

ADF Preview: An Oral History of the Early AIDS Crisis Becomes Dance in Sean Dorsey's *The Missing Generation*

Posted by Byron Woods on Wed, Jul 5, 2017 at 11:54 AM

What drives someone to devote well over a thousand hours of research, editing, and rehearsal to a single dance? For trans choreographer Sean Dorsey, who makes his American Dance Festival debut this week with *The Missing Generation*, part of it was the realization of how much even he, a longtime activist and a self-avowed “history nerd”, didn’t know about the time when the LGBTQ community faced its most existential threat.

Dorsey had based an earlier dance, *Lou*, on the diaries of Lou Sullivan, a pioneering female-to-male trans activist, author, and editor, who was one of the founding members of the GLBT Historical Society of San Francisco.

“As I was doing that, I was struck by how the trans narrative in the history of HIV/AIDS has been completely silenced,” Dorsey says. When we remember that era, we tend to think of gay or bisexual cisgender men. “But that’s because the transgender women of that time were decimated. It was almost impossible to change your name legally and there was so much employment discrimination that, for many trans women of color, there was literally no choice but to starve or do survival sex work. That’s how so many contracted the virus.”

In a later work, *The Secret History of Love*, Dorsey found remarkable stories of underground gay communities from the fifties while recording oral histories with LGBTQ elders. But he hit a wall while researching the late seventies.

“There was a whole swath of a generation I could not talk to because we lost them during the early years of the epidemic,” Dorsey recalls. “I do a lot of research, but despite my own work, my own activism, and my own life experience, there was still so much I didn’t know.”



photo by Lydia Daniller

Sean Dorsey Dance: *The Missing Generation*
Wednesday, July 5 & Thursday, July 6, 8 p.m., \$10-\$27
Reynolds Industries Theater, Durham

As a result, the choreographer felt called to find the survivors from the earliest years of the AIDS crisis and tell their stories. He collected seventy-five hours of oral histories while traveling around the country. He devoted a year to transcribing, researching, and editing that testimony, working with four composers, into a score for an evening-length dance work. Choreography followed, attempting to place the truths of those lives in the bodies of four dancers. *The Missing Generation* is the result.

“Our culture has turned its back on the early epidemic and its survivors,” he says. “We don’t talk about it. It isn’t taught.” That poses a “literal life-and-death danger” to the current LGBTQ generation. “When we forget or lose sight of our history, we begin to take our safety, our human rights, and each other for granted. We don’t realize that every single resource and liberty we enjoy as trans and queer people today was fought for, tooth and nail, by these ancestors and survivors.”

Those advances were made in the face of ongoing governmental attempts to pass legislation making discrimination against LGBTQ people legal, and that threat has not stopped. In losing LGBTQ history, we risk losing bonds of solidarity that were difficult to forge between lesbians and gays, trans and non-trans, and straight and gay people.

“These alliances were hard-won,” Dorsey says. “They were formed over the bodies of our friends.” LGBTQ history can “give us a roadmap and resistance and organizing tools that were developed through the civil rights movement. Lose the history, and you lose the strategies. Lose the strategies, and you lose the battle.”