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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Secret Love Shared Onstage in Dance

A cutting-edge dance show, being performed this weekend in San Francisco, celebrates the lives and loves of our LGBT elders.

BY Michelle Garcia



Before Ellen came out, and before two people of the same sex were even allowed to dance together in bars, gay people around the world were mustering the courage to be out, to find each other, and to allow themselves to have fun and fall in love. Over the course of two years, renowned transgender choreographer Sean Dorsey sought LGBT people ages 55-88, to record their own version of history, ranging from joyous to heartbreaking. The stories then sprouted his new show, *The Secret History of Love*, which celebrates the life and loves of LGBT people starting in the 1930s.

As the show is staged in San Francisco this weekend (continuing on a tour across the country through the fall), Dorsey talks about his process, and why we shouldn't desexualize people just because of their age.

The Advocate: Tell me about your National LGBT Elders Oral History Project.

Sean Dorsey: Over a two-year period, I met with and interviewed LGBT elders across the U.S. and asked them about their lives in oral history interviews. I asked these elders about everything from their childhood, their coming-out, their first crushes, first loves, love affairs, activism, and then their lives as they have grown older and aged and their perspective on how things have changed over the decades. It was an extraordinary experience, and I met a lot of extraordinary people.

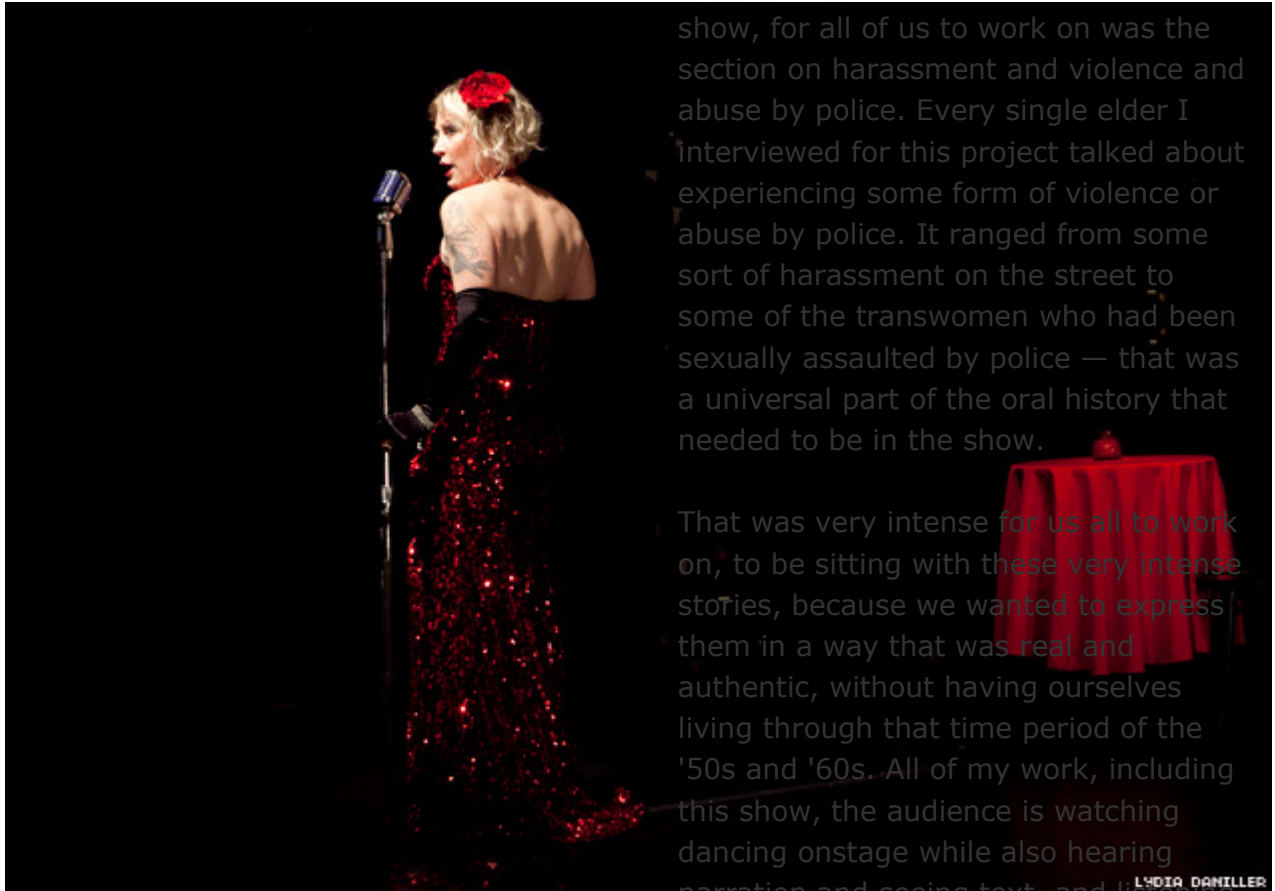
Could you talk about some of the interesting people you met on this journey?

