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This Choreographer Is Blazing a Trail for Trans Artists Through Dance

“Dance has the power to heal, to liberate, and to transform culture.”

BY

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Lydia Daniller

Over the past two decades, Sean Dorsey has cemented his legacy as a visionary trailblazer in the world of dance. His work as an award-winning dancer, choreographer, and trans activist illuminates trans and gender non-conforming experience through innovative movement and multi-media performance. He was the first American trans dance artist presented by The Joyce Theatre in New York, and the first to be awarded grant support from the National Endowment for the Arts. His

company Fresh Meat Productions is committed to supporting and producing the boundary-pushing work of transgender and gender-nonconforming creatives.

“Dance has the power to heal, to liberate, and to transform culture,” Dorsey tells *them*. His mission-driven choreography is rooted in research, activism, and empathy. His groundbreaking work “The Missing Generation” features movement inspired by over 75 hours of dialogue with LGBTQ+ survivors of the AIDS epidemic. His latest piece, “Boys in Trouble,” likewise draws on recorded interviews, this time from his two-year exploration of what masculinity means to people across the country.

“This work places a trans and queer lens onto intersectional questions around contemporary American masculinity: embodiment, violence, Black queer love, whiteness, shame, posturing, and much more,” Dorsey says. As he tours “Boys in Trouble” around the U.S., Dorsey sat down with *them*. to discuss his creative development, the impetus behind his latest piece, and his mission to make dance a more radically inclusive artform.



Lydia Daniller

How did you express yourself growing up?

I didn't see anyone like me in the dance community, [but] I was a very creative kid. Even at a young age, I immersed myself in the arts: I wrote stories, studied theater, learned piano, and made music. I loved observing how humor and performance connected people.

My upbringing drives my artistic practice and activism today: I'm passionate about making dances that lift up LGBTQ+ stories, experiences, and bodies. I'm also passionate about advocating to create supportive space onstage and in leadership for trans/gender-nonconforming communities through Fresh Meat Productions, the nonprofit I founded 17 years ago.

How would you describe "Boys in Trouble" ?

"Boys in Trouble" investigates contemporary American masculinity. I'm a dance-theater artist, so the show is a fusion of full-throttle dance, intimate storytelling, exquisite queer partnering, highly physical theater, and a good dose of trans/queer sass and humor. The show is both a physical and emotional marathon to perform. I hope people leave the theater transformed in some way.

Something that challenged me about this particular project was learning to be more okay taking up space with my own story. Much of my career has been dedicated to lifting up other people's stories (for example, my last work "The Missing Generation"). I've spent a long time internalizing [social messaging] that my trans body and stories don't matter. I'm still teaching myself how to "un-learn" that.

What have you learned from sharing "Boys in Trouble" with the world?

I keep hearing from audiences that people [of different bodies and identities] deeply relate to shared experiences of shame, violence, and the deep craving for healing. The audience response to this work has been extraordinary. We're about halfway through a two-year, 20-city tour.

Back in 2002 [before Fresh Meat Productions], nobody would put transgender and gender-nonconforming artists on stage. We were always relegated to perform in bars or the noisy corners of cafes. I brought together a group of artists and activists to put on the first Fresh Meat Festival of trans and queer performance, and the community's response led us to transform into a year-round arts organization. I'm overall just so proud and in awe of [what we've accomplished]. We have supported more than 500 trans/gnc/queer artists and put more than \$1 million directly into their hands.



Lydia Daniller

What else do you think the dance community could be doing to be more inclusive?

In too many ways, the dance field is still transphobic, racist, and ableist. My fierce desire to change this drives my creative process more than anything. The fact that gender-nonconforming creative expression and cultural leadership are constantly, actively excluded from the field needs to be immediately addressed.

Most of the time on tour with my own dance company, or traveling to speak at a conference, there's nowhere that's legally or physically safe for me to pee as a trans person. The leadership and artistry of Black trans women and trans femmes of color is ignored, dismissed, and censored by the dance

field. Backstages of theaters and entrances to stages aren't accessible for wheelchair users. There are layers and layers of barriers and harm being done.

Dance has no gender! Our blood, muscles, ligaments, bones and breath have no gender. So why the hell does the old guard of dance leadership keep enforcing racist, ableist, binary-gender constructs on our bodies, choreography, costuming, partnering, gestures, bathrooms, changing rooms, and more?

What types of stories are you interested in telling in the future?

My next project, "The Lost Art of Dreaming," [imagines] expansive futures through transgender, gender-nonconforming, and queer lenses. Along with creating a new show, I'm also going to travel the country to host Dream Labs — free creative workshops and spaces where folks are invited to dance, move, write, sing, craft, and creatively express.

I'm also excited [to continue] teaching and speaking. I really love the work I'm involved in and I want it to reach as many people as possible.

Interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Online: <https://www.them.us/story/sean-dorsey-dance-choreography-interview>