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Sean Dorsey Dance: Trans and Queer Perspectives on Masculinity

BY HEATHER DESAULNIERS



Sean Dorsey pushes himself in a different direction, unpacking contemporary masculinity with unflinching honesty.

Sean Dorsey Dance is known in the Bay Area performing arts ecosystem for bringing potent, powerful LGBTQ narratives to life on stage. Its recent projects have reached back in time to untold and often forgotten parts of LGBTQ history. In 2015, the troupe presented “The Missing Generation,” which recounted the

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early days of the AIDS epidemic, a time of deep loss and deeper love. In 2013, “The Secret History of Love” mined the vicious stigmatizing of gay, trans and queer intimacy, when many relationships had to be covert and yet, despite threats and violence, connection still thrived.

In his newest work, artistic director Sean Dorsey pushes himself in a different direction. “BOYS IN TROUBLE,” which premieres April 19 at Z Space, propels forward to present-day, unpacking contemporary masculinity with unflinching honesty and “from unapologetically trans and queer perspectives,” says Dorsey. “The audience gets treated to a suite of dances that feature giant, full-throttle movement, very irreverent humor, pure, vulnerable storytelling and exquisite queer partnering.” The piece explores many thematic strands—shame and trauma; bravery and vulnerability; tenderness and belonging—using an eclectic combination of theatrical devices, including text, sound and storytelling. Playfulness and humor also have a big role. Underpinning the work is Dorsey’s remarkable choreography that manages to stay rooted in modern technique while embodying an innovative, outside-the-box spirit.

Dorsey always takes a deep dive into the research and development phase with each project, taking advantage of the opportunity to gaze inward at his own journey, while also looking outward into the community. “BOYS IN TROUBLE” is no exception. “I was really interested in centering the project on the lens I bring as a trans person to the conversation around masculinity,” he explains. “Trans people have such rich and complex insight around gender, and it’s a perspective that we aren’t seeing in contemporary dance right now.” At the same time, Dorsey wanted the work to have a broad scope and include contributions from many voices. To that end, over the past two years he engaged communities around the country in a dialogue on gender and masculinity. “In several cities, I hosted forums, discussions about masculinity, and trans-supportive dance and movement workshops for folks on the masculine spectrum—trans guys, cis-gender gay men, non-binary people,” Dorsey relates. He also turned to the cast for collaboration, which for “BOYS IN TROUBLE” includes Brian Fisher, ArVejon Jones, Nol Simonse and Will Woodward. “Everyone has created movement, gesture and partnering, but with this piece, I wanted to deepen the collaborative

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process even further with writing exercises, conversations and personal histories of their journey in and of masculinity,” Dorsey explains. And while “BOYS IN TROUBLE” started percolating years ago, Dorsey is keenly aware of its topical urgency. “Who knew back then what additional layers of context would be added: the barrage of toxic masculinity in our climate, #MeToo, the increased attacks on LGBTQ rights from the current federal administration?”

“BOYS” marks a number of departures for Dorsey. Many of the company’s past works have been composed for a quartet of dancers, whereas “BOYS” is for five (Dorsey performs with Fisher, Jones, Simonse and Woodward). “I intentionally choose to create “BOYS IN TROUBLE” on a quintet; I wanted to push myself as a choreographer to think about how the masculinity narratives might unfold with five instead of four.” Dorsey is also approaching the relationship between movement and story with a fresh eye, at times melding the two together and in other instances—with stretches of more abstract choreography and segments of theatrical storytelling—letting each stand on its own. The result is a broad collage of vignettes woven together by this common theme of contemporary masculinity. One moment may bring a comical send-up of all things macho, while another, a technically rich pas de deux. Dorsey describes one particular duet as “a love letter” between queer black men. Danced by Jones and Woodward, this poignant section has already received a 2018 Isadora Duncan Award nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Performance-Ensemble.

While the subject matter and approach of BOYS IN TROUBLE may be different, the work follows Sean Dorsey Dance’s commitment to making art with a trans/queer framework as well as Dorsey’s desire to share relatable, relevant and resonant messages. “While creating hilarity and beauty, we want to ask some tough questions,” Dorsey says. “I hope that the work gives people a visceral, charged, emotional experience of the false, harmful truth that lies underneath gender constructs.”

“BOYS IN TROUBLE”

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Z Space / 450 Florida St., San Francisco