

Sean Dorsey: Dancing on Razor's Edge

By Jacob Anderson-Minshall

Published: June 14, 2007

When Sean Dorsey confesses, "It's scary breaking new ground," it's hard to believe. After all, Dorsey is a critically-acclaimed dancer and choreographer who has been honing his craft for years. He's the creator and director of Fresh Meat Productions, an organization whose very name reflects the transgender man's commitment to showcasing new talent, and the powerhouse behind San Francisco's annual three day event, which, in its sixth season, promises audiences not one, not two, but nine world premiers.

This is the guy who's intimidated by trailblazing?

Before Dorsey founded Fresh Meat Productions in 2001 there was nothing else like it, and transgender artists often struggled for years in vain attempts to gain recognition and support from traditional art institutions. Fresh Meat was created to overcome those kind of barriers and it's been extremely successful in doing so, creating an infrastructure to support transgender artists, promoting unique works and gaining visibility through year-round arts programs that explores the transgender experience.

"This year, over 16,000 people will attend Fresh Meat's events," Dorsey boasts. "We are giving an artistic voice to transgender experiences in a way that's never happened before."

In addition to producing and commissioning original work for the annual Fresh Meat Festival, the organization sponsors Dorsey's internationally renown Dance Company, co-presents TrannyFest (San Francisco's transgender film festival) and curates art exhibits throughout the year.

Promoting trans artists may be the primary function of Fresh Meat Productions, but the impetus behind Dorsey's work is a commitment to trans activism. "At heart, I'm an activist and an artist—they're inseparable for me. It's a political and revolutionary act to stand up for transgender rights and expression—[especially while] we are still being mocked, killed, sexually assaulted, fired, evicted and silenced because of who we are."

He says Fresh Meat's work is transformative, arguing, "That's how real change happens: when we are empowered to bring our voices forward, to speak positively and authentically...about our experiences as transgender."

To further their activist goals, Fresh Meat Productions works in conjunction with other community organizations and is a proud co-sponsor of San Francisco's Annual Trans March.

But it's for his choreography and dance performances that Dorsey is best known. His many accolades prove that while it may be frightening out on the front lines, that's exactly where you'll find the trans dancer. "I've had an amazing couple of years," he admits. Dorsey has won two prestigious Isadora Duncan Dance Awards—the San Francisco Bay Area's 'Oscar' for dance—and the Goldie Award for Performance. He was also awarded a San Francisco Arts Commission and an amazing Gerbode Foundation commission to create a new concert of work.

These accomplishments have skyrocketed Dorsey's visibility beyond trans and queer and circles allowed him to overcome many of the hurdles facing transgender artists. But, Dorsey says, that's come at a price. "There are very particular challenges being a transgender dancer-choreographer making work that's popular with audiences, critics and the press. I feel a lot of support from the arts community, but sometimes, I feel resentment too, like 'Oh, all you have to do these days is make dances and be transgender and you get all this attention'. When actually, I almost break myself—that's how hard I work. It's lonely, it's painful."

Nominated for another two Isadora Duncan Dance Awards for his work this year, Dorsey insists it's not awards that keep him going. "When a person comes up to me in tears after a show relating how powerful it is to see themselves reflected onstage for the first time. That's what feeds me. Fresh Meat Productions has enriched and forever altered the artistic landscape of the Bay Area and the nation."

He also finds support in his partner, trans rock star Shawna Virago, who has an insider's understanding of being an artist and the painful process of creating new work. "Shawna is the love of my life and an astronomical musician—brilliant, powerful, sexy."

With Virago's support he's been working on a new collection of performances titled, *Untold Stories, In Between*, which focuses on stories from "between the pages. I'm interested in bringing stories to the stage that history or society leaves out." The first portion of *Untold Stories* is "Bully" in which three dancers navigate their way in to and through (or out of) masculinity. As the title suggests, the segment also confronts the consequences of bullying.

Violence against trans individuals, and the seeds of suicide, often starts in the schoolyard, Dorsey explains. "Being different, and betraying masculinity in particular, isn't tolerated, it's punished and it's punished severely."

"Bully" premieres at the Sixth Annual Fresh Meat Transgender and Queer Performance Festival (freshmeatproductions.org) held June 14-16, at San Francisco's ODC Theater.

For this year's festival, Dorsey challenged performing artists to re-imagine traditional forms—like Hula dancing, taiko drumming and Afro-Colombian dance—from trans and queer perspectives. Furthering their commitment to innovation, this year's festival features world premieres by some of the nation's leading trans and queer artists, including Dorsey, Colombian Soul, Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu, Taiko Ren, Imani Henry, Miguel Chernus-Goldstein, Shawna Virago and Ryka Aoki de la Cruz.

Dorsey describes the festival as a "whirlwind weekend of high-energy, powerful, spectacular and deeply moving performance. It's truly a powerhouse gathering of communities that's really transformative for us all."

Not one to rest on his laurels, when the Fresh Meat Festival wraps Dorsey will hit the road, touring with *The Outsider Chronicles*, his critically acclaimed work that has played to packed theaters. Then, in November, he'll premier the complete *Untold Stories*. And fear or no fear, Dorsey will continue breaking new ground and crafting new, cutting-edge productions that he hopes will lead to real and lasting change.

Catch Dorsey and other trans and queer performers at the Fresh Meat Festival, June 14-16, ODC Theater, 3153 17th Street, San Francisco. Get your tickets early () because these shows consistently sell out.

