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San Francisco's Sean Dorsey Dance unpacks 'boy trouble'

By Claudia Bauer

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Photo: Lydia Daniller

"Boys in Trouble" combines dance, theater and humor to unpack masculinity in American culture.

Like any good storyteller, **Sean Dorsey** has a knack for distilling the universal from the specific. In contemporary dance-theater works like "The Secret History of Love" and "The Missing Generation," the San Francisco choreographer shone a literal spotlight on long-buried trans and queer

histories, in ways that both validated those communities and captured the essential beauty and anguish of human relationships.

He's doing it again with "Boys in Trouble," which Sean Dorsey Dance premieres on Thursday, April 19, at Z Space. The Canadian-born Dorsey, 45, who is trans, describes it as "unpacking masculinity from unapologetically trans and queer perspectives."

"Boys" is layered with poignant themes, from racism to gender identity to being "not like the others" in high school. A rehearsal viewing revealed Dorsey's signature mix of happiness, heartbreak, confessional dialogue, salty language, goofy humor and gorgeous partnering — ArVejon Jones and Will Woodward received an Izzie nomination for a showcase performance of their duet.

Co-commissioned by San Francisco's Queer Cultural Center and five theaters and festivals nationwide, "Boys" will be performed by Dorsey, Jones, Woodward, Brian Fisher and Nol Simons. In May, they'll embark on their third 20-city tour.

Dorsey spoke by phone about boys, trouble, manhood and the mixed blessing of America's "trans moment."

Q: You're taking on a huge topic — in your words, "heterosexual male supremacy."

A: It's true. Although all of my recent projects have been quite enormous in scope, there was something that felt even more enormous with this project. There is no singular phenomenon of masculinity. It's an incredibly complex and complicated and sometimes contradictory set of intersectional experiences and expectations that mean very different things for each of my

collaborators, and all of the many different people I got to engage with to create the work.

Q: Why this topic, and why now?

A: People will often ask me what I think about this “trans moment” — and I say that in quotation marks. I always laugh because, first of all, we’ve always been around. It’s not new, it’s not a moment, and we’re also not going away. But I think it’s an opportunity to talk about trans and gender-nonconforming bodies and experience in a way that a lot of audiences may not have had the cultural literacy for, even two years ago.

Q: I feel like all of your work has been widely relatable because you’re dealing with vulnerability. But male supremacy — that’s a fact of life for pretty much everybody on this planet.

A: The hurt and humor and insight that we arrive at is absolutely far beyond trans or queer or cisgender, white or black.

Q: And you bring a unique point of view to it.

A: I grew up as a girl, and I was trained into femininity. I looked at (masculinity) and studied it from afar. Trans and gender-nonconforming people can offer this incredibly rich, deep, insightful perspective on all kinds of gender expression, including masculinity, because we’ve been around it, outside of it, inside of it, through it. That is a gift I’m interested in sharing in this work. Trans people are only ever told that we’re less than, or partial, or almost whole, or a facsimile. I resist that and declare instead that we have incredible wisdom and perspective and consciousness that can deeply enrich and heal, if we’re elevated into cultural spaces to share that.

Q: What effect do you want this work to have, both here and on tour?

A: With all of my work, my foundational hope is that audiences immediately and deeply connect with it, and that something in them shifts through the experience of being in the room together and witnessing each other, and our super-sweaty dancing, and our very vulnerable storytelling. It's also important to me that this work is going to feel really resonant and reflective of the trans person in the audience, just like the queer person in the audience, just like the heterosexual person, just like the person who can't remember how that darn acronym LGBTQ goes.

Q: Have you seen progress in trans awareness and acceptance over the past few years?

A: I consider this moment very dangerous for trans people. The main "progress" we're seeing is that trans people can become reality TV stars, or traditionally pretty or handsome celebrities. What we're seeing is cisgender men putting on a dress and pretending to be transgender, and winning Emmy Awards and Academy Awards. I think it's important that cisgender people know that this "trans moment" is really to be called a cisgender moment. Cisgender people are finally becoming more aware that (a) there are trans people in the world, (b) that there are a spectrum of people who are gender-nonconforming, transsexual, genderqueer, nonbinary — an infinite, beautiful galaxy of gender expressions — and (c) it's totally OK to be trans.

Claudia Bauer is a Bay Area freelance writer.

Sean Dorsey Dance

"Boys in Trouble": 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, April 19-20, 4 p.m. (with ASL interpretation) and 8 p.m. Saturday, April 21. Z Space, 450 Florida St., S.F. \$15-\$30. www.seandorseydance.com. View a video at <http://bit.ly/2GDHFnu>