez, Gwen Park, Krista Smith, Ezra Unterseher, and Den Legaspie) have crafted these dynamic online events.

Is there any other programming Fresh Meat Productions is rolling out this year that you want to draw attention to?

Yes! We have an incredible year lined up to celebrate our 20th anniversary, and to offer love, resources, support and joy to our communities at this hard time.

We've just launched season two of [#stayFRESHatHOME](#) – a free, online, closed-captioned video series that features artists leading people through all kinds of activities to promote wellness and creativity. [JanpiStar](#) teaches a wheelchair technique class – they are a stellar dancer (they dance with [AXIS Dance Company](#)) and teacher. You can also enjoy [Reflective Meditation with Lady Dane](#), [Afro-Rican Bomba with Taller Bombalele](#) and much more!



JanpiStar, photo courtesy the artist, Visual description: Janpistar is pictured with their wheelchair facing to the left of the frame and their torso turned to the face the front. Their right arm is drawn across their torso ending with the palm flat and fingers up. JanpiStar is smiling. The background is a covered outdoor area with trees.

And I've started a new project with Sean Dorsey Dance: [THE LOST ART OF DREAMING](#) investigates and images expansive futures. We'll create a new full-evening dance-theater work that we will premiere next year; and in the meantime, we're creating and sharing dance films and so much more! This summer and fall we will launch:

– The Futurist Pledge: a gorgeous, downloadable pledge you can sign

– Postcards From The Future: we commissioned [four brilliant visual artists](#) to create a new piece inspired by our Expansive Futures theme. We're printing them onto full-color postcards, and folks will be able to request that we mail them a postcard with a hand-written message from the future!

– The Dictionary Of Joy and Pleasure: we commissioned [10 amazing artists](#) to create lists from A-Z of things that give them joy and pleasure. We'll compile these lists onto an online, interactive dictionary where people can just click on any letter of the alphabet to be transported to a future world of possibilities!

I cannot wait to get back into the studio with my wonderful dancer-collaborators for this project!

From your perspective putting together the FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL for the past 20 years, how has transgender and queer performance evolved over the past two decades?

The first thing I'd say is that we owe so much to the artistry and cultural production and community-building of the trans-cestors who came before us, including our living elders. These folks pioneered so much around trans performance, aesthetics, and innovation. They made our lives today possible.

Twenty years ago, when we'd curate the festival, we had such a radically smaller pool of artists and ensembles to choose from. Today, it is extraordinary how very many trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming artists are making work, making waves, and changing the world! It's a joyous thing to witness and be part of.

Sadly, what has not evolved much over the past two decades is the cisgender dance field's actions around and toward trans/ nonbinary/gender nonconforming artists and leaders; the dance field's leaders, choreographers, funders, and decision-makers are still almost entirely cisgender, and still mostly white and mostly non-disabled.

Part of my passion is organizing and art-making strategies to change the field. We do this justice work as an integrated part of all our programs at Fresh Meat Productions.



Toby MacNutt, photo by Owen Leavey, Visual description: Dance artist Toby MacNutt is standing in a grass field with trees in the distance. They are leaning on their crutches and have a brace decorated with stars around their torso. They are wearing a t-shirt and leggings and gently smiling.

What are some steps other professional and educational dance institutions could take to make their spaces more welcoming to trans/nonbinary/gender nonconforming dance artists?

Thanks for asking! I could literally list 100 things just to start with, but here's a short and very partial list, truly in no particular order:

