

BODIES OF WORK

M A G A Z I N E

TRANS/GENDER VARIANT ARTISTS & WRITERS

INTERVIEW WITH DANCER SEAN DORSEY



(Sean Dorsey - Photo by Lydia Daniller)

Sean: Hi Morty!

Morty: Hi Sean! Are you ready?

Sean: I am.

Morty: When were your earliest moments of thinking 'I'd like to be a professional dancer'?

Sean: I always loved dance with every cell and bone in my body, but did not see myself ever having a career in dance. I performed as an actor and did a lot of theater and music as a kid. It wasn't until I was in graduate school (Masters in Community Economic Development) that I considered tearing myself away from my "serious" activism to let myself take a "year off" and go to dance school. I started dancing professionally almost right away - but even then didn't realize what was happening to my life! That is, my life became beautifully taken over with dance before I could get in the way and stop it....

Morty: That sounds like a very sweet story.

Sean: But I certainly never saw *any* role models of queer, gender-variant or queer dancers out there that made me think that my body dancing professionally was possible....

Morty: So, looking for differently gendered bodies in dance was part of the impetus to stick with it?

Sean: While so much of my soul and identity and heart has been wrapped up in what we traditionally call 'activism', truly the 'impetus' for me dancing was that I loved to dance, loved dance, was moved by dance and felt it moved me (and people) viscerally like no other medium could. This was also at the core impetus for making my own work — I was passionate about telling body-stories and about pairing text and dancing and queer/trans experience right from the start. Because of this there was an issue with the director of my dance school. She pulled me in to her office after a showcase of student work and told me my queer duet made people feel "uncomfortable"! Part of my impetus for making work certainly was that I didn't see my community's stories or bodies on the stage or in any dances I saw or knew of. A lonely place for sure at that time.

Morty: She made you feel like an outcast for the queer content of your work?

Sean: The Director of the school didn't mention anything about the queer content of the work — but she was definitely saying between the lines: this queer subtext, this queer text (literally queer text and narration in the sound score) makes us uncomfortable. I felt lonely because I didn't know anybody else in the whole world who was like me, who either danced or made dances.

Morty: It sounds like, from the beginning, you were able to see, first hand, how charged art can be for some people — do you see making your art as political?

Sean: First and foremost, I see myself as a professional artist who has a broad, diverse audience of both activists and mainstream dance-lovers. This is important to me, that my work reach and speak to all of these people. I do see my art as political, and I do consider myself a cultural activist. I have learned that making dances (and running [Fresh Meat Productions](#), my nonprofit that presents year-round transgender and queer arts programs) is the most powerful and effective form of activism I can offer the world.

Right from the beginning I began to understand how charged and how political art is. People can have a knee-jerk or defensive reaction when they hear that a piece of art is "political". But here's the thing: all art is political! Because all art has a point of view — whether it's conscious of it or not. The problem is just that a lot of art is not honest about either a) its point of view or b) the vantage point of the art-maker. So, if the art is about / from the perspective of straight, white, able-bodied, legally documented, etc, people ... then that can be beautiful art, but it runs a greater risk of not being conscious of its own vantage point.

This is why I love trans and queer art! Art that comes from trans, queer, people of color, immigrant, people with disabilities communities often comes from artists who have had to think so much about their place in the world (or lack thereof). There is a gorgeous depth and consciousness that we can reach, I think, more easily than other folks.

Morty: How do you stay conscious of your own vantage point in your work?

Sean: I would like to say that things have changed faster than they actually have but I am still often painfully aware of my own vantage point in my work as a trans and queer artist because there are still so few of us. When I moved to San Francisco I was like "Yes! I'm coming to where all the trans dancers must be." And then it was like being the first person to arrive at the party. Awkward! Scary!

Morty: So you didn't meet any other trans dancers when you began in San Francisco?

