

DANCE

Trans choreographer moves for liberated future

By Rachel Howard

Having taught workshops for transgender dancers across the country for nearly 20 years, Sean Dorsey has heard a lot of stories.

“After we share our names and pronouns, I’ll ask, ‘What’s your relationship to dance?’” the choreographer explained during a recent sunny autumn afternoon at a Mission District cafe. “Someone will share, ‘I studied ballet for eight years as a child, and then I transitioned and was told I had to leave my dance studio.’ Or, ‘I trained at a major company in New York, but then I and another trans woman were kicked out.’”

Wearing a shawl-collared sweater, his hazel eyes offset by sideburns and glasses, Dorsey sipped his coffee. “Then we always do some form of meditation to arrive in the room with mindfulness and witness what’s there, be it a racing heart or depression. And after acknowledging some tough stuff, we’ll do affirmations — especially about bellies. Everyone has judgments about their bellies.”

Dorsey laughed, seemingly relaxed, even though the six hours of rehearsal he’d just finished with his company, Sean Dorsey Dance, is only a small portion of his workday, which starts at 6:30 a.m. For him, making art may be inextricable from maintaining community and supporting others’ well-being.

Excitedly, he opened a laptop to display the design for “The Futurist Pledge” — a poster that will be given to attendees of Dorsey’s new show, “The Lost Art of Dreaming,” premiering Friday, Nov. 18, at Z Space before embarking on a national tour. The poster ends with the declaration, “Today I declare that a future of joy + pleasure + love + well-



Kegan Marling

Héctor Jaime (left), Sean Dorsey and Nol Simonse perform “The Lost Art of Dreaming.”



Kim Komenich/The Chronicle 2009

Sean Dorsey Dance founder and choreographer Dorsey (center) works with dancers Simonse (left) and Juan De La Rosa.

being + liberation is my birthright,” with space for a signature below. Dorsey shrugged with an air of sensible truth. “How are we going to build the future we want unless we’re

fueled with all that freedom and worthiness?”

The poster, and more importantly the dance it accompanies, marks a major shift in Dorsey’s art. His four previous

works, each two or three years in the making, have combined dance, music and storytelling to preserve LGBTQ history and illuminate the past, drawing on archival research and oral histories. Along the way, the 50-year-old himself made history, winning five Isadora Duncan Dance Awards, a Dance/USA Artist Fellowship and seven National Endowment for the Arts grants, in addition to becoming the first transgender artist to grace the cover of Dance Magazine.

Now, for the first time, his dance is looking to the future.

“The Lost Art of Dreaming” began taking shape before the pandemic, as the country reeled from political instability, when Dorsey pinned a phrase to his bulletin board: “Dreaming is your birthright.” His realization that building a joyful future requires permission for imagination intensified

“The Lost Art of Dreaming”:

Sean Dorsey Dance. 7 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Nov. 18-19; 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 20, at Z Space, 450 Florida St., S.F. Free-\$50. www.zspace.org

during the city’s shelter-in-place order, he said, as the show’s multitude of composers sent music. One day he had a vision of flowing fabric, dresses with long trains — “which is funny because I’m probably the least gender-fluid member of my company,” he said, noting he prefers jeans and T-shirts. But he found himself going with San Francisco-based costume designer Tiffany Amundson “to thrift store after thrift store to buy cheap used wedding dresses and cut them off at the waist to do movement research.”

The resulting work is more dance-driven than anything in Dorsey’s oeuvre, but still incorporates the lyric reflections and comedy that fans think of as his signature heat-tugging mix.

“We definitely get our rage and sass on in this show,” Dorsey said.

In many ways, Dorsey is long accustomed to boldly dreaming the future he wants to live in. Moving from Vancouver to San Francisco in 2002 in hopes of finding other transgender choreographers and finding none, Dorsey created a showcase for trans and gender-nonconforming performers called the Fresh Meat Festival.

“That’s what struck me from the beginning,” said Pamela Peniston, artistic director of the Queer Cultural Center, which has commissioned Dorsey’s work since 2003, “seeing the care Sean took to involve the community.”

