

EAST BAY EXPRESS

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Fresh Meat's Oakland DNA

As transgender art organization has evolved, many of its artists have relocated to The Town.

By [D. Scot Miller](#)



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AXIS Dance Company.

"It's difficult finding spaces for black transwomen in general," she said. "Fresh Meat welcomed me and my work with open arms and I have been performing with them ever since."

This year, Star is the featured headliner, and just as her music has transformed from acoustic vocals to internationally acclaimed Electronica (under the name Ah-Ma-Ra-Su, with a new album, *Luminescent Bodies*, due out in August, [The Fresh Meat Festival](#) has evolved into more than just a night of queer performance.

"Lifting Star up as a really important, incredibly talented artist as she continues to be a role model, while still remaining cutting edge as an activist and organizer, just makes us super excited for her," said Sean Dorsey, the founder and artistic director of Fresh Meat Productions. "It's been really a blessing to witness her artistic journey, and to have the opportunity to present her work over the years. It's been so, so, so, so wonderful."



Axis Dance Company

Founded in 2002, Fresh Meat began as a space for transgender and queer performance but since that time has expanded to become Fresh Meat Productions, a year-round arts organization that both invests in and nurtures the burgeoning transgender arts community; provides mentorship, training, and leadership; and is at the forefront of this rapidly growing transgender artist movement. It now helps artists create and perform new works, has conducted community engagement programs in more than thirty-five cities, and has a national advocacy program (TRANSform Dance) that provides resources, education, and leadership development in order to advance trans equity in Dance.

The 2019 Fresh Meat Festival promises vogue superstars, deaf dance pioneers, bachata dancers, trans-Americana rock, a queer retro-rock boy band, and a gender-defying choir. But what is most interesting about this year's San Francisco event is how many of the artists call Oakland home.

Along with Oakland resident Star Amarasu, Oakland's integrated/disabled dance pioneers AXIS Dance Company, vogue superstars #KnowSHADE Vogue Ensemble, queer bachata champions Jahaira Fajardo & Angelica Medina, comedian Lottie Riot, R&B singer Tajah J, and the queer retro quartet The Singing Bois, all dial out from the 510.

"A majority of our audience is based in the East Bay," Dorsey said. "This is where transgender, non-gender-conforming, and queer artists' communities live. San Francisco has chased out so many communities of color, and migrant communities, disabled trans who have been evicted. So, our gathering is both a testament to the depth and breadth of brilliant artistic communities based in the East Bay and our communities' larger mission."

Dancer Jahaira Fajardo agrees. "Fresh Meat has created a space for Queer and Trans folks to celebrate our expressive selves and has given us a platform to share our artistic gifts," Fajardo said. "Angelica and I were honored to be asked to perform at the Fresh Meat Festival in 2017. This year will be our third-year attending. Becoming a part of Fresh Meat

for us is incredibly meaningful because it's an event where we get to be ourselves unapologetically. For us personally, it's a space that recharges us every year.

"For us this has been a cathartic and healing experience. As a community we thrive by seeing reflections of ourselves on that stage," she said.

Over the years, Fresh Meat Productions has constantly evolved and re-invented itself to meet the changing, and increasingly threatening times — as of this writing, eight black transwomen have been brutally murdered across the country over the last six months, with no end in sight — and this year called for an even greater commitment to the community and the cause.

"We need a battery-recharge right now," Dorsey said. "As we, as community, continue to live under this white-supremacist, trans-phobic administration. We carefully and lovingly chose the artists we wanted to lift this year who are establishing a working relationship between their bodies and the audience in her own way. We really wanted people to have an embodied experience and get recharged as we continue this revolution. We also wanted to emphasize the joy and love that comes from sharing that experience."

Singer-songwriter Shawna Virago, an essential element to not just Fresh Meat, but to the trans-artistic community, has been a trailblazer for more than twenty years. As Dorsey's partner in the organization, she also sees what they do as a beautiful struggle.

"When I think back to when the festival started," she said, "I could never have imagined the public scope that transgender issues are receiving, including the constant attacks on our rights from the President of the United States, proving why this festival is more relevant than ever — and creating a place for trans/GNC folks to share our art and gather safely in community."



Star Amarasu