



Modern Dance's outsider

As one of the nation's only out transgender choreographers, Sean Dorsey says he is often asked, "Why modern dance?" In some ways he understands the question. After all, modern dance has traditionally neglected, excluded and alienated trans people.

"But," Dorsey appeals, "there's something so powerful, so visceral, about expressing ourselves and our stories using the body."

Dorsey speaks of the passion that has haunted him since childhood. He danced as kid, but, as an adult, he set it aside to focus on activism and community organizing,

"I figured that was the best way to serve my trans-queer community, so I left dance behind," Dorsey says. But he couldn't ignore the siren song of dance's call. "After much soul-searching, I finally realized I could marry my activism and my art by telling trans and queer stories through dance."

Dorsey's performances fuse modern dance, theater and storytelling to bring trans and queer stories to the stage. Last year the 33-year-old choreographer became the first trans person given a San Francisco Arts commission grant to create and perform pieces reflecting gender variance. Dorsey turned that award into his most recent piece, *The Outsider Chronicles*, which premiered to sold-out houses and was praised widely by critics. BalletTanz has named him one of the international dance scene's most promising choreographers; and he's been nominated for the Isadora Duncan Dance Award. Although proud of these accomplishments, Dorsey says it's the hidden message that pleases him most.

"I mention these because it's important to note that my work is being followed and praised by mainstream audiences — which means that trans stories are being successfully introduced to the mainstream. This is part of what can lead to real and lasting change."

Dorsey says that as he tours internationally and around the country, viewers react strongly to his productions.

“People tell me my work moves them very, very deeply; it often moves them to tears. I’m blown away by how [many] people thank me for what I’m doing, for allowing them to finally see themselves reflected onstage, sometimes for the first time in their lives.”

The choreographer is forthright about how his transgender identity has impacted his work. He argues that all artists are impacted by their gender experience.

“Non-trans people just aren’t generally conscious of it. They don’t name it. They just make heterosexual ballets and duets and everyone calls their work ‘universal.’ Well, I make work that speaks to people universally, too — addressing issues of love, relationships, belonging — but I do it using the specific experience of being trans.”

In addition to his own artistry, Dorsey heads Fresh Meat Productions (freshmeatproductions.org) a year-round performance, dance, visual arts and media arts program that he founded and now directs. Fresh Meat supports multidisciplinary arts that explore transgender experiences; and produces performances that have gained a loyal following in San Francisco’s queer community.

“In the past few years, we’ve witnessed the birth of a quickly-growing, powerfully talented transgender arts community. But we had virtually no organizations that connected and served trans artists. Trans artists didn’t have access to funding, large audiences, professional venues, professional development or mentoring. This is why I founded Fresh Meat. We’ve been an instrumental part of building one of the world’s largest trans arts communities, connecting trans artists with each other, with audiences, with venues and presenters and with the broader community. Our performances and exhibitions are incredibly important opportunities. It’s transformative and powerful stuff!”

One of the production company’s highlights is the annual Fresh Meat Transgender and Queer Performance Festival held, this year, at San Francisco’s OCD Theater, June 15-17. This year’s festival includes artists like Kate Bornstein, Imani Henry, Katastrophe, Shawna Virago and Dorsey presenting everything from dance theater to homo hip hop, from all-girl breakdancing to tranny glam rock.

Dorsey is happy to include queer performers in Fresh Meat productions, because he sees lesbian, trans, feminist, anti-racist, fat positives and disability rights movements as inter-related. He sees gay, lesbian, intersex and genderqueer artists — like himself — as using their work to agitating for social change.

In the way that he sees his work mirroring his activism and art, Dorsey argues that other transgender artists also work to change the current culture. “Transgender people are enriching the cultural landscape of this country in ways unforeseen,” Dorsey says. He believes the impetus for that work is the transition process itself.

“When you have to go through such an intense process of self-examination and soul searching to ‘come out’ as trans, you are blessed with a level of consciousness and depth of life experience that can translate into extraordinary art. Trans people have a lot to say. We speak truths and stories [people] can all relate to. That’s what my goal as an artist is.”

Dorsey brings his Outsider Chronicles show to New York’s July Fresh Fruit Festival, and he is looking for other theaters and festivals play host to his brand of dance-activism.