

S A N F R A N C I S C O

BAY TIMES

LGBTQ News & Calendar for the Bay Area

Sean Dorsey Dance Celebrates 15 Years of Trailblazing Dance

Company celebrates in San Francisco March 14–16



Over the past 15 years, trailblazing transgender choreographer, dancer, writer and advocate Sean Dorsey has had a profound impact on audiences, communities and the performing arts across the U.S. As a choreographer, Dorsey has shattered cisgender and heterosexual limitations in dance; as an activist, he has championed transgender creativity and brought (literally) hundreds of other gender-nonconforming artists to the stage.

Fifteen years ago, Dorsey founded his namesake company Sean Dorsey Dance, an ensemble known as much for their beautiful dancing as for their groundbreaking content. “In a field filled with heterosexual pas-de-deux and rigidly enforced gender roles, Dorsey’s work arrived as more than just a breath of fresh air,” explains Sean Dorsey Dance’s Production Coordinator Eric Garcia. “It was a revolution!”

Today, when the dance field boasts a dynamic variety of talented trans and non-binary dance artists ([Leiomy Maldonado](#), [NIC Kay](#), [Chase Johnsey](#), [Ashley R.T. Yergens](#), [IMMA](#), [Jayna Ledford](#)), it would be easy to forget how different things were only a few years ago ... or the fact that Dorsey's artistry and activism opened the door for countless trans dancers today.

"Fifteen or twenty years ago," recalls Dorsey, "nobody would present us transgender artists. It was a very lonely and overwhelming experience."

Dorsey therefore decided to take matters into his own hands. In 2002, Dorsey brought together a group of trans, gender-nonconforming and queer artist-activists to put on the first annual FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL at San Francisco's ODC Theater.

"That first FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL of trans and queer performance was absolutely historic," says transgender singer-songwriter and Dorsey's partner of 17 years Shawna Virago. "It was the first event of its kind in the U.S."

The annual festival, which centers the work of trans/gender-nonconforming/queer artists of color, has become a Bay Area favorite. Each year, the event features new work by local and national LGBTQ artists performing everything from vogue to opera, hip hop to taiko, bachata to bomba, spoken word to folk, comedy to modern dance. (The [2019 FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL](#) takes place June 20–22 at Z Space, SF.)

Fresh Meat grew from that first event put on by volunteers 17 years ago into a thriving year-round arts organization that creates, presents and tours award-winning transgender arts programs.



Photos Courtesy of Sean Dorsey Dance

Today, [Fresh Meat Productions](#) invests in the creative expression and cultural leadership of transgender and gender-nonconforming communities through year-round programs including the FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL, resident company Sean Dorsey Dance and the groundbreaking program [TRANSform Dance](#)—which conducts national education, engagement and advocacy to promote Trans equity in dance.

As Dorsey's artistic success has grown, so has his commitment to supporting other trans and non-binary performing artists.

“I am in love with the power of trans and gender-nonconforming artists who are at the forefront of creating gorgeous work that also fights white supremacy, racism, ableism, homophobia, anti-immigrant-hatred and transphobia.”

San Francisco’s Director of Cultural Affairs Tom DeCaigny has high praise for Dorsey, saying, “Sean Dorsey is a visionary whose leadership in promoting and uplifting transgender and gender non-binary artists has left an indelible mark on San Francisco and the country.”

“I started creating dances because I didn’t see myself reflected anywhere in modern dance,” says Dorsey, who grew up in Vancouver, Canada. “I grew up without seeing a single trans person in dance. The world told me that people like me didn’t belong in dance; that our bodies and our stories would never belong. I somehow had the courage—or audacity—to decide otherwise.”

Unlike many cisgender dancers, who are supported to begin their training at a young age, Dorsey started his professional training at the age of 25. “People should know it’s never too late to start!” Dorsey exclaims.

Dorsey started creating choreography at his dance school. “There was no one like me in my program,” says Dorsey, “and pretty early on, I got chastised by the Director of the school. She claimed I made people ‘uncomfortable’ by choreographing openly and unapologetically queer work.”

This admonishment only emboldened Dorsey in his quest to “queer” modern dance.

“So many marginalized communities get told to hush up, to make ourselves small, to metaphorically sit down and shut up,” Dorsey says, “And I was determined to find a way to stay standing.”

More than just stand tall, Dorsey has achieved a legacy by becoming the U.S.’ first acclaimed transgender modern dance choreographer. Dorsey has been awarded four Isadora Duncan Dance Awards, awarded support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Dance Project, and had his work commissioned by theaters across the U.S. Last summer he became the first U.S. trans artist ever presented by The Joyce Theater in New York.

