



BOYS IN TROUBLE: A Conversation with Sean Dorsey

by Roula Seikaly

Sean Dorsey is a dance-maker, activist, and trans advocate based in San Francisco. A founder of the [Sean Dorsey Dance](#), [Fresh Meat Productions](#) and the Fresh Meat Festival, Dorsey and his family of talented artists who represent the breadth of gender expression have slowly chipped away at rigid social attitudes that influence who is celebrated in a performance setting. I spoke with Sean about his new dance work, [BOYS IN TROUBLE](#), which premieres in April, and what changes in the dance field need to happen so as to fully and ethically embrace this moment when trans experience is in the cultural spotlight.

Roula Seikaly: Could you describe your current project?

Sean Dorsey: *BOYS IN TROUBLE* unpacks masculinity with unflinching honesty – from unapologetically trans and queer perspectives. We do this through full-throttle dance, super-vulnerable storytelling, raw emotion, irreverent humor and exquisite queer partnering. True Transsexual Confessions. An unabashed love letter between queer Black men. A sendup of all things Macho. A queer spin on butch-ness. Real talk about whiteness. An invitation to look deeply at shame. A witness to hurt and harm and heartbreak. A roadmap for another way.

We premiere the work April 19-21 at Z Space in San Francisco, and then launch a 2-year, 20-city tour supported by the [National Dance Project](#) and [National Performance Network](#). This project was commissioned by six theaters across the US (from Maui to L.A. to Atlanta), so I built the work after engaging transgender, gender-nonconforming (GNC) and queer people on the masculine spectrum during my community residencies in several cities. I

hosted community forums, led participatory self-expression workshops and taught classes. The urgent, and sometimes explosive, themes that emerged from communities deeply inform this work.

When I began work on this project two years ago, I couldn't have imagined how timely and urgent this work would be – we're premiering *BOYS IN TROUBLE* right as America is grappling with toxic masculinity, the #metoo movement, and renewed attacks on trans and LGBTQ rights.



RS: I was fortunate to witness you and the dancers rehearsing sections of *BOYS IN TROUBLE*. Does the work include some of what you performed at your home season last year as *Boys Bite Back*?

SD: We performed some early sections of this project as works in progress at our *Boys Bite Back* concert last year. Since then, it's become clear what sections I would set aside and allow to rest, what needed development, and what was ready to emerge and be created. Ultimately, I'm shaping everything down into a 60-70 minute performance.

RS: That flows nicely into a question about previous performances and preparation. I prepared for this interview by reading press and watching clips of earlier performances including *Outsider Chronicles*, (2005), *Uncovered: The Diary Project* (2009), *Secret History of Love* (2013), and *Missing Generation*, (2015). These all seem to take 2-3 or 2-5 years to realize. How does that process unfold beginning to end? Do you start with music, or the idea? How does it progress for you?

SD: I always start with a conceptual frame or thematic lens for the work. That gives me a doorway into my creative investigation. It also creates the structure of what my community engagement process will be for that work. My fundamental belief is that art needs to exist

for a reason, an important reason to be in the world. Otherwise, it might as well just be danced or created in our bedrooms. It's always about the "why" and the "why now" and about "how" the work will impact communities and culture.

When I feel deeply called to dive into a question, that informs with whom and how I want to work. To create *The Missing Generation*, I recorded 75 hours of oral history interviews with long time trans and LGBTQ survivors of the early AIDS epidemic, and then spent 500 hours after that sitting with and sifting through transcripts, and creating the sound score.

For *Boys in Trouble*, I worked again in community and hosted forums on masculinity, listening to all kinds of conversations about masculinity. I held movement workshops that were supportive to trans-spectrum and gender non-conforming people, and also held some workshops that were open to anyone who identifies as masculine some or all of the time.

