

ON TAP MAGAZINE



Photo: Lydia Daniller

BOYS IN TROUBLE Tackles Toxic Masculinity Through Dance

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BOYS IN TROUBLE is a dance performance, but it's not only a dance performance. The show is radically different than what most modern dance is – abstract movements perpetually difficult to follow for the untrained eye. Instead, this piece is based on storytelling, and it's deeply understandable and relatable.

“The first thing people need to know is it's not boring modern dance,” choreographer Sean Dorsey says. “Most people feel like they don't ‘get’ modern dance, and for good reason. It's pretty inaccessible!”

The actual product isn't the only aspect that sets *BOYS IN TROUBLE* apart from what you might normally see at Brookland's [Dance Place](#), the show's DC host on May 19 and 20. Much like Dorsey's other works, the project focuses on masculinity from a transgender and queer viewpoint.

“We do this through full-throttle dance, highly-physical theatre and vulnerable storytelling,” Dorsey says. “One minute we’re flying through the air doing super technical and rigorous dancing, the next minute we’re delivering dialogue and irreverent humor, and the next minute we’re doing movement with storytelling.”

This kind of subject matter is a reflection of previous works by Dorsey, who is seemingly unanimously titled the first acclaimed transgender modern dance choreographer. His company [Sean Dorsey Dance](#) is located in San Francisco.

“As a trans person, I grew up without ever seeing a single other transgender modern dancer, let alone a choreographer. I’ve been so alone on this journey in many ways, all the while facing harsh barriers, judgement and questions from the world. This project pushed me to unleash some defiant energy and righteous, proud anger – and sass.”

With the titles and recognition, Dorsey feels a deep sense of responsibility, creating a huge amount of pressure each time he begins to craft a new work.

“I had to dance myself into being. I had to insert trans bodies and stories into dance. I care so deeply for my people – for my trans and gender-nonconforming communities – that I often take on too much, and work too hard.”

A piece with this kind of emotional weight doesn’t form overnight; Dorsey began initial research on the project three years ago. A year later, he began hosting free community forums on masculinity, led transgender-supportive dance classes and taught self-expression workshops for anyone willing to partake.

“The themes that arose in these communities guided me as I built the show, which is also built around the dancers’ own experiences and life histories,” he says. “After working for two years creating a show, you wait for a moment when you *know* that the piece is complete. There were several deep themes related to masculinity that I really, really wanted and needed to get into – sections that explore shame, body shame and questions of self-worth. These lie under everything that is toxic about masculinity.”

While the process of developing what would eventually become *BOYS IN TROUBLE* began years ago, Dorsey is not surprised that the topics he chooses to tackle are still wholly relevant to society. In his view, these issues have perpetually existed within society’s collective subconsciousness.

“When I started this project, I could not have imagined how timely and even more urgent it would become. Here’s the thing. Toxic masculinity, racism and white supremacy, transphobia, body shame and gender norms – none of these things are new. These things have plagued us ever since this country was founded on invasion, genocide, slavery, segregation, internment, and the criminalization of trans and queer bodies and love.”

All of Dorsey's dance is uniquely educational about the transgender experience and has been performed all around the country on several tours, but he still feels a lack of acceptance from his own community on a wider scale. Though his work is routinely critically acclaimed and celebrated, he still sees barriers within the medium – walls he hopes to eradicate, one piece at a time.

“In ways, the dance field has not changed,” he says. “The field still actively excludes trans and gender-nonconforming people. I am now asking the field to call this a crisis. The barriers are massive and numerous. My national education program, TRANSform Dance, addresses these, and through trainings, workshops and performances, we are working with the field to change.”

One of those performances is *BOYS IN TROUBLE*, and Dorsey is excited for the District to see his work.

“If you love the theatre, I guarantee you will be moved deeply and laugh out loud. You will leave with your heart cracked open and transformed. It's a very, very powerful show.”

BOYS IN TROUBLE will be performed at Dance Place on Saturday, May 19 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, May 20 at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$15-\$30. Learn more at www.danceplace.org.

Dance Place: 3225 8th St. NE, DC; 202-269-1600; www.danceplace.org