What was a really wonderful part of this national oral history project were some of the surprises I found in the interviews and in meeting people. Frank Lapiana is a Boston native, and one of the wonderful surprises that I encountered first in talking to him was I came to the oral history project preparing myself emotionally for all of the very painful parts of our community's history and struggle — the losses, the isolation, the police abuse — but what I hadn't prepared for was the extent of joy or the innovative, creative ways that LGBT people managed to fall in love and fall in lust and have saucy love affairs or organize sex parties in the 1950s and meet their first love in the 1930s. With Frank, I had this beaming smile during much of my interview time with him, because he would just share these incredibly joyful and saucy stories, among some really painful stuff. It was

incredible to learn of the resiliency and the life force and energy and love that thrived many decades before our community was out from the underground. Part of why I think that the show and the oral histories are important is that we really desexualize our older generation. There's this big disconnect within the LGBT community when it comes to our elders. It was these elders who broke down the sexual revolution doors and were really the heroes and pioneers that made our lives and sexuality and love possible now.

How were you inspired to launch this whole project?

I actually designed the oral history project in order to develop the content for the show. So when I had the idea for the show, I knew I wanted it to be informed by real, lived history. I didn't know what I would find, but I spent a lot of time at the GLBT Historical Society's archives, for example, putting my hands on people's love letters. Like a love note on a cocktail napkin from a club in the 1950s, for example. Getting my hands on these archival materials was just so important to me. And I knew I wanted real voices from our elders to be in the show. So I designed the oral history project around that. But then I was left with this huge stack of transcribed interviews, so then I found themes and stories and commonalities and the arc of the show. So I didn't come to the show with preconceived ideas of how it would go. It really came out of the research that I did.



How long does it normally take for you to choreograph a piece?

I think this process was about allowing myself the time. It usually takes two years to develop a show. And we tested some audiences with it, so that took a little time as well. But I spent 100 hours in the sound studio alone creating the sound score, which is a time-intensive process. Like I said - the sound score, working with my team of composers, my narration, recording the interviews, and then the mixing and editing endlessly and finally coming up with the final score.

Was there a particular time period that you found challenging to capture?

I think the most painful part of the

show, for all of us to work on was the section on harassment and violence and abuse by police. Every single elder I interviewed for this project talked about experiencing some form of violence or abuse by police. It ranged from some sort of harassment on the street to some of the transwomen who had been sexually assaulted by police — that was a universal part of the oral history that needed to be in the show.

That was very intense for us all to work on, to be sitting with these very intense stories, because we wanted to express them in a way that was real and authentic, without having ourselves living through that time period of the '50s and '60s. All of my work, including this show, the audience is watching dancing onstage while also hearing narration and seeing text, and listening to the sound score. So there's always something happening. It's a pretty intense part of the show.

There seems to be a lot of gender norms in the dance world. What is that like for you working in this industry?

Dance is definitely one of the most conservatively and traditionally gendered art forms, because the instrument is the body. So, dance hasn't always led the way for us to liberate ourselves from constrictive gender norms. Sometimes it absolutely has, and I think that there is a tradition in the history of modern dance where a lot of the dancers and choreographers wanted to move away from the strict rules and physicality and to some extent, the gender dance and gender

partnering of ballet. But unfortunately, modern dance started to replicate those same problems, so transgender people have always been completely absent from modern dance, historically. You always see men are always lifting the women, and there's just certain expectations around partnering and strength and even quality of movement or gesture onstage.

So I'm really excited to create work that I think is very queer, and with all the work I create, everybody has to lift everybody. Everybody has to be really kick-ass strong. There's a lot of challenging dance, there's a lot of challenging partner work. I think it's very powerful for audiences to see a trans person dancing, to see men dancing tenderly and intimately with each other. Ultimately, my goal is for all audiences — whether they're LGBT, heterosexual, not sure yet, anybody — can see the work, understand it immediately, and really click with it and let it resonate with them deeply. I think this show speaks to a very universal desire: We all want to be seen, we all want to be loved, and we all long for human connection.

Your show seems to chronicle the human experience of gay relationships in a very artful way. Since the Prop. 8 hearing takes place the same week as the opening of *The Secret History of Love*, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on how these two things relate?

I feel really happy and lucky to be alive and making art as a transgender and queer person in history. Prop. 8 is being

heard by the court, we have many diverse communities and diverse organizations speaking out about civil liberties for all people, and I think there is absolutely some kind of cosmic connection to these things happening [in the same week]. Whether it's in the court or lobbying or community gatherings and rallies or this dance work, I think that there are a lot of us who are deeply impassioned with creating change and transforming our communities with justice, so I feel really privileged to get to be a leader in my community and be sharing this work with so many people across this country at a time when the courts are having to look seriously at the civil liberties of LGBT people and immigrants and people who are in communities who have really been discriminated against in law.

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