



Discovering The Undiscovered Dance

Choreographer and dancer Sean Dorsey discusses trans "origin myths," his critically acclaimed new dance piece, and friend and collaborator Kate Bornstein.

By Justin Ocean

"I'm an elder of the transgender community, and Sean Dorsey is my pride and joy. His sensitivity to the pain that comes with transformation is as compassionate as any Zen master's. His deadpan comic timing, his skill at seduction, his charm and boyish sexiness all make us -- his audience -- love him all the more." -- Kate Bornstein

When one of transgender activism's most lauded artists and theorists gives that kind of kudos, it's time to take note -- especially when the medium of his art is dance, a form more likely to cause eyes to glaze over than minds to expand. But Sean Dorsey is here to change all that. As founder and artistic Director of San Francisco's Fresh Meat Productions, the nation's first nonprofit dedicated to creating, presenting and touring year-round transgender art programs, he's been bringing the trans and queer experience to the masses in a vibrant, accessible way since 2001, racking up accolades in the process. At 36, the Vancouver native has received two Isadora Duncan Dance Awards, the Bay Area's top dance honor, and was recently named "Best Dance/Performance Company" by *SF Weekly*. (Having seen his work in person, this often skeptical writer agrees.)

Out caught up with Dorsey last week as he prepares to bring his latest critically acclaimed work *Uncovered: The Diary Project* to New York City, with special guest Kate Bornstein, as part of Dixon's Place HOT! Festival of queer performance art. Dates in Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles and Berlin are also in the works. We chatted about trans "Origin Myths", his unique creative process, and why talk of junk is better left in the trunk.

Out: Lately trans issues have hit the mainstream, what with Oregon mayors and MTV *Real Worlders*. As a trans man, have you seen it make a positive impact, or has it just made it more pop and trendy?

Sean Dorsey: Oh, MTV...people love to sensationalize, don't they? But isn't that always how marginalized folks make it into mainstream consciousness? First we're ignored, then we're sensationalized, then we get a certain level of acceptance, then they try to co-opt us. But it's exciting that people are finally starting to realize that there are trans *guys*, too, and people outside the male-female binary. I look forward to when less sensationalized transpeople enter public consciousness -- the activists, the artists, the thinkers.

Is that a goal of your latest project, to bring forward those activists and thinkers?

In my work, I strive to articulate that which is most human and visceral and honest about us. *Uncovered: The Diary Project* took me deep into a year-and-a-half research process where I read the diaries and personal writings of transgender and queer people, taking actual text and transforming it into very accessible, colorful dance theater.

Given that your body is your main tool as a dancer, would you say being trans makes it easier or more difficult to be a dance artist?

I think it is both a blessing and a huge challenge. Our body is our instrument and even post-post-post-modern dance theater, if we want to be honest about it, is completely, traditionally gendered. But on the other hand, there's something really magical about being in your body and your skin in a really honest and full way and being able to share something physically using your body.

When did you start to transition?

My partner Shawna talks a lot about the idea of an "Origin Myth" -- that there was this particular instance or place where it all started, like when I was seven, I was a boy. Although there are those markers like when we got it internally, or when we told our families, or when there's hormones or surgery, but I really think more significant than those markers, is the gradual organic journey. It's taken my whole life to get to where I am today. Some of those seeds are in childhood and some of those seeds are as an 18-year-old or 21-year-old, but my journey as a trans person really centered a lot on moving to the Bay Area. There's so much space and support and affirmation and celebration and innovation in transgender culture and activist movements that there was a really exciting shift in my own journey. San Francisco provided a community and an artistic home which allowed me to be my full self and create the art I dreamed of.



Has dance always been your art?

I did my BA and graduate work in Political Science and Community Economic Development, so as an adult my career/personal path was activism and community organizing. That was my whole life. It wasn't until I was 27 that I allowed myself to pursue dance in a serious way. That's when I left grad school and entered dance school full-time. It took me several years to make peace with this decision, to not feel guilty about wanting to be a full-time artist, realizing that my art *was* my activism, and that this was the best way I could personally affect change.

How does *Uncovered* address that activist drive?

An important impact of this work is the healing and dialogue it promotes not just *within* transgender communities, but *between* transgender and queer communities. Historically, there's been a lot of division and tension there. I make work that uses the *specific* experience of being transgender to talk about *universal* issues like difference, belonging, love, loss, history -- and to speak deeply to trans and non-trans people alike. My audiences are an amazing mix. I've gotten the young trans hipsters and the elder modern dance enthusiasts to come and literally sit side by side! This is where we need to move politically.

Can you describe *Uncovered* a little bit?

My first dance is "Lost/Found," a rather humorous duet that was sparked by my own childhood diary, *Norman Rockwell's Diary for a Young Girl*. Later I found a diary in a used bookstore that belonged to a non-trans young boy who was clearly struggling with some issues of sexual identity and supplemented that with conversations with trans men and non-trans gay men. But I spent the bulk of that time developing "Lou," a suite of dances based on the lifelong journals of Lou Sullivan, a pioneering transsexual gay man, activist, writer and historian who lived -- and died -- in San Francisco. I was really driven to create dance theater that addressed and talked about the gap between mainstream recorded history and memories and actual lived experiences in the queer and transgendered communities. What happens to the lives in our community that fall between the pages of recorded history? I wanted to find and reclaim those stories and bring them to the stage. I actually started off researching four or five transgendered folk and then settled on Lou's story pretty much the instant I opened his diary and started reading his story.

