

Keepin' It Fresh

The Fresh Meat Festival keeps bringing down the house. ★ By Zak Szymanski

Picture this: you've scored tickets to one of the hottest shows at the premier professional dance theater in town. When the house lights dim, the stage is infused with electrically charged salsa and tango, live rap and hip-hop, four-part harmony, modern dance, rock and roll, gospel, burlesque and trapeze. The crowd is moved to its feet by the intensity of the performance. Now imagine that all the artists onstage represent queer and transgendered bodies and stories, and that much of the applause is coming from mainstream patrons and top professionals in their artistic fields.

Such a scene is a reality every June in San Francisco at Fresh Meat, described by artistic director Sean Dorsey as "a joyful, soulful, extraordinary festival of transgender and queer performance." Now in its fifth year at the prestigious ODC Theater, the event prioritizes visibility for artists who are transgendered and/or people of color, and has smashed stereotypes in the process of producing kick-ass productions. It also is a rare opportunity for trans and queer populations to be showcased at a top-rate venue.

"It's one of the first performance festivals where people are actually buying tickets and sitting down to watch trans-specific performers," says Shawna Virago, a male-to-female transgendered woman better known as a guitarist, singer and songwriter who delivers serious



Sisterz of the Underground's crew

messages through hard rock — and a good dose of sexy sarcasm.

Virago says that Fresh Meat inherently builds artistic as well as political bridges. "As an activist I find I'm usually taking my message to communities to which I already belong, but a lot of people in ODC's audience are from other communities who would otherwise never see trans performers or hear from a queer perspective," Virago points out.

The venue also has given LGBT people a chance to see the many different faces of their own community, from the "homohop" rap group Deep Dickollective to the female breaking troupe Extra Credit Crew, organized by Sisterz of the Underground, a queer-positive, female, hip-hop collective that has consistently brought down the Fresh Meat house.

"The thing I love so much is that anybody can enjoy Fresh Meat.

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There are so many different identities converging," said Sisterz of the Underground founder Sarah Smalls. "You also can't compare any one of the performances to each other. They are all so eclectic and beautiful."

Smalls estimates that half of the collective are queer women. Representative of the diversity of the trans-queer communities held together by events like Fresh Meat, Smalls herself is straight, but considers herself "part of the family."

"I take my boyfriend to Fresh Meat. He's a b-boy and he's supposed to be one of these typical straight guys. He loves the show," says Smalls, who also notes that the event has opened many other doors for her; one Fresh Meat performer is a high school teacher who just hired the Sisterz to teach breaking to her phys ed students.

For Dorsey, Fresh Meat seized upon an opportunity that he first recognized in 2001, the year he arrived in San Francisco.

"I happened to come to the Bay Area at a time when there was a real ground swell of totally dynamic trans artists and in some ways the beginnings of a real trans art community, but we had very few venues and organizations that supported us," Dorsey says. "So often transgender and queer artists are relegated to perform in cafes and small spaces. The time was right to take a step forward and gather this growing momentum and take our trans selves onto big stages and into big venues."

Still, Dorsey "could not have predicted its success," and since its debut, Fresh Meat Productions has grown to include many other media forms and smaller events throughout the year; the annual Fresh Meat cabaret now also hosts an art show in the ODC lobby.

At press time, confirmed performers for Fresh Meat 2006 include Kate Bornstein, Imani Henry, Miguel Chernus-Goldstein, Ryka Aoki de la Cruz, Katastrophe, JenRO, Juba Kalamka, Scarletto, Virago and of course, Dorsey. The shows take place June 15, 16 and 17, and reservations are recommended. ■

For more information, visit freshmeatproductions.org.

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