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Art Talk with Sean Dorsey of Fresh Meat Productions

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Sean Dorsey. Photo by Lydia Daniller

"As a transgender and queer person, I didn't see anyone like me in dance. Ever. So how could I see my future there?" -- Sean Dorsey

When we think about Americans who lack abundant opportunities to see their stories on stage, we usually think about people of color or women. But LGBTQ Americans also face a glaring scarcity of opportunities to experience their own stories in the arts. For dancer and choreographer **Sean Dorsey** that lack has become an opportunity. Through **Fresh Meat Productions**, Dorsey presents dance and performance works that explore the historic and contemporary transgender and queer experience. For example, Dorsey's newest work-in-progress *The Missing Generation*, which is supported by an NEA Art Works grant, looks at the impact of the early years of the AIDS epidemic. We spoke with Dorsey via e-mail about how art works to bridge dance and activism.

NEA: What do you remember as your earliest engagement with the arts?

SEAN DORSEY: I remember dancing around the living room in my leotard, I remember putting on a play at my elementary school, I remember singing my heart out to my *Sesame Street Fever* and *Fame* records. I loved writing, I loved dancing, I loved music, and I loved theater! Carol Burnett and then Michael Jackson were my childhood heroes.

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NEA: What was your career path to becoming a dancer and choreographer?

DORSEY: I loved dance *enormously*, but didn't have much formal training as a child--a "shake your tambourine" ballet class here, a jazz class there. But I did immerse myself in theater and acting. I was part of a youth theater group for years.

I grew up identifying as an activist and saw my future in community organizing. I was passionate from a young age about justice and social justice. As a transgender and queer person, I didn't see *anyone* like me in dance. Ever. So how could I see my future there? Then I took some modern and ballet classes during my university years, and the instructors approached me and encouraged me to audition for the full-time program. "You could be a professional dancer," they told me. I was shaken. My whole path thus far had been built on the assumption that I'd "grow up" to be a community organizer.

So I auditioned. For two dance schools. And I got in to both!

I wanted to dance! I started to see that the arts could be the way that I could effect change in the world. So I went to dance school, starting dancing for a few companies right away, and starting making my own work. And then I moved to San Francisco.

NEA: What was the need that led to the creation of Fresh Meat Productions? What's the mission? What are some activities?

DORSEY: In the early part of the millennium, there was this incredible groundswell of transgender performance in San Francisco, really strong work--but nobody was putting transgender artists on the nation's stages. It's important that people know this history: despite all this great artistry, theaters wouldn't present transgender artists, funders and government wouldn't fund us, the media wouldn't write about our work, and we couldn't get access to high-production value theaters or audiences. If transgender artists got to perform, we were always relegated to the corner of a café or a bar.

Add to this the constant layers of discrimination transpeople face: employment and housing discrimination, street violence, police abuse, and no legal protections. There were, and still are, very high suicide rates in the trans community--that's what happens when you harm a community like that.

So in 2002 I brought together a group of artists and activists to put on what we thought would be a one-time event: the Fresh Meat Festival of transgender and queer performance at ODC Theater. I wanted there to be a dance-focused, multi-disciplinary performance festival that reflected our community and showcased the very highest level of artistry. The response was overwhelming--standing-room only [audiences], incredible praise from audiences and critics. There had never been anything like this before in the U.S.

We've grown from that first event staged by volunteers into the nation's first nonprofit creating, presenting, and touring award-winning year-round arts programs: Fresh Meat Productions is now in our 13th season. Our programs include the (still outrageously popular) Fresh Meat Festival of transgender and queer performance, resident dance company Sean Dorsey Dance's local and touring events, an arts services program, and community arts workshops and events. We're presenting the next Fresh Meat Festival this June.

NEA: On the Fresh Meat Productions website, it says you believe in "art as a powerful tool for social change." Can you talk about how you think art in general, and dance in particular, can speak about LGBTQ issues in ways that other modes can't?

DORSEY: Dance is the most visceral form of expression I know. It provides a direct line from the eye to the heart. When you see a body in motion, a body expressing story or emotion, it goes right to your heart. It bypasses the brain. So people that feel like they don't "get" LGBT or transgender issues come to see my work and leave with a new understanding and connection. And LGBT people get to see their bodies and lives reflected in award-winning dance and performance.

Transgender and queer people come up to me in tears after the show, saying it was the first time they'd seen someone like them on stage before, or the first time they'd ever seen their story on stage before. It's vital that we see ourselves reflected in art and culture. It affirms our worth and our value in the world. When transgender and queer people are erased from art and culture, our worth and value are erased.

Right now, Sean Dorsey Dance is on a 20-city tour across the US with our show *The Secret History Of Love*, which reveals the underground ways that LGBT people managed to survive and find love and community in decades past. I built the show through a national LGBT Elders Oral History Project.

In every city we tour to, we have sold-out audiences that are some of the most diverse you'll see anywhere: young hip queers, older heterosexual church-going couples, transgender youth, gay, and lesbian dance lovers, straight teens interested in theater or history. These are people that would *never* normally be in the same room! Never!

NEA: You just received an NEA Art Works grant to support *The Missing Generation*. What can you share with us about that project?

DORSEY: *The Missing Generation* will explore the contemporary impact of the loss of part of an entire generation of gay and transgender people to AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s. I am creating the work over a two-year period through oral history interviews with longtime survivors of the early epidemic, community

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residencies, and archival research. So far I've conducted oral history interviews and community residencies in San Francisco, Washington, DC, New York, and Atlanta. I'll be visiting more cities this fall.

The Missing Generation will premiere in April 2015 in San Francisco before touring to 15-20 cities. We've been blessed to receive NEA, National Dance Project, National Performance Network, and other major support for the work.

The show will feature full-throttle dancing, intimate storytelling, luscious partnering, highly physical theater, and a multi-layered score featuring actual voices and stories from these oral history interviews.

It's been a very, very, very powerful project. There's a way that our entire culture turned our back not just on the devastation of the early AIDS epidemic, but also on its survivors--who are often culturally isolated, unrecognized, and unsupported.

It's also important for me as a transgender artist to bring transgender histories into the AIDS narrative. Transwomen's communities have been devastated by AIDS but those stories are rarely told. I want to integrate these histories.

NEA: You work at the intersection of arts and activism. When you look across that landscape, what's missing? Where are the opportunity gaps?

DORSEY: Theaters and festivals across the U.S. need to program and present more openly transgender and queer artists. Your programming isn't right if it doesn't reflect the face of America.

Many presenters think of heterosexual artists as making "universal" works that everyone can relate to, and consider these works a safer bet. They see LGBT artists as making "niche" work that will be "hard to find an audience for." Nothing could be further from the truth! Good art is good art--period. A community that has endured tremendous hardship and struggle, that has had to be extraordinarily creative just to stay alive, never mind make art--*that* makes for good art. All of that struggle forges great consciousness and vibrant community and an incredible level of creativity. Finding the ability to speak across differences is how my community has stayed alive. *That's* universal.

NEA: You may know that "Art works" is a type of shorthand for us for our mission; it refers to works of art themselves, the way art works on us as human beings, and also the idea that art is work. How does that phrase "Art works" resonate for you?

DORSEY: Art allows us to imagine and build the world we want. The world I want is full of love and justice. And good art!

Art works when it embraces all of us, opens our hearts, expands our minds and creates community. That's my life's work through Sean Dorsey Dance and Fresh Meat Productions. It's very hard work, but it's profoundly rewarding work.

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