

‘Art does change the world’: Choreographer Sean Dorsey reflects on ‘Lou’ and legacy

September 13, 2024 | Lauren Harvey

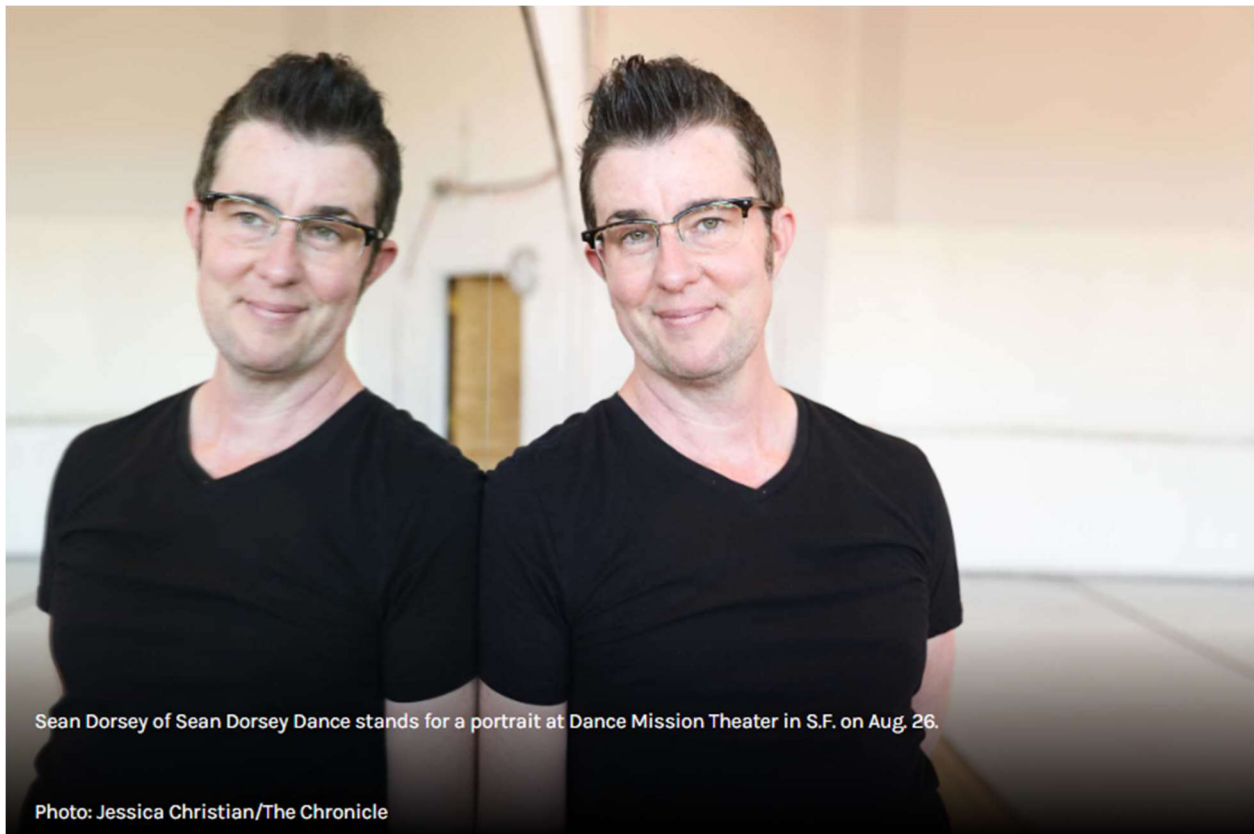


Sean Dorsey spent much of 2007 and 2008 digging through the archives at San Francisco’s GLBT Historical Society, parsing through and transcribing 30 years of diary entries by Bay Area trans activist Lou Sullivan, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1991.

Looking back on this time, the choreographer recalls “getting goose bumps and chills when I opened up the (first) box and took out a diary... and spent hours reading through so many diaries and just falling in love with this person that I never got to know.”

Dorsey eventually compiled his findings into a sound score, using his own voice for the narration. Using the source material — Sullivan’s journals, medical records and letters — he choreographed original dances to trace the journey of the activist’s life. The multimedia

project, titled “Lou,” [premiered at Dance Mission Theater in 2009](#), and for the first time in over a decade, it will be restaged in honor of Sean Dorsey Dance’s 20th Anniversary Home Season, scheduled for Thursday-Saturday, Sept. 19-21, at Z Space.