Sean: Indeed. I arrived here and was so excited to meet my peers ...and I literally didn't meet another trans-identified dancer until years later. I was thrilled, however, to meet transgender writers, theater artists and musicians. Well, thrilled is an understatement since I met and married a particularly gifted musician: [Shawna Virago](#). I think that there are actually lots of transpeople who are dancers, in their hearts and minds and spirits - but the world is still such that it is very unsafe for gender non-conforming people to even think about setting foot in a dance class, yoga class, gym, dance show. Going to these places assumes a level of personal power, cultural power, personal confidence and physical safety that most trans and genderqueer people don't have. I teach beginning dance classes geared especially for transgender and genderqueer and queer people (and their friends). I haven't taught any in the Bay Area, I mostly do it on tour, but I should bring this to the Bay!



(Shawna Virago - Photo by Lydia Daniller)

Morty: Yes! You really should! Can you give readers, for those who aren't aware who your wife is, a little "Shawna Virago 101"?

Sean: My love, my partner Shawna Virago is someone that your readers will want to know! Shawna is a genius singer-songwriter - she's a transwoman, a brilliant guitarist and singer. She is sexy as hell, and a fierce pioneering activist. Her songs are a powerful fusion of Americana, folk-punk and roots. She is a very passionate, powerful woman and her songs explore many sides of trans and queer experience: police abuse, love and relationships, objectification, road songs.... She is genius and should be checked out right now! (Go to [www.shawnavirago.com](#)). You can buy her new album "[Objectified](#)" on her website, too. Shawna is also a writer and a filmmaker, whose films have screened around the world. And she is the Director of the [San Francisco Transgender Film Festival!](#) And she composes for my own work. How does she do it all? She is a Renaissance Goddess...

Morty: That is a jaw-dropping description!

Sean: Shawna also performs in my new show '[The Secret History Of Love](#)' - she is our very special musical guest and she nails it!

Morty: Alright, this is what I really want to talk about. Your new performance - The Secret History Of Love - please give us a little peak...how did you begin and get inspiration from?

Sean: [The Secret History Of Love](#) is a full-length dance-theater show that reveals the ways that LGBT people manage to find — and LOVE — each other in decades past. The show is based on oral histories I recorded with LGBT elders, and we have 2 years of archival research and a lot of reading! The show is jam-packed with luscious, full-bodied dancing; theater; storytelling and gorgeous music (I work with a brilliant team of composers). You could call my work "choreo-telling": we dance to music and also to stories and narration. This is not abstract "I-don't-get-it" modern dance. These are real stories rooted in real people, real characters, real emotions. Powerful and understandable! And moving! You hear the actual voices of these amazing LGBT elders in the soundscore.

I started working on this show during my last production '[Uncovered: The Diary Project](#)' which also explored historic themes. It featured excerpts from real-life diaries of trans and queer people. The centerpiece dance "Lou" was based on the lifelong journals of pioneering transman Lou Sullivan, who died of AIDS in 1991. Themes of loss were an important part of the show but were especially intense for me, since I spent a year reading and hand-transcribing Lou's diaries. As I got to know him more, and came closer to what I knew was his impending decline and death, the depth of the loss was very intense for me. And then expressing that every night in the show! And on tour...I was ready for love! Actually, there was a lot of love in that show too, but I was ready for more love!

I also am inspired by the fact that I am in a loving, creative, mindful, artistic relationship...Shawna and I just celebrated our ten year anniversary! So I was ready to explore love, and uncover our buried history of how on Earth we queer and trans people managed to meet and love and connect through all those decades of intense repression and violence...And to share our love and our victories!



(Still from Sean's new show: [The Secret History Of Love](#) - Photo by Lydia Daniller)

Morty: You put so much time into the research aspect of The Secret History Of Love, its really astonishing. And you seem to love storytelling from a historical perspective. Why does the preservation of LGBT history mean so much?

Sean: The Secret History Of Love is truly a labour of love. It is the culmination of a two-year research process and my national LGBT Elders Oral History Project. Yes! This process has been long and enormous, larger than I even imagined.

