

KQED Arts

Sean Dorsey on the Reinvention of Masculinity in 'BOYS IN TROUBLE'

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Published on Apr 16



Sean Dorsey Dance in Sean Dorsey's *BOYS IN TROUBLE*, an examination of masculinity in the modern age. (Lydia Daniller)

Watching excerpts from Sean Dorsey's latest evening-length work, titled *BOYS IN TROUBLE*, I was reminded of the Japanese art of *kintsugi* in which fragments of broken ceramics are welded together, with seams of gold accentuating the historic cracks.

In *BOYS*, activist dance-maker Dorsey explodes tropes of masculinity to refashion them with embedded shards from the wide spectrum of gender expression, welded with rivulets of modern dance. He and his tight-knit company of four men deploy spoken word, physical comedy, and a lush, expansive dance vocabulary to tell deeply personal

stories likely to strike a chord regardless of one's own gender leanings. From the poignant tale of a young boy's shame to a riotous allegory involving those super-absorbent polymer capsules that, when dropped into water, expand into toy dinosaurs, Dorsey's wicked wit and generous spirit expose the sometimes absurd contortions we put ourselves through when we construct identity.

I attended the performance of an extract of the work at [RAWdance's CONCEPT:22 program](#) on March 30, then slipped into a rehearsal a few days later. I caught up with Dorsey at Café La Bohème in the Mission, curious to learn about his own journey through the dance world, and about the way he shaped this ambitious piece — which, after it premieres in San Francisco on April 19–21, goes on the road to 20 cities around the United States.



Sean Dorsey Dance in BOYS IN TROUBLE. (*Lydia Daniller*)

What you're doing seems so topical right now. The toxic political environment has permeated the dance world – as evidenced by, for example, the controversy around the [Ballets Trockadero](#), and the [vilification of Misty Copeland](#) by ballet right-wingers.

Toxic masculinity, racism and transphobia are nothing new, but there are certainly more widespread cultural conversations around these things right now. Our show is part of

that urgent conversation. There is a continued firestorm of racism and transphobia in this country... And yet there are so many of us who are fighting against harmful constructs like masculinity, femininity, whiteness, “race,” and the gender binary itself.

What inspired the script for BOYS IN TROUBLE?

I wrote the script after a two-year research process. The script and dialogue are based on my community research, and on the conversations we had in the studio – along with writing exercises about masculinity, gender, white supremacy and racism [two of Dorsey’s dancers are black].

At the beginning of the project I didn’t have a predetermined idea of exactly what themes I wanted to unpack or what the show’s sections would look like. In the end, they were driven by all these conversations and self-expression workshops I led with all kinds of folks on the masculine spectrum. That really revealed what people were feeling, what themes were very charged for them, either because it was a source of pain or trauma, liberation, or joy. That then drove me to investigate certain themes with my dancers in the studio and drove my own creative writing.

And then working with the composers and musicians, I didn’t just say to them, “I’ll talk to you in six months” and then, “give me what you’ve got.” We were in frequent conversation about the emotional direction of each section.



Sean Dorsey Dance in BOYS IN TROUBLE. (Lydia Daniller)

You performed the ‘Butch’ section as a work in progress last year. With a group of dancers across the queer spectrum, how does the concept of ‘butch’ relate to each of you?

It’s about gendered expectations. That applies to non-trans and cisgender straight guys who always have to be “capable,” can’t hesitate, can’t not know something. It’s also true that, within gay and queer cisgender men’s communities, more effeminate and femme expressions are judged as lower on the hierarchy than butch. The same thing applies to trans guys – all of us are measured according to how well we align with the patriarchy.

Above all, as a trans person, I’m supposed to be consistent in my gender expression... like, from birth to today. There’s this band of appropriate gender expression for trans guys and it has to be consistent with what you articulate as your early life story. So in the ‘Butch’ section, that’s where I talk about how I totally loved my Barbies, how I loved playing with make-up as a kid. I don’t buy into the “I played with G.I. Joe and that’s how I knew I was trans” thing.



Will Woodward and ArVejon James in BOYS IN TROUBLE. (Lydia Daniller)

Dancer ArVejon Jones has a striking recorded monologue in the ‘Sweet Time’ duet. In it, he says "I love how our mothers and our grandmothers and our aunties are present in us ... Even if it's not our own aunts and grandmothers and mothers specifically, it is black women that is present in queer black men." What was the genesis of that?

After the election, we were talking a lot about racism and white supremacy, and AJ had said one day in rehearsal that whenever he walks into a room –

regardless of his sexual orientation, what he’s wearing, what he does for a living – he’s always seen as black first. I asked him to talk more about that, and I also asked, “what is the difference for you when you are with another black queer man in terms of how you inhabit your body, how it is for you to be in the world?” And he just spoke this spontaneous love letter to black queer men. The sound recorder was rolling, and that’s the soundscore behind that duet!