Also, in this process, my dancers are deep artistic collaborators. They're a central part of the process, so that informs how I might develop a character for them, or a duet, or a section of dialogue. In this project, my dancers' life histories really informed how their role in the work developed. As we created the talking section you saw us do in rehearsal, we had a lot of conversations around masculinity, whiteness, white supremacy and racism in America. We've also done writing exercises about these topics, which then sources an idea for movement, or may enter the show as text or as a recorded section of the score. My dancers have always been deeply involved in the creative process. They aren't just bodies that show up to learn and perform choreography. They're fully invested. It's powerful and exciting.

RS: A follow on to that question: are there specific challenges, victories, or hindrances that you face consistently? I'm also thinking about funding, and how the flow of money to the arts and artists in this country is almost exclusively philanthropic. Have you noticed a change in that climate that recognizes the artistic value and quality in what you produce?

SD: I feel like three things are true. The first is that I make good work, and so I'm blessed that Sean Dorsey Dance and Fresh Meat Productions are supported by a group of significant and prestigious funders. Second, it's true that as a transgender artist, me and my organization still have to prove ourselves twice as hard, or do twice as much, to receive the same amount of funding as cisgender artists/organizations. For example: in many cases we may be awarded a grant comparable to another organization, but that other organization is *only* a dance company or *only* an annual festival. We operate a nationally-touring dance

company *and* a major festival. We provide fiscal sponsorship. We offer national trainings and workshops. We do teaching residencies. We advocate in the national field around trans exclusion.

The third truth is something that is very important to me. As a trans artist, activist, and advocate, I am painfully aware that we are at an important and dangerous moment in history. We're in a time when the word and the phenomenon of "transgender" are on the lips of mainstream cisgender culture, including the dance field and the arts. So, the beginning of some awareness is there ... but with zero trans leadership, representation, or support. Cisgender organizations are using the word 'trans' or gender themes for their festivals and conferences and events – but completely bypassing transgender and GNC people in the process. We're not being hired, supported or brought into leadership.

This is one of the things that pushed me to expand my [#TRANSformDance](#) program to the national level. Through #TRANSformDance, we work with nonprofits, service organizations, funders, presenters, venues, and dance schools. We're asking the field to start naming and recognizing the continuing exclusion of transgender and GNC people in dance as a CRISIS. There are specific barriers that are keeping my people out of dance classes and schools, teacher training programs, and admin, tech and programming positions. That gatekeeping extends to funding organizations and who holds the purse strings as well. This needs to be acknowledged and we need field-wide change.

America's "trans moment" is happening without trans people in leadership, and that needs to be addressed. So I'm saying to cisgender people in the dance world, whether they are EDs or administrators or choreographers or dancers or teachers or funders, that they are not ready to do trans-based programming or events unless they have trans people in leadership doing that work with decision-making power.

RS: You've toured and taught extensively, and in talking with you now, I understand that teaching accessibility is very important to you. You've met and worked with trans, queer, non-binary and GNC artists who, I'm guessing, have aspirations similar to yours. Do you give them advice? What do you say?

SD: Sean Dorsey Dance has toured to 29 cities, and I've taught in more than 35 cities. Whether in big cities or small towns, the conditions for a trans or GNC person wanting to enter the dance field are far less than favorable. Where I start when I'm teaching,

regardless of the identity of the students I'm working with, is with a self-care practice. This might sound flakey or 'Californian' of me, but we desperately need this supportive practice as trans people.

What I experience every day as a transgender dancer and dance-maker is that EVERYTHING in my field tells me that my body is unusual or wrong, not suitable, that there's no place for me. I don't see myself reflected anywhere in my field. So I encourage my students and give them tools to create a daily practice that gives them positive messages about their bodies being beautiful and wise, that they have gifts to offer, because the greater external messages we are barraged by every day say that our lives are meaningless. That's the place I start.

RS: You've emphasized the importance of teaching, community building, and mentorship in your practice, and that you look more to writers or visual artists as guides because there simply aren't trans dancers or choreographers to identify as models. Given that, are there people in the dance world whom you look to, even though trans bodies are not represented?