1. Hire trans/nonbinary/gender nonconforming dancers; hire trans/nb/gnc staff; hire trans/nb/gnc teachers; hire trans/nb/gnc guest choreographers; give residencies to trans/nb/gnc artists; offer scholarships to trans/nb/gnc students.
2. Especially if you're cisgender: if you have a touring dance company, expand your Tour Rider to require the theater you're touring to provide all-gender bathrooms for audiences and for backstage. Same for any studios or workshops spaces you hold events in, at home and on tour. We can't come to your show or perform in your show unless you do so.
3. Don't ask the one trans person on staff to educate the rest of the cisgender staff about 'trans issues.' Budget for and hire an outside consultant for this.
4. Don't assume that all trans folks want to talk to well-meaning cis folks about All Things Trans (we probably don't, thank you very much anyway).
5. Don't claim that "my org doesn't need all-gender bathrooms or changing rooms because there aren't any trans/nb/gnc people in our space." First of all, yes there are trans/nb/gnc people in your space, you just don't notice us; and secondly, your problematic binary-cis bathrooms may be the very thing that is preventing us from accessing your space! So please fix this as a priority.
6. In other words, provide all-gender restrooms and all-gender changing rooms in all dance spaces, theaters, offices, studios and facilities. Period. No exceptions.
7. Make sure your dance spaces, theaters, offices, studios, bathrooms, changing rooms, stages, backstages and other facilities are truly wheelchair accessible. Prioritize fundraising to change this if this is not the case; rent and tour to spaces that are accessible.
8. If you welcome or instruct people in a performance/class/workshop/etc, stop saying "Ladies & Gentlemen" or "boys and girls" or just "guys." There are many ways to welcome all the people in the room (and to avoid making some of us feel, once again, excluded). "Welcome, everyone! Welcome, students! Good evening, friends! Good afternoon, dear audience! Hey there everybody! Okay students, let's all come to this end of the room." You get the idea.
9. Stop requiring 'gendered' dance attire for students (eg. pink tights, black tights in ballet). It's harmful, shame-inducing, traumatic and keeps us out of the dance education pipeline. Step out of the cis-gender-binary and identify what student attire requirements actually are: need to see a student's alignment? Provide options based on that. Keep in mind that trans/nb/gnc students may have feelings about our pelvic area or chest area, so do not require clothing that is tight around those areas. Don't monitor hair-management/styles by students based on white supremacist or gendered expectations of what hair looks or behaves like.
10. What kind of art lines your space's rooms and hallways or your website? Images of only white cis dancing bodies? Only skinny dancing bodies? Only non-disabled dancing bodies? Only cis-hetero partnering? Only cis bodies? Representation matters: it is

literally a message that tells us “this is who belongs and can excel in dance.” Time to make some changes!

11. What teaching faculty do you hire / have on staff? See #5 above.
Who do you offer choreographic residencies to? See #5 above.
What artists do you present in your theater or studio’s season? See #5 above.
Who do you welcome to auditions? See #5 above.
Who’s on your staff? See #5 above. It matters who has access to decision-making power.
Who’s on your board? See #5 above. It matters who has access to decision-making power.
12. Add info to your website and outward-facing communication about the fact that you do have all-gender restrooms and add this info to the details for every class/event/workshop/performance you advertise. It sends a signal to us that you are thinking about our safety, comfort and wellness.
13. Add info to your website and outward-facing communication about specific elements of your accessibility and/or access accommodations and add this info to the details for every class/event/workshop/performance you advertise. Are your online programs, events and videos closed-captioned and/or ASL interpreted? Is the front door, lobby, seating area, stage, backstage and all bathrooms and changing rooms wheelchair accessible? Do you offer a scent-reduced seating area? It sends a signal to us that you are thinking about our safety, comfort and wellness.
14. Any organization, project or artistic project “about” trans/nb/gnc issues must be conceived, designed, directed and evaluated by trans/nb/gnc people. Funders: please stop giving grants to cis people/orgs/projects for “trans” projects.
15. Please ask around in your community about more tips!



NEVE, photo by Ron Rogers, Visual description: Performance artist NEVE is sitting on a hardwood floor leaning against their wheelchair with their legs outstretched in front of them and their arms by their sides. Their mouth is open as if to say something. They are wearing a white camisole and the background behind them is dark.

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To learn more about Sean Dorsey and all of the programming Fresh Meat Productions has planned, [visit freshmeatproductions.org](http://freshmeatproductions.org).