

Sean Dorsey writes a love letter to 'The Missing Generation'

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"The Secret History of Love," by Sean Dorsey Dance 2013.

In the 10 years since founding a dance company, **Sean Dorsey**, who is transgender, has garnered national attention for heartfelt dance theater that draws on extensive research to tell stories of queer cultural history. Dorsey's 2013 work, "The Secret History of Love," grew from a two-year collaboration with the LGBT Elders Oral History Project and toured to 20 U.S. cities.

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His newest, “The Missing Generation,” was commissioned by such prestigious supporters as the Bates Dance Festival and the National Dance Project, and involved a year and a half of traveling the country to hold community residencies and record conversations with witnesses and survivors of the early AIDS outbreak in the 1980s — people who knew the generation that Dorsey fears will become missing if their experiences are not remembered. “The Missing Generation” opens May 14.

Q: How did you decide upon the focus of this show?

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A: When I was recording interviews with queer elders for “The Secret History of Love,” it became painfully obvious early on that there were so many members of that generation that I could not interview, because so many had died in the epidemic. And also, transgendered stories were completely missing from the mainstream AIDS narrative. That was important to me, to bring in the realities of trans women. Even today, they have so many challenges and so few resources. Many hospices won’t accept trans women, and many women’s shelters (won’t either).

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Q: Who are some of the 25 interview subjects you spoke with?

A: In Washington, D.C., I got to meet **Ron Swanda**, an important activist for gay elder issues, advocating for seniors who may have to go back into the closet as they move into elder care facilities. I also interviewed **Billy Jones-Hennin**, a legendary D.C. activist who founded the first black HIV organizations and an overwhelmingly warm and humorous person. In New York, I spoke with **Kate Bornstein**, an internationally celebrated transgender performer, and **Javon Egyptt**, who told me about trans rights and police accountability.

Also in New York, I spoke to **Jeff Jones**, one of the first responders to the epidemic. I also got to talk to his sister, **Patricia Jones**, who dropped everything and moved to San Francisco when word started coming out about the strange new illness. She was one of Kaiser’s first HIV case managers. She was giving people their test results during that horrible period when if you were positive, there was nothing to do about it.

Q: What surprised you most during these interviews?

A: How important it was to people to explain the context of their lives before the epidemic hit. So many queer people had come to a new city to start a new life and choose a family, to create a community where they could finally be safe. And not long after they made those communities, they started losing everyone.

Javon told me an especially poignant story about how she came to New York because her family had literally said, “You can’t stay here.” She found trans people hanging out in **Penn Station**. And she met her “gay mother,” that person who takes you under a wing and helps you navigate the world. Kiki said, “I like you, I’m going to look out for you.”

So in the show we hear their story. Like so many trans women who face constant employment discrimination, Javon had to do sex work to survive. Kiki tells her how to stay safer, what to beware of in a client. Kiki kept on her about always using condoms because Kiki was sick. Javon said, “I’m alive today because Kiki kept me safe.”

Q: Your cast includes **Brian Fisher, whom you’ve worked with for seven years, and **Nol Simonse**, whom you’ve worked with for six. How does that effect what you can do onstage together?**

A: We get a lot of audience feedback on the trust people see onstage between us. Brian and Nol are such mature and deep performers in both their dance technique and their emotional presence — which this work demands. You have to know what real feeling is behind every gesture, how that translates to your eye focus, or tiny aspects of posture. We’re also happy to welcome A.J. (Arvejon Jones) this season. He was an instant family fit.

Q: I’m sure that connection is important in a show this intense.

A: It is. There is less humor in this show than in my previous work. At first I thought, “How will we get through this?” But over and over the people I interviewed made clear they just need people to show up and listen and stand close. It has been an intense journey to hold these horrific and heartbreaking stories. I hope I’ve done so with respect and heart. My guiding idea is that I want this to be a love letter to this generation.

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Sean Dorsey Dance: “The Missing Generation” will be performed at 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, May 14-15; 4 and 8 p.m. Saturday, May 16; and 4 and 7 p.m. next Sunday, May 17. \$15-\$25. Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St., San Francisco. (415) 826-4411. <http://themissinggeneration.brownpapertickets.com>.

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