In your research travels, did anything unexpected come up?

I was so focused on emotionally showing up for the participants I was working with – being prepared, really holding space and being supportive of them – but had not

planned for the fact that I was personally going to have such beautiful and intense personal experiences myself, of having a lot of things said in the room or expressed that I could really identify with personally, or felt mirrored in. This was huge for me, especially because my last three full-evening projects have been so focused on holding *other* people, holding *history*, holding *community*. [The last show](#) arose after I recorded oral history interviews with trans and queer longtime survivors of the AIDS epidemic, so I was focused on being there for people, lifting them up.

This time around, I had forgotten to factor into the equation how would it be for me, as a trans person, to be part of these conversations with peers. Because up to now in the dance field, I've never had peers; I've never had a single person older than me who is a choreographic or modern dance mentor and who's trans. Only in the last two to three years have I met a professional modern dancer who's on the trans spectrum. Before that, I was teaching trans students who were emerging, or who were having their first ever supportive dance class. But I couldn't have held an audition for trans dancers before today. I've been really alone.

What is your background as a dancer?

Unlike most dancers, I did not grow up at the ballet barre nor went to a conservatory in my youth. I did a lot of straight-up theater, music, and writing as a child, and I danced around my living room. I did one ballet class when I was five, one jazz workshop when I was a senior in high school. Carol Burnett and Michael Jackson were my heroes, so it was basically comedy and dancing. Now, looking back, it was very unconscious but I never saw anyone like me in the entire dance world. I couldn't picture myself there. My whole identity was really as an activist. Social justice was my calling – I cared about the world, and thought I couldn't be an artist and do my activism. Because I had no model for that, really.

It wasn't 'til I was an undergraduate doing my double major in political science and women's studies at University of British Columbia in Vancouver that I started taking community-level modern dance classes, and went to my first real ballet class.

Long story short: that ballet teacher took me aside after class one day and said, "you should be a professional dancer." First of all, I'm 24, and second of all, I'm me (trans). But I decided to take a year off from school – I was in graduate school at that point – did some auditions, went into full-time dance school for two years. Never did go back to grad school. I danced for some small companies in Vancouver, and started making work as a student. Remember, I grew up in Canada, didn't know about dance-makers like Bill T. Jones or Joe Goode, so I hadn't seen story and text in dance, but I was really interested in doing that.

My first piece of student work was queer and had text – it was just a little student piece, but the whole dance community came out to the recital, people were very positive and said things like "we're so excited by your emerging artistic voice." The next day, the director of the school called me into her office and said, "Your piece made me very

uncomfortable.” Queer content was not okay by her. She withheld my graduation diploma at the end of my program.



Sean Dorsey. (Lydia Daniller)

Had you transitioned by that time?

I was out and queer and trans but I didn't take hormones until I was living here in San Francisco and already dancing professionally. I was out as trans for 10 years before I chose to take hormones or have top surgery.

I came to visit San Francisco in 2000 for two weeks, fell in love with the city, was taking class every day, took class with Lizz Roman, and I was, like, “What is this upside-down dance magic y'all are doing?” I told her “I loved your class, I'd love to come and study with you one day.” She said, “You're a gorgeous dancer, why don't you join my company?” That's when I moved to San Francisco. I danced with Lizz Roman and Dancers doing daredevil hanging off of buildings for about six years. It was so great; Lizz is amazing and

is like family. And I just kept making work here. In 2002, we put on what we thought would be this one-time Fresh Meat Festival of trans and queer performance. But the response was so astronomical that today, 17 years later, [Fresh Meat Productions](#) is a thriving midsize non-profit.



Sean Dorsey. (*Lydia Daniller*)

What do you look for in your dancers?

I don't hold auditions – I'm looking very specifically for someone who, besides being a gorgeous dancer, is very present in their body, their spine, and in their eyes; someone who can be totally theatrically present in their dancing, and then deliver dialogue as well as over-the-top humor.

All of my dancers have worked with me for years. Brian Fisher, who was a principal dancer at ODC, has been dancing with me since 2007. Nol Simonse since 2008. Juan De La Rosa danced with me for seven years then moved to New York. ArVejon Jones joined the family for *The Missing Generation*, so this is his fourth season. And this is Will Woodward's second season.

There is definitely a very deep family bond in the company, a deep level of trust. I'm not, like, smoking a cigarette in the corner dictating to my dancers what to do. We all generate emotional information from our bodies and our lives; we work together in communities, in workshops, and we go to a lot of vulnerable places, whether it's purely dance-wise, or performance-wise or emotionally. Everyone generates movement, gesture, partnering. I give everyone movement tasks and build from that. I work with exceptional humans who are deeply good-hearted and generous people, who have no ego getting in the way.

'*BOYS IN TROUBLE*' premieres April 19–21 at Z Space in San Francisco. [Details here.](#)