I am passionate about documenting, preserving and sharing LGBT history: it's up to us to do this, because no one else will. Our lives, our bodies, our stories, our history are generally left out of family albums and history books. And yet: we are amazing, powerful, creative, passionate, zany, brilliant, trailblazing, loving people! Our stories and bodies and lives are wonderful, inspiring, glorious, mundane, and extraordinary. Future generations deserve to know about us all. And our ancestors deserve us remembering them.

It is shocking how much we forget already — how much things have changed. And we forget our leaders and quiet heroes. These people made my life possible, and made my art-making possible. It feels like a glorious circle that I can now honor these voices, people, stories, history in my own work. History is also very much alive and relevant today - so many of these stories are very timely, and all are very relevant to the lives and struggles and victories we have today.

Morty: That was a great answer, I couldn't agree more. So, I have to ask. I hope you don't mind that I do.... How do you make it work in your relationship with Shawna? Your relationship is so strong and loving and ten years is quite a long time! You two are also extremely busy!

Sean: Oh my yes, we have a lot going on! And, no, I don't mind this question at all! We are both working artists - we are constantly creating, performing and touring. We also both run nonprofits in the arts. What makes it work is: that we are both crazy in love with each other (more so every day); that we both approach relationship as a "practice" — something to do mindfully, consciously, lovingly; that we both are spiritual beings and embrace meditation and mindfulness as core practices of our life; that we are both political beings, our politics are at our hearts' core — and that we so closely share our political points of view; that we are passionate about both passion and fun and make sure to practice both of those; that we both have physical practices that both keep us in our bodies and keep us healthy (exercise, dance, yoga, cardio, etc); that we are both mindful of what we ingest (food, drink, information, media); that she is so so so damn sexy!

Morty: Whoa... I'm going to reread that a few times. That was beautiful. Ok, last few questions - my stock question is: do you call yourself a "trans artist" or does that feel too limiting?

Sean: Well, I am transgender, and I am proudly an artist - so I feel very comfy calling myself a "trans artist". I don't tend to say that — I probably say more often that I'm a choreographer and than I'm transgender...

Morty: Last one: What would you say to new and upcoming trans, queer, gender variant, intersex artists?

Sean: What I would say to new trans/queer artists wanting to get started with their art: YES! DO IT! You are important and beautiful and the world needs your voice! Never mind if you're the only person you know like you, or if you don't have any confidence! The most important thing is to START. Then: the most important thing is to start a practice. You have to make regular time for your creative self! It doesn't have to be at the same time every day or every week, but you must block out time on your calendar (or phone or gizmo) to you and to either art-making, or dreaming, or research, or going to the record store and being inspired by music, or doodling.

We ARE important enough to make art...and we are important enough to push ourselves to make good art. We deserve to be demanding of ourselves that we work hard, hone our skills, hone our craft, get feedback, and challenge ourselves to grow and learn as artists.

Morty: Sean, you rock! I really am looking forward to seeing your new show!

Sean: Morty, you rock! Oh, how you rock! I am so glad you are in the world and making glorious art and community!

Morty: Thank you, Sean!

Sean: Thank you so much!

To buy tickets to Sean's new show and to see more of his work please visit: [www.seandorseydance.com](#)

If you can, please donate to Sean's indieGoGo to help fund his new work, The Secret History Of Love: [http://www.indiegogo.com/THE-SECRET-HISTORY-OF-LOVE](#)

Watch the video trailer for Sean's new show: [THE SECRET HISTORY OF LOVE!](#)

Shawna Virago's website: [www.shawnavirago.com](#)

SEAN DORSEY THE SECRET HISTORY OF LOVE TRANS TRANSGENDER DANCER DANCE FTM MTF SHAWNA VIRAGO TRANSEXUAL GENDERQUEER GENDER GENDER VARIANT SAN FRANCISCO FRESH MEAT