“I consider dance to be the most visceral form of expression that I know,” Dorsey told the Chronicle. “Bringing these stories into our bodies and expressing them with our breath, our spines, our eye contact, our physical touch and partnering with each other is embodying and bringing these stories to life and also keeping these stories alive.”

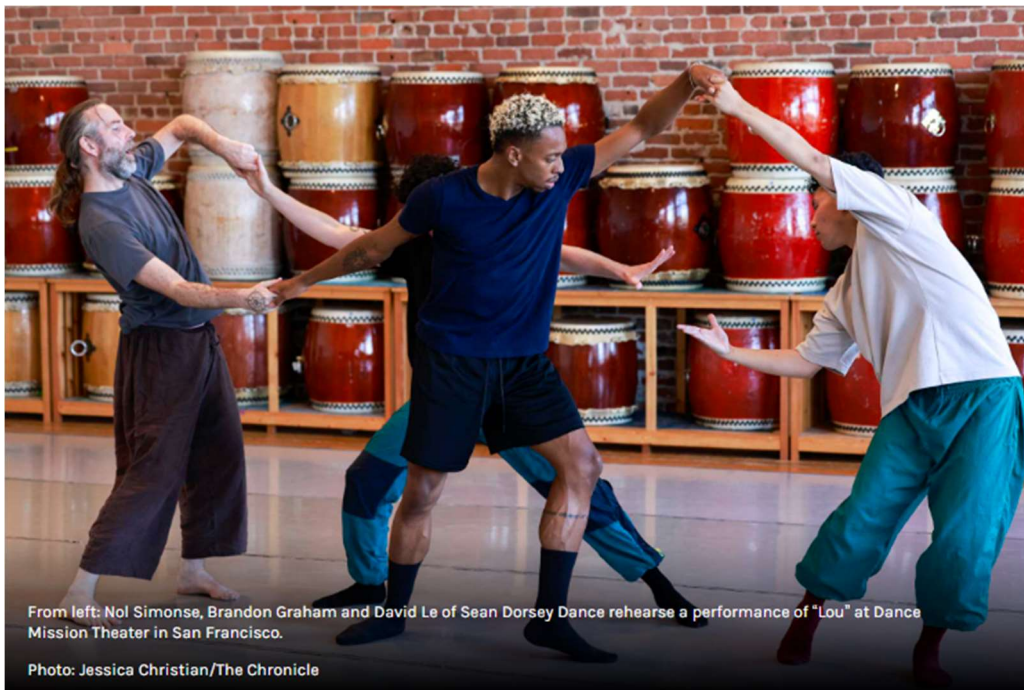
More Information

Sean Dorsey 20th Anniversary Home Season: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Sept. 19-21. Z Space, 450 Florida St., S.F. 415-626-0453. www.zspace.org

Dorsey, widely regarded as the first acclaimed trans choreographer in the U.S., has been a trailblazer for trans, queer and gender-nonconforming dancers since he organized the first [Fresh Meat Festival](#) in 2002. But it wasn’t until 2005 that he produced his first full evening of original works, titled “The Outsider Chronicles” and performed at ODC.

“Those people 20 years ago and still today come up to me after the show in tears, saying ‘I’ve never seen myself as a trans person represented onstage, let alone with such exquisite, beautiful artistry,’” Dorsey said.

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of that first evening, Dorsey will be revisiting three archival works. In addition to “Lou,” the program includes a restaging of 2012’s “The Secret of Love” and 2015’s “The Missing Generation,” both based on oral histories given to Dorsey by LGBTQI+ elders.



