

Early AIDS victims remembered in dance

Sean Dorsey's show includes voices and stories of people, many of whom died alone in the hospital system

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Members of Sean Dorsey Dance perform award-winning *The Missing Generation*, which features 17 sections over 65 minutes.
Photograph By Submitted

What: *The Missing Generation*: Sean Dorsey Dance

Where: Farquhar Auditorium, University Centre, University of Victoria

When: Friday, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$58, \$68 (250-721-8480 or tickets.uvic.ca)

One largely forgotten aspect of the AIDS epidemic is its affect on transgender people, says choreographer Sean Dorsey.

On Friday night, Dorsey and company bring his critically-lauded dance *The Missing Generation* to Victoria. It is intended to bring attention to the survivors of the early AIDS epidemic. In the 65-minute work, their voices and stories can be heard on a soundtrack that recently won an Isadora Duncan Award for best sound-score/text/music.

Raised in Vancouver and now based in San Francisco, Dorsey is a transgender choreographer, writer and dancer (he performs in *The Missing Generation* along with three other dancers).

In creating the work, he recorded 25 interviews with AIDS survivors in six American cities. Dorsey amassed 75 hours of tapes and took two years to assemble the dance and its string-driven soundtrack, working with four composers.

Dorsey says one interview that particularly affected him was with Cheryl Courtney-Evans, 63, an Atlanta trans woman and activist. Courtney-Evans said during the early AIDS epidemic, her ailing trans friends would sometimes mysteriously disappear. It transpired that they had gone to hospital and died shortly thereafter.

Some were admitted under their legal names, typically unknown to friends who knew them only by assumed names reflecting the gender with which they identified. Hence these people seemed to “disappear” once they entered the hospital system.

“People literally got sick and died alone all the time. And then they were buried in paupers’ graves because nobody knew who they were,” Dorsey said.

The 43-year-old choreographer was also struck by how swiftly AIDS took its toll in the early days of the epidemic in the 1980s, when drug treatment was rudimentary.

“People would literally be fine on Friday. You’d see them at the club or at work. And they’d get sick and die by Monday morning.”

Dorsey describes *The Missing Generation* as “full-bodied, luscious, full-throttle” dance. The tempo varies within its 17 sections — there are slow and fast parts. It’s an intense work with lots of eye contact and partnering, which can be physically taxing.

“I think it’s satisfying for the audience to see dancers dripping with sweat 10 minutes in. I felt like it was the only way to authentically honour and embody the stories,” Dorsey says.

As well as strings, the score for *The Missing Generation* includes high-energy house music to reflect “going back into the Seventies and honouring the era of free love and disco.” One can also hear the AIDS survivors Dorsey recorded with a high-end recorder. Sometimes it’s just a few words, sometimes it’s an entire anecdote.

“You hear people’s voices as they’re recalling really devastatingly painful memories. Or you’re hearing them laugh. All in real time.”

The choreographer says *The Missing Generation* aims to preserve the stories and histories of a generation of gay, bisexual and transgender people that’s in danger of being forgotten. Dorsey believes young people know little about the early AIDS epidemic — something the dancework intends to help remedy.

It’s a serious message. At the same time, he hopes audiences come away feeling buoyed by the transformative magic of art.

“I think it really is a beautiful dance. Many aspects to the show are painful. What the audience ultimately experiences during and after the show is a message about love and human connection.”