

# SF WEEKLY

## Ballet Is Heteronormative. These Artists Are Fixing That.

The binary-smashing Fresh Meat Festival returns for 2018, this time with a transgender rock opera and plenty of bachata.

- [Peter Lawrence Kane](#) // Wed Jun 6th, 2018 7:05pm



*2018 Fresh Meat Festival Jahaira Fajardo and Angelica Medina. Photo by Lydia Daniller*

“The opposite of being gay for pay in porn is being straight for pay in dance,” says **Fresh Meat Productions** founder and artistic director **Sean Dorsey**. “So many men are bi, queer, or gay in dance, and they all have to play straight on stage. Every single ballet duet on stage by any ballet company is heterosexual, and it floors me in 2018 that that’s still true.”

In a climate where an awareness of the effects of toxic masculinity has grown more acute, it sounds strange to call out choreography for its role in perpetuating it. After all, irrespective of their sexual orientations, most male-identified dancers are probably more accustomed to being called a sissy by meathead jocks than to being equated with those meathead jocks. Perverse though it sounds, it's actually further proof of just how hardwired the gender binary is in quote-unquote high culture.

That's right: Ballet isn't nearly queer enough, something the **Fresh Meat Festival** aims to correct. A three-day (June 14-16) celebration at **Z Space**, primarily of dance and primarily by bodies that are considered "other," this year's iteration — the 17th — includes same-sex ballroom champions and a transgender rock opera. The idea, Dorsey emphasizes, is not so much to transpose genders on stage and have male-identified people dancing "female" parts (or vice versa) but to broaden the very concept of what is considered laudable within the wider dance world, which has ossified along the gender binary in almost all aspects. To that end, Fresh Meat includes work by and for transgender artists as well as by "queer, disabled dance pioneers" and artists toiling at the intersection of gender and race.

"I want the dance field to reflect the rich variety of humans that exist in our society," Dorsey says. "Right now, we have the tiniest, narrow band of bodies being represented, which benefits no one. Everyone loses when we champion only the gender binary with no flexibility."

That people who have been relegated to the margins of performance have, in Z Space, a 14,000-square-foot venue is no small feat. To Dorsey's knowledge, zero companies in the Bay Area have trans-identified people on their boards or in other positions of leadership. That means no one to steer funding and other resources toward festivals like Fresh Meat (or to other endeavors meant as correctives) without a lot of vocal prodding.

Among the dozen-plus performers are the duo **Jahaira Fajardo** and **Angelica Medina**, winners of the 2015 Ladies Latin Division of the **World Latin Dance Cup**, who return to Fresh Meat having founded an academy called **Quisqueya**. **Alice Sheppard** and **Laurel Lawson** will make the West Coast premiere of an excerpt of ***Descent***, a full-length work that reimagines the myth of Venus and Andromeda as an interracial love story — with the two principals dancing while in and out of their wheelchairs. And **Toby MacNutt** speaks of his work as a duet with his crutches, Dorsey explains, using them, not merely for balance and for locomotion but also visually, in terms of negative space.

"As a curator, I'm really excited about the intersections between bodies that are trans and bodies that are disabled, because these are all powerful bodies that are constantly being told that we don't belong in dance or that our bodies aren't right to dance," Dorsey says. "I know this personally as an able-bodied trans dancer. I still hear it every day of my life."

Rather than signing on to what is sometimes called the “transgender moment,” Dorsey prefers to think of the crisis in the field as a “cisgender moment,” in that cisgender people are coming to understand themselves as cisgender and not as some default setting from which trans people merely deviate. (A roughly analogous phenomenon began to occur 10 to 20 years ago as heterosexual people came to think of themselves as straight — as opposed to merely, well, “people.”) A bit like the Catholic Church’s inability to come to a full reckoning with homosexuality because the entire institution is just so damn gay, modern dance and ballet have “yet to recognize how almost completely cisgender and heteronormative the field is, to the exclusion of gender-nonconforming and queer bodies.”

Dorsey adds that, “There are very tangible, multiple barriers that are actively keeping us out of dance studios, out of theaters, from getting grants, from getting press coverage, from getting jobs of leadership. ... It means audiences aren’t seeing trans people dance on stage, which again tells cisgender people that we don’t have the expertise or the training or the beauty required for that, and it tells trans audiences that they don’t belong here.”

Nothing can repair this situation quite like the bombast of a rock opera, perhaps the least meek genre of performance known to humanity — and ***The Red Shades*** has enough of a San Francisco connection to press the point even further. The story of a teenage trans girl named Ida who runs away and joins a gang of trans superhero squatters in the mid-1960s Tenderloin who use their magic powers to fight the cops, it’s one big love letter to solidarity, and it puts trans people of color front-and-center.

“It’s a rock *opera*, classically, in the sense that all the dialogue and monologues are sung, and it’s a *rock* opera in that there’s a rock band and super-high energy,” Dorsey says. “It’s loud, beautiful, and it has incredible musicians.

“It’s really rare in trans and queer spaces to have a really high level of dance presented,” he adds. “For over a decade, it’s felt like this amazing family reunion.”

**Fresh Meat Festival**, Thursday-Saturday, June 14-16 at Z Space, 450 Florida St., \$15 plus sliding scale, [freshmeatproductions.org/fresh-meat-festival-2018/](http://freshmeatproductions.org/fresh-meat-festival-2018/)