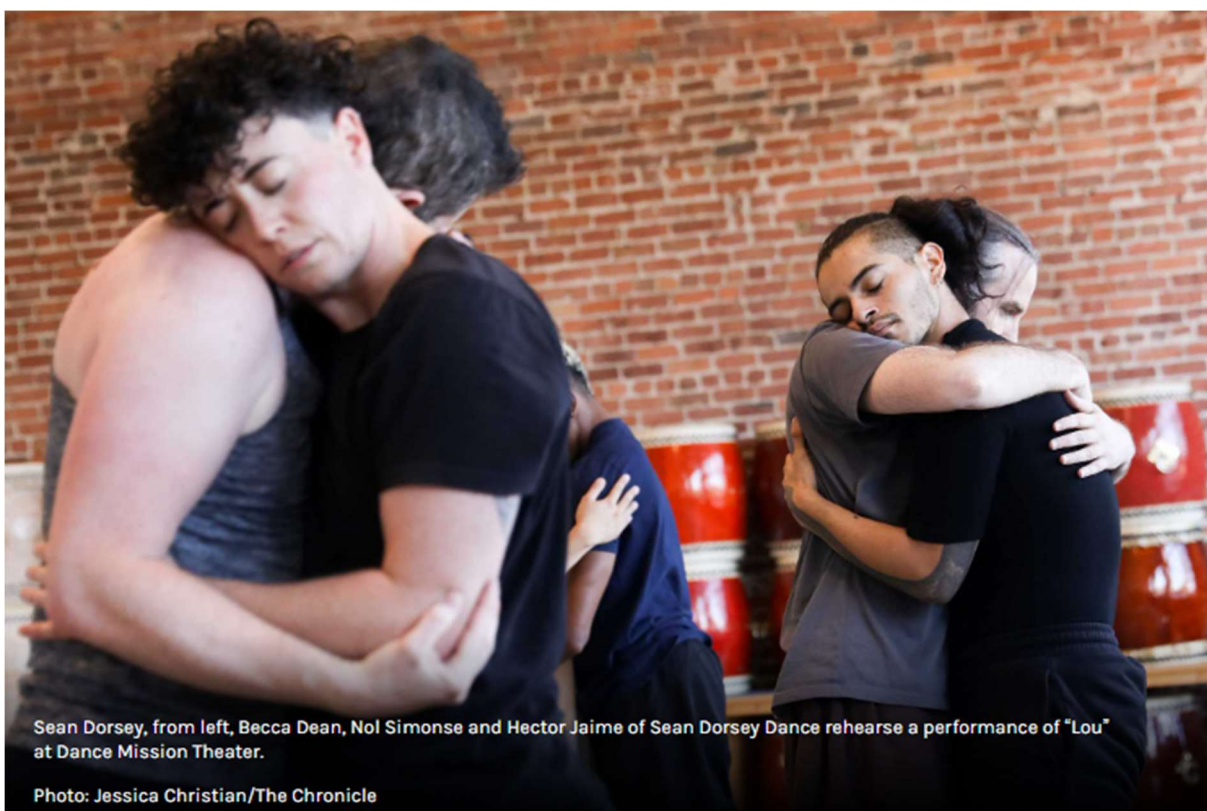
From left: Nol Simonse, Brandon Graham and David Le of Sean Dorsey Dance rehearse a performance of “Lou” at Dance Mission Theater in San Francisco.
Photo: Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

“All of these works together comprised a trilogy of works that I created over the course of about a decade,” Dorsey said of the anniversary shows’ retrospective program. “And all of these works were about unearthing, uncovering and expressing previously censored, buried and forgotten parts of trans and queer history.”

But Sean Dorsey’s 20th Anniversary Home Season isn’t just about excavating the past.

In revisiting “Lou,” he expands the piece to include six dancers rather than the original four. He has also passed on his role as the titular character to an up-and-coming trans and nonbinary dancer named Becca Dean, with whom Dorsey collaborated during last year’s Fresh Meat Festival.

Dorsey will now assume the role previously played by Brian Fisher, who was a member of the company for 15 seasons, and dance in a pivotal duet with Dean. With the change in time and cast, the partnered dance is now infused with new meaning.



Sean Dorsey, from left, Becca Dean, Nol Simonse and Hector Jaime of Sean Dorsey Dance rehearse a performance of "Lou" at Dance Mission Theater.