His inclusive approach
Dance continues on G20

DANCE

From page G18

makes a difference to dancers like Héctor Jaime, the company's newest member, who recently earned a degree in dance through the Lines Ballet BFA program at Dominican University in San Rafael.

"When I graduated, I was frightened as to how companies would use me as a dancer," said Jaime, who uses the pronouns they and she. "You know, it's often a heterosexual man represented onstage partnering women, and I was concerned that I would be forced into costumes that didn't fit my self-image. But Sean takes all that into consideration, asking me if I would be comfortable wearing a skirt onstage. And that checking in, caring about my comfort level with how I presented myself to the world, I thought that was just beautiful."

These days, teenagers nonchalantly share their pronouns, and in some ways, "the culture has caught up to Sean faster than we thought possible," Peniston said.

In other ways, the future Dorsey dreamed is not fully here yet. Dance institutions "show a lot of goodwill but not

a lot of action," Dorsey observed, noting breakthroughs like New York's Joyce Theater changing to all-gender bathrooms, but also the persistence of practices such as some local studios requiring dancers to provide ID before taking class, a rule that can be uncomfortable for someone who has not yet legally changed to a gender-affirming name.

And then, outside the Bay Area bubble, there is the bad-faith use of transgender rights as a point of attack in the escalating culture wars. Just last month Fox News assailed Fresh Meat as unworthy of receiving American Recovery Plan funding administered by the National Endowment for the Arts. Dorsey mindfully moderates his news intake, "but it's enough to know that there have been over 100 anti-transgender pieces of legislation introduced in the last year alone," he said.

How does Dorsey maintain not only his optimism, but his unflagging positivity?

"Sean is very protective of his heart and spirit," said dancer Nol Simonse, who has worked with Dorsey for 15 years. "His attitude is absolutely not forced or made up. Even more than the artistic work itself, kindness is his No. 1



Lydia Daniller

David Le in Sean Dorsey Dance's "The Lost Art of Dreaming," which will tour nationally soon.

goal."

It was Simonse who, one day in rehearsal, brought up the idea that Dorsey has since kept at the center of "The Lost Art of Dreaming."

"In (the spiritual practice of) Wicca, there's a belief that

desire guides everything: gravity, magnetism, ocean tides, the moon. I just fell in love with that idea," Dorsey said. "Everything clicked, and I thought, yes, longing is nature's organizing principle. It's a natural force behind all things in the

cosmos. It explains our deepest desires, whether that's to fall in love or connect through friendship. And that's what this show is about."

Rachel Howard is a Bay Area freelance writer.

JANIAK

From page G19

a free man.

"I think they want to smash things. I think they are filled with a rage that they cannot name because they're in the middle of it."

Accordingly, in the show, she envisions them as punk rockers.

Almost 200 years later, Cathy still thrills as a female character. She spurns all the era's norms for her sex — demureness, selflessness — without becoming a villain.

"She wants to be in trouble," Rice said. "In this world where she has no agency, she goes, 'I

don't think I give a s—. She has these grand passions and no loyalty whatsoever. There's a sort of missing empathy gene. She's not in the past at all. She's in the present."

Rice noted that so much of Heathcliff and Cathy's love takes place outside on the moors, a forbidding, hostile landscape; she made the moors a chorus of actors in the show.

"Their love affair is described so clearly through them being free on the moors. They run, and they travel great distances. What an amazing metaphor it is for freedom," she said, adding, "Both of them have this amazing life force which is politically repressed, and that is where

their codependency comes: They see something in each other."

Running outside by ourselves was about all we could do during the worst of the pandemic. During the wildfires, even that was impossible. As I rattled around inside my 600-square-foot apartment, my furniture became wind-blasted dales and coarse, witchy grasses. Like Cathy, I was ready to wail and roar. Thanks to "Wuthering Heights," I mostly didn't have to.

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Steve Tanner

"Everybody always thinks 'Wuthering Heights' is romantic, and it so isn't," director Emma Rice said.