What was it about Lou's story that made it such an obvious choice?

The subject matter was incredible: a young girl yearns to be a man, grows up and obtains hormones and surgery, becomes a pioneering activist, cruises and fucks and loves wildly as a gay transsexual man, contracts HIV, struggles to leave a legacy while facing his own death. Lou was so gorgeously articulate, candid and descriptive in his diaries that it clearly provided a visual vocabulary for the choreography. There were 22 diaries, his childhood and adult creative writing and poetry, research, plus all his medical records and diagnoses from living with HIV. And because of the delicate nature of the collection [located in the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California], you're not allowed to photocopy any materials. I literally had to hand-transcribe word by word over 30 years of diaries. It was easy to find evocative passages, passages that spoke right from Lou's heart -- harder to choose between them.

What did you have to leave out?

Lou published the first newsletter for transpeople and personally corresponded with hundreds of trans men and people at a time when there really was no social support at all. People wrote in from all across the nation and the world and he personally wrote back letters to all these folks and kept carbon copies of both the letters he received and the answers. It was incredibly, deeply moving.

Do you think the rest will ever see the light of day?

Yes -- there's somebody who is doing a Ph.D on Lou Sullivan and there are folks who are working to publish material in his diaries. I'm really excited that I've been a part of a movement to not only re-remember Lou but also to share knowledge and significance of him both nationally and internationally. Even though he was such an enormously influential and pioneering person in the history of trans community, very few people know about him now. He's incredibly under-recognized.

For newbies to dance performance, how can you "read" a piece like yours? Is there a proper state of mind to be in?

Modern dance has a reputation as being cryptic, inaccessible and irrelevant. Even many modern dancers I know whisper "I don't understand modern dance!" [Laughs] It's hard to maintain an audience... I'm not interested in creating abstract dances with dancers in gossamer making geometric patterns in a space. My audiences howl with laughter, murmur with identification and get moved to tears -- to tears! At a modern dance show! There's no "trick" to watching and understanding my work, no Modern Dance Coles Notes needed. You will get it and you will be moved.

How can you be so sure?

I consider it my job as a dancer/choreographer to create work that speaks, really directly and clearly and emotionally and literally to an audience, making them feel in the gut and heart. It's really about storytelling and revealing things that are very familiar, universal and human. I have non-trans gay men or lesbians or totally mainstream heterosexual folks saying "Oh my god, I know it was about this trans thing but it spoke to me and I got it!"



That dialogue voiceover as a storytelling mechanism seems unique to the traditional idea of dance performance. Why did you choose to incorporate it? All of my work uses text. I think it's the most organic thing in the world: as human beings, we move and we speak. People can relate to language and character in a way they can't always do with abstract dance. I am in love with movement and so I'm a choreographer. I am in love with language and so I'm a writer.

I felt the music, too, contributed a lot to the impact of the performance.

The first seed of all of my work lies in language and writing and also in the music. I literally work bar by bar with the musicians to create the perfect synergistic fit between the two.

You mentioned your partner, Shawna Virago, before. She's also one of the composers in *Uncovered*. How was it working with her?

Fantastic! We've been together seven years and this was our first artistic collaboration. She's kind of rock star here on the west coast, so it was really easy for her. We had a few sessions where she started composing work, and then she laid down everything in maybe honestly two takes. She's a pro, simply amazing!

At what point do you add in choreography?

My process is almost opposite to some choreographers' processes. Some choreographers will create movements and then commission music that comes in later or in the middle of the process, but I spend anywhere from 3 to 8 months *just* working on a sound score. When I have a draft or final version recorded, only then do I set foot in a dance studio. For me, free physical impulse and all of my movement vocabulary is directly driven by the music and the text of the sound score.

One of the dramatic high points of the performance is when you reveal your chest scars. Are you completely post-op? As a non-trans person, is it even OK to ask that question?

[Laughs] Thank you for asking if it's appropriate to ask a transgender person if they are post-op. It's not. We like to keep our genitals just as private as you do. It's like asking someone how big (or small) their penis is or whether they've had breast implants or use Viagra or some other, er, way-too-personal question. If someone wants to disclose to you, they will. In *Uncovered*, I do disclose that I've had chest surgery. That was vulnerable but it was what that moment authentically needed.

How do you feel about working with Kate Bornstein?

I'm *tremendously* excited and honored that Kate Bornstein is creating new work for me as part of this concert. Kate is a huge long-time hero of mine and many, many transgendered or gender diverse people around the world look at her writings and artistic work as influential to the process of coming into ourselves or informing our own lives as artists. When she asked if I'd be interested in having her read her work for my show, my jaw hit the floor. [Laughs] She's brilliant and a huge pioneer. How amazing to have the opportunity to witness the premiere of her new work as part of my own show that I'm so passionate about. Lucky lucky lucky me!

Uncovered: The Diary Project plays at NYC's Dixon Place July 30-Aug 2. Visit HotFestival.org for tickets and more info, or FreshMeatProductions.org for future tour dates.