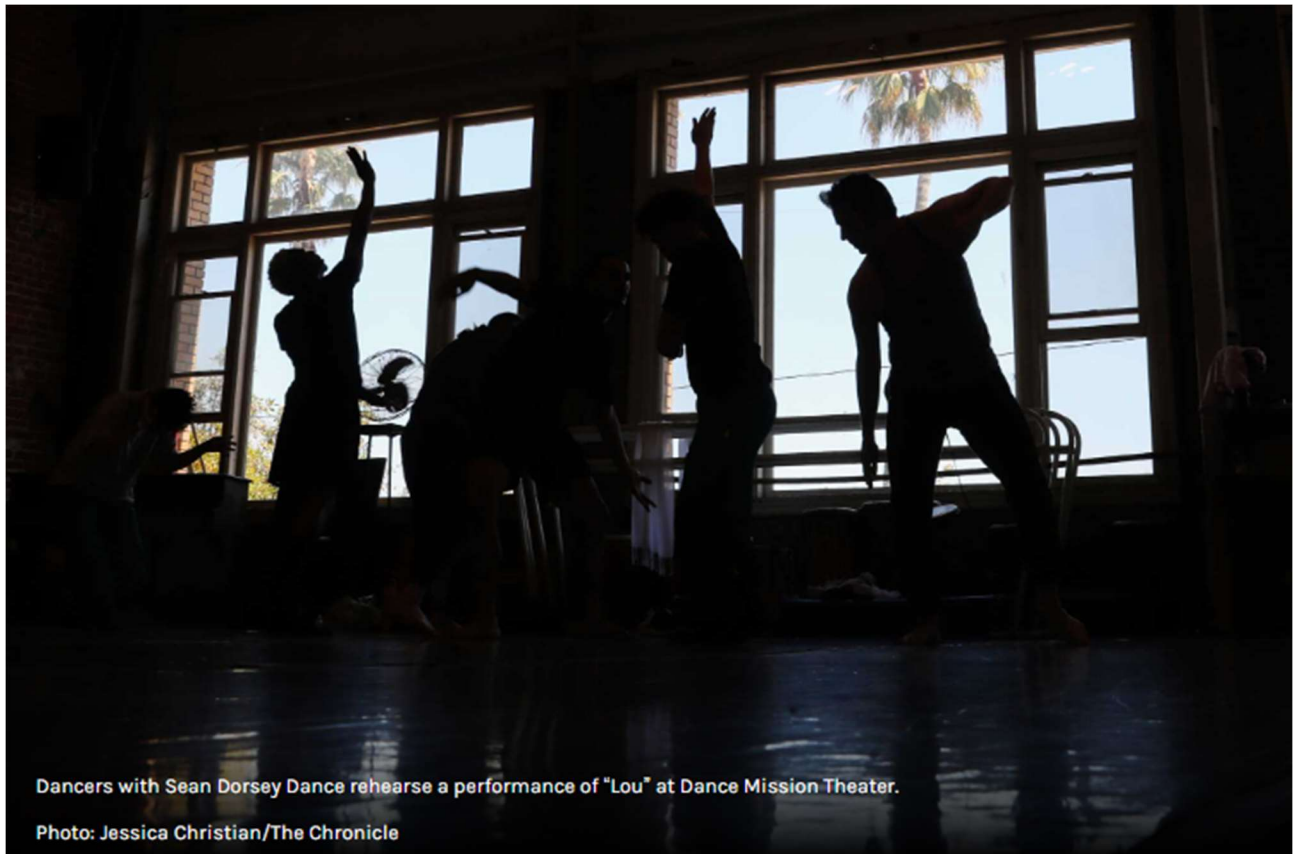
Photo: Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

“There’s now a transmasculine person coming up to another, younger transmasculine person as an offering in the mirror or in this person’s future of what is possible for themselves and their body and their future,” Dorsey said. “Hence many tears in the rehearsal process.”

When Dorsey first created the score for “Lou,” he was not yet taking testosterone, so his voice sounded a bit different than it does today. In restaging the piece, Dorsey has also updated the score to include his voice both pre- and post-testosterone. Anniversary audiences will hear Dorsey’s voice transition from one stage to the next as Sullivan undergoes his own gender transition.

“I felt really excited about that refresh, just overall doing some retouching and remixing and remastering of the score, but also to bring more of my journey into the score in a way that aligns more deeply with Lou’s journey,” Dorsey said.

Dorsey has spent the last 20 years touring the country and the world, but he still considers San Francisco his home. It’s where he first moved from Canada to find and express himself, where he started his dance company and where he met his now-partner of 23 years, singer and activist [Shawna Virago](#).



“There’s not a long tradition in the arts for trans people, and especially trans men,” Virago said. “So I felt early on Sean took this talent to tell stories of trans men and the stories that needed to be told.”

While the social and political landscape for trans folks has certainly evolved over the decades, much also remains the same. Twenty-six states currently have bans on gender-affirming care, 40 years after Sullivan was denied such treatment from Stanford for his gay and trans identity. Dorsey is wary of the ongoing attacks on trans rights, even noting that he’s more careful about where his company travels these days, but he also chooses to remain optimistic about what the future holds.

“I know that art does change the world,” Dorsey said. “We’re in a very, very rough period right now, so all the more important to carve out time to celebrate, just yell out with joy and pride and celebrate this milestone and share this beautiful work. And then get to dream about what comes next.”



David Le, from left, Hector Jaime and Nol Simonse of Sean Dorsey Dance rehearse a performance of "Lou" at Dance Mission Theater in S.F.

Photo: Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

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