Dorsey’s choreography is highly physical, accessible, rooted in story, and danced with precision and guts and deep humanity. Over the last 8 years, Dorsey created a trilogy of powerful full-evening works exploring censored, buried or forgotten parts of LGBTQ history: [THE MISSING GENERATION](#)(2015), [The Secret History Of Love](#) (2013), and [Uncovered: The Diary Project](#)(2010). [THE MISSING GENERATION](#) gives voice to LGBTQ longtime survivors of the early AIDS epidemic. Dorsey created the work over a 2-year period after recording 75 hours of oral history interviews with transgender and LGBTQ longtime survivors. These survivors’ voices and remarkable real-life stories are featured in the work’s Izzie Award-winning soundscore.

And this March 14–16, Sean Dorsey Dance celebrates its 15th Anniversary Season with a special homecoming treat for Bay Area audiences: for one weekend only, the company will perform a return engagement of [BOYS IN TROUBLE](#) at San Francisco’s Z Space theater.

[BOYS IN TROUBLE](#) is a timely and urgent commentary on contemporary masculinity that places a trans and queer lens onto intersectional questions of embodiment, violence, Black queer love, whiteness, shame and posturing. The show features Sean Dorsey Dance’s signature fusion of full-throttle dance, exquisite queer partnering, intimate storytelling, highly-physical theater and irreverent queer humor.

“Performing the show is truly a marathon,” explains Dorsey. “It’s incredibly physically demanding and also emotionally intense for us. We dance hard but we also have a blast—there is a lot of humor in the show. Not to mention 125 costume pieces!”

[BOYS IN TROUBLE](#) returns to San Francisco as part of a 20-city international tour that is bringing the company from Stockholm to Sheboygan, from Maui to Los Angeles. The work is performed by Sean Dorsey, Brian Fisher, ArVejon Jones, Nol Simonse and Will Woodward, with

original music composed by Alex Kelly, Anomie Belle, LD Brown, Jesse Olsen Bay and Ben Kessler.

BOYS IN TROUBLE was recently nominated for two Isadora Duncan Dance Awards: Best Company Performance and Best Music/Sound/Text.

There is more good news to report. Dorsey is also the subject of an upcoming full-length documentary. Currently in production, this Sean Dorsey doc is directed by Annalise Ophelian and StormMiguel Florez—whose previous documentary *MAJOR!*, about pioneering Black transwoman elder and activist *Miss Major*, was an official selection at 60 festivals worldwide and garnered more than 20 awards for best documentary.

Today, Sean Dorsey Dance can be found on stages from coast to coast ... and beyond. Colleen Furukawa, Vice President of Programming at Maui Arts & Cultural Center (MACC) says, “Sean Dorsey is an innovator, a trailblazer and a bridge-builder. At this moment when transgender communities are under attack, Sean offers us beauty, truth and joy—the antidotes to hate and fear.” MACC is bringing *BOYS IN TROUBLE* to Maui audiences on April 11 <http://www.mauiarts.org/event-detail.php?id=722>

7 Stages in Atlanta has commissioned and presented Dorsey’s work multiple times. Artistic Director Heidi Howard says, “Sean’s work is not only gorgeous: it’s important, trailblazing and history-making.”

Acclaimed transgender author/performer/playwright [Kate Bornstein](#) says, “At this 15th anniversary milestone, I applaud Sean Dorsey as a love warrior whose tireless activism has opened the door for thousands more. Sean Dorsey is a national treasure.”

Congratulations from all of us at the *San Francisco Bay Times* to Sean Dorsey Dance as they continue to, both literally and figuratively, transform dance.

Sean Dorsey Dance’s 15th Anniversary Home Season: *BOYS IN TROUBLE*

4 shows only

Thursday–Saturday: March 14–16

(Thursday 8 pm, Friday 8 pm, Saturday 4 pm with ASL interpretation + Saturday 8 pm with Gala Reception)

Z Space, 450 Florida Street @ 17th Street, San Francisco

Tickets: \$15–30 at <http://www.zspace.org/boys-in-trouble>

For More Information

Sean Dorsey Dance

<http://seandorseydance.com/>

Shawna Virago

FRESH MEAT Productions

<http://freshmeatproductions.org/>

FRESH MEAT FESTIVAL 2019

<http://freshmeatproductions.org/fresh-meat-festival-2019/>

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