SD: I think most people can't imagine what it means to not see a *single* person like you in Dance ... not onstage, or choreographing, or taking dance class next to you, or stage-managing, or running a theater. Although I always loved to watch dance, I really don't feel like there was ever a "someone" who was my inspiration. I was in a kind of wilderness and so I starting making work based on my gut and my heart. I had to make the dances I wished I saw.

RS: Is there a desire, whether it's welcome or something you resist, to be recognized in the form of awards or money from the formal or institutional dance world? Is that important to you?

SD: The most important thing for me is that my work succeeds at being accessible, beautiful, moving and deeply *relevant* for the audience, transformational somehow. And this is true for a transgender person as much as it's true for a cisgender or heterosexual person in the audience. That's what drives and feeds me. But I sure wouldn't sneeze at something like the giant unrestricted artist awards that many of my cisgender peers have been awarded!



RS: I'm thinking about the role of language or spoken word work in your performance strategy. For you, or your dancers or we in the audience, is it explanation? Is it elucidation? How do you relate to that?

SD: All of my work features language and text. Not constantly, and not in all parts of my work, but that's central for me. I'm a writer. I'm in love with

language and storytelling. I love the smoothness or crispness or urgency of breath in spoken language. But language for me is not used as "explanation" in my work. It's there because as a writer and poet, I love the relationship of language to breath, to our lungs and our diaphragm and our muscles as we're moving. I know there's still a tradition of "purity" in dance that says we "shouldn't need text" to communicate in dance. I don't believe that at all. As a human being, I use language and story in my every day life as well as in movement. It also creates a deep connection between the audience and myself.

RS: For someone who doesn't know the context at all, is that getting closer to musical theater, or dance theater? Is that an accurate description?

SD: Dance-theater, sure. I use "dance-theater" often as a shorthand, but it's not a perfect fit to describe what I do. It does indicate the use of story, or text, or character, and that's important to convey.

RS: That leads directly to another question about description. You identify as a "dance maker," maybe not "choreographer." Is that an important distinction? How do you sort that out?

SD: I use the phrase "dance-maker" a lot, but I also say that I'm a choreographer, dancer, and writer. I like "dance-maker" because it feels active and activating. I feel like that's what my work does. I activate my communities and collaborators to bring forward their stories and truths and bodies into the work.

RS: To wrap up, and thank you so much for speaking with me, the last year has been exceptionally challenging in this country for a host of reasons. We're in the midst of what could easily be described as a cultural crisis. Do you see yourself responding to that as a trans person and a maker? Has the last year brought what you've experienced in 17 years into greater focus?

SD: The concept for *BOYS IN TROUBLE* was born several years ago, but the last year has deeply informed my work in community and our time in the studio. Friends and collaborators who are Black have talked with me about how their white, heterosexual, cisgender counterparts are suddenly becoming alarmed and aware of truths that they had long-known and *lived in* for years (starting with the white supremacy this country was founded upon). For many people of color, nothing is different now than it was a year ago. If anything, it's gone from horrible to worse – but it's not “new”.

So yes, we're in a “crisis” – but America's *always* been in a crisis, because this country was *founded* on crisis – namely: invasion, genocide, colonialism, slavery, internment, segregation, forced sterilization. Today it continues with deportations, anti-Black-and-Brown-immigrant hatred, talk about the “wall” and Islamophobia. Even though *BOYS IN TROUBLE* was born a few years ago, there are so many things that happened in the last year that for me as a white trans guy were crystallized, and I'm bringing that into the work now. I'm thinking of the ways we talk about whiteness, the way we talk about expressions of trans masculinity. There are things that are scary for me to bring forward, particularly my anger and righteousness as a trans person. But I'm ready to go there, all while doing justice to the work and the audience. I can't wait to share this new work with audiences.



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