

Sean Dorsey Dance premiere's AIDS work at Bates Dance Festival

Emily Darby / Special to the Sun Journal

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'The Missing Generation' tells a story of pain and anguish in the AIDS crisis

They put their hands on their hearts at the end of an afternoon lesson. And they listened.

They listened to lyrically transporting cello undertones. They listened to raw voices tell unheard stories from an era before they were born. They listened to their master instructor's encouraging words that gave them permission to listen to themselves.

And as they moved their bodies to layered stories, they listened to their own hearts. And then they felt the stories.

These young dancers from across the country recently arrived at Bates College to participate in the Young Dancers Workshop as part of the annual Bates Dance Festival. They expected to learn technique and to refine their art. However, they found that they have become part of the story brought to the festival by Sean Dorsey, a transgender artist who believes in the beauty of truth and human beings.

Dorsey's work, "The Missing Generation," combines music and the spoken word with theater and modern dance to tell the first-hand gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, and spirit-lifting stories from the deadly AIDS epidemic years of the late 1980s. In addition to premiering his show on the east coast with his dance company at Bates on July 16 and 18, Dorsey has been teaching young dancers during the 6-week festival.

"I never thought to do that before – to give it love," said Claire Moberg, 14, from Ohio. "You can tell that this topic is important to (Sean). It's so intense and he's so enthusiastic and passionate."

"With regular music, the beat makes it obvious when to move," said Gabriella Poulin, 14, from Saco, ME. "With the words, you really have to listen to know when to breathe, when to step. Your movements mean something. This has been more like a rehearsal setting than a workshop."

Dorsey, who is in his 10th year of Sean Dorsey Dance in San Francisco and has received countless awards and accolades, has long been an advocate of GLBT causes and issues. He observed the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling legitimizing gay marriage as more of a change in attitude than one of law.

“You know that the gay marriage movement was actually born from the painful experiences of partners during the AIDS crisis,” said Dorsey. He continued to lament that so many people were blocked at the hospital door or never got to attend a funeral or even knew when the person they loved actually died.

Dorsey’s own decision to come out as a transgender person and social advocate preceded his first ballet class and foray into serious dance. He knew that he wanted to bring attention and change to the issues he and others experience.

“I loved music, and theater, and writing,” said Sean. “Carol Burnett was my hero. But in terms of my own identity, I saw myself as an advocate for social justice and didn’t really consider art as an option.”

Then something clicked. A few dance classes in college, a few auditions, a few performances led to the realization that art can be a powerful social tool. Sean has received several National Endowment for the Arts commissions and three Isadora Duncan Dance awards among many other honors.

Laura Faure, director of the Bates Dance Festival, has understood and championed the power of art for a long time. Bates is the lead commissioner among five others for Dorsey’s latest work.

“I’m always looking for good work and new artists,” said Faure. “And I’m interested in work about relevant social themes dealing with the human condition. Sean and I are interested in this story. There is a generation now that doesn’t know what happened during the AIDS crisis. His work celebrates the survivors and activists.”

Dorsey remembers meeting Faure about five years ago and then a year later bouncing off ideas that evolved into “The Missing Generation.”

“She was super supportive,” said Dorsey. “I remember talking about some of my ideas of wanting to tell this story. She asked, ‘Have you got a commissioner?’ and she became a champion and a cheerleader. She is so important to the national scene and has been responsible for so many careers.”

Dorsey, now 42, spent about two and a half years researching and creating “The Missing Generation.” He began by reading volumes of letters and personal papers archived in the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. He then set out across the country to meet these people and to hear and record their stories.

After spending hundreds of hours culling through hundreds of hours of

tape, Dorsey collaborated with a team of composers that includes cellist Alex Kelly to write the score. Weaving in narration and body movements, Dorsey created a work that treats the suffering, grieving, and healing experiences of AIDS victims and survivors with a stark tenderness that celebrates human compassion and resilience. Along with Brian Fisher of Maine, ArVejon Jones, and Nol Simonse, Dorsey brings a multigenerational and emotion laden performance to the stage of Schaeffer Theater at Bates College.