Seeing in the Dark: Dance show gives voice to early AIDS epidemic

by Belo Cipriani

While some parts of our LGBT past have been well documented and have made their mark in American history, there are still several LGBT events and stories that have not been given the attention and dedication they deserve by our society at large. One of these often-overlooked segments of LGBT history is the early AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s.

"Our culture has turned its back on the early AIDS epidemic," said Sean Dorsey, the founder and artistic director of Fresh Meat Productions, the nation's first transgender arts nonprofit, and Sean Dorsey Dance. "Young people simply aren't being taught about this incredibly important period in American history."

Dorsey, a San Francisco-based trans man and award-winning dancer – Sean Dorsey Dance picked up an Izzie Award last month – has put together a thought-provoking and gorgeous production that gracefully captures the experiences of survivors of the AIDS epidemic. Part intimate storytelling and part highly physical theater, The Missing Generation places us back into the loss and chaos that was that time, while painting a mesmerizing tribute.

"The Missing Generation project is about attuning ourselves to and attending to these longtime survivors – lovingly witnessing and holding and listening and connecting," said Dorsey.

The 25 transgender and LGBT survivors featured in the production took time to find, and Dorsey spent a year traveling the country looking for early AIDS activists, early health care workers, and leading trans AIDS activists.

"Every single person I asked said a resounding 'yes' to being interviewed," said Dorsey.

Some conditions, such as HIV and AIDS, can lead to other disabilities, and Dorsey definitely found this to be true as he collected the 75 hours of oral history in which survivors shared their own experiences, as well as the experiences of close friends, on the physical implications of the virus in their bodies.

"In the early years, many people developed cytomegalovirus (CMV), which often led to blindness," Dorsey said.

Disability interpretation in the arts is something that greatly matters to Dorsey, and influenced some of the artistic decisions for the show. He explained, "It was an important task for me as a choreographer to find ways for us to move, partner, and speak onstage and embody and express these stories in a way that was authentic ... without, of course, pretending that we 'are' the people we interviewed. It became about being deeply vulnerable as performers and finding the most truthful gesture, breath, every moment. Being true to these people that honored us with their stories."

Dorsey is also looking into providing audio description services for the blind and closed captioning for the hearing impaired for the shows, as well as for the places where the production will be archived.

The Missing Generation project is a true labor of love and was funded by several cities and communities, such as Bates Dance Festival, Queer Cultural Center (San Francisco), Dance Place (Washington, D.C.), 7 Stages (Atlanta), and the Theater Offensive.
Additionally, during the production of this project, Dorsey became the first transgender dance artist to be awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which also supported the production. *The Missing Generation* is going on a two-year, 20-city tour. In San Francisco, it will be performed at Z-Space, 450 Florida Street, from May 5-7. For other locations, visit [www.FreshMeatProductions.org](http://www.FreshMeatProductions.org).

_Belo Cipriani is a freelance journalist, the award-winning author of Blind: A Memoir and Midday Dreams, and a spokesman for Guide Dogs for the Blind. He was voted best disability advocate in the Bay Area in 2015 by SF Weekly. Learn more at [BeloCipriani.com](http://BeloCipriani.com)._