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Interview: Choreographer Sean Dorsey on the Depths of the Missing Generation

Posted By Peter Lawrence Kane on Wed, Apr 27, 2016 at 5:45 PM



Lydia Daniller

l-r: Nol Simonse, ArVejon Jones, Brian Fisher, Sean Dorsey

By the time it comes to Z Space in early May, choreographer Sean Dorsey's *The Missing Generation* will be midway through its 20-city national tour. Twice nominated for Isadora Duncan Awards, it's a dance-theater work that looks at the trauma of HIV/AIDS survivors, paying special attention to transgender individuals whose stories have often been left out of the prevailing narratives of the crisis years.

The piece came together after two years of conducting oral histories with survivors of the epidemic, only a fraction of which could be used in the final work. *SF Weekly* spoke to Dorsey about his choreographic style,

the heartbreak of having to leave so many people's intimate stories on the proverbial cutting room floor, and what the idea of the missing generation came to mean for him.

NEW trailer: THE MISSING GENERATION (Sean Dorsey Dance)



You were only able to use a tiny fraction of your research. Was it hard to leave all that material on the cutting room floor?

I recorded over 75 hours of oral history and the show runs 65 minutes — and, of course, it's not non-stop talking. So I calculated it, and I was only able to use .08 percent of what I recorded. So that was heartbreaking firstly because all 25 people who I talked to shared such remarkable, articulate, devastating, inspiring, heart-cracking-open stories. It as really painful knowing that I was not going to be able to include a lot of it in he show. In the process of doing that, I clocked over 500 hours *listening* to those 75 hours over and over, pulling out threads.

So the two wonderful outcomes are one, that we created a really powerful show that people in 20 cities across the country are going to see and hear and two, we are working really hard to fundraise in order to make all of these interviews extensively available across the country in LGBT archives, HIV/AIDS archives, academic archives, in schools. That is the next project for me, to do a lot of grassroots fundraising and find donors or institutions who share my passion.

Were you caught off guard by the range of topics people wanted to discuss?

So many! We're talking primarily about this decade-and-a-half period of the epidemic, before there was any remotely effective treatment — which of course came in 1996 with the cocktails. I asked people to talk about the 1960s and 1970s because people's histories are extraordinarily pertinent to how the AIDS crisis devastated our community, and the phobic political landscape that resulted in unnecessary mass deaths.

I had multiple decades of people's life history and chose to both focus on some stories that were extraordinarily specific, giving a really intimate, up-close lens into a unique person's particular experience of a moment in their life — of someone passing in their life, of the moment they became positive — to also choosing other excerpts that lent themselves well to connecting with other people's stories and drawing out the many universal themes in this show which extend far beyond the early epidemic, scenes of isolation, grief, loss, longing for connection with community, hoping for love, healing. These are the universal themes that are also really prominent.

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Lydia Daniller

l-r: Brian Fisher, ArVejon Jones, Nol Simonsen, Sean Dorsey

Was there anything about other trans people's experiences in the 1960s and '70s that made your jaw drop?

It was really important for me as a transgender person to prioritize recording and sharing transgender experiences of the AIDS epidemic because most non-trans people have no idea how transwomen of color were decimated. Even as a longtime trans and queer activist and a history buff-slash-nerd, and someone who's done a lot of work around transgender history, I was definitely shocked at many of the stories. Especially transwomen of color.

It was an interesting challenge for me as an artist to figure out how to relate these polar opposite disparate experiences of the '60s and '70s and the early AIDS epidemic. You had gay and bisexual men having sexual liberation and the birth of the gay rights movement. This window cracked open on the opportunity to meet and love and — I don't want to say the F-word — have sex with each other, to begin demanding visibility and rights. We had that whole historical phenomenon, and on the other hand, in trans communities you have the exact opposite: horrific violence against transwomen, complete denial of any rights and protections. You have profound economic, housing, social, medical, educational, and religious discrimination, and so the ways that these two communities arrived in the '80s was very different. One was primarily through sexual encounters and community and the other, because of economic marginalization, many transwomen had no other employment alternative besides sex work. So many transwomen were contracting HIV through sex work. They were arriving at being positive in different ways, so that was an great story to tell.

Did the concept of a "missing generation" shift over time as you worked on this project?

Initially, when I felt called to do this work, I thought of the "missing generation," thinking that that was going to be referring to all those people we lost: to HIV/AIDS, to government indifference and transphobia and racism and homophobia and biphobia. That was my assumption when I began the project, and as soon as I began sitting at the table, one-on-one with people who survived, I realized my calling was to attune myself to the people living amongst us who endured and survived that horrific and extremely important time in American history.

Everyone I talked to talked about how they had to shove down the memories, the trauma, the mass grief in order to continue living. I talked to people who've been positive for 30 years, who lost hundreds of friends or lovers, and there's a way that — because there's so much trauma — they had to shove it down to carry on. We're not very good in American culture at dealing with death or grief — or with lesbian, gay, bi, queer people — so the missing generation came to mean "here is this generation of survivors living among us who are totally missing our attention, our care," and it became an invitation for us to gather together in community and witness some beautiful dance and beautiful art. But in the process, to crack open our hearts with each other.

How would you describe your choreographic style in *The Missing Generation*?

We dance really hard for 65 minutes straight. It's very full-bodied, luscious, full-throttle dance. I think we dance with a lot of warmth and precision of gesture, and it's deeply human, meaning that we're not automatons: There's a lot of partnering and touch and eye contact. I use the term "dance theater," because it's not just pure dance, you're hearing stories and voices in the score. I'm also a writer and my narration is there. We speak live while we dance, so it is really gorgeous, juicy, full-on dancing — but it's also really rooted in story, and it's very relatable and accessible to audiences.

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We have audiences who are dance fans and people who see our work who claim to hate modern dance and claim not to get it, and I really feel like my job as an artist is to make dances that people can get into and understand and have an impact on emotionally – and that they leave the theater changed in some way.

The Missing Generation, Thursday-Saturday May 5-7, 8 p.m., at Z Space, 450 Florida, seandorseydance.com



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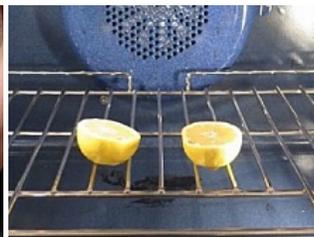
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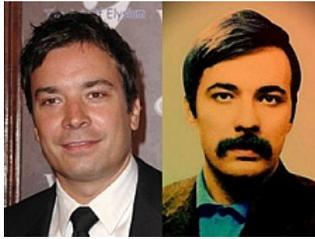
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Peter Lawrence Kane is SF Weekly's Arts Editor. He has lived in San Francisco since 2008 and is two-thirds the way toward his goal of visiting all 59 national parks.

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