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Art-making From a Trans/Queer POV

BY HEATHER DESAULNIERS

At 15, Sean Dorsey Dance carves out space in the modern dance ecosystem for trans, queer and gender non-conforming voices.

Last summer, choreographer Sean Dorsey stepped onto New York's legendary Joyce Theater stage for the first time. In the days and weeks leading up to that moment, he wondered how it would feel. Having a show there is a huge

milestone for any artist, but as the first transgender choreographer to be presented there, he had extra skin in the game.

“I thought that...I would be anxious and overwhelmed, but instead it felt very natural, like I was in the right place at the right time,” Dorsey recalls. “To be honest, it really caught me off guard that it felt so comfortable; that was a big moment for me emotionally and artistically.”

That memory is one of many that has resurfaced as Dorsey’s San Francisco-based company Sean Dorsey Dance (SDD) readies its upcoming 15th-anniversary season. Last year’s “Boys in Trouble” is the centerpiece of the festivities as SDD, a multi-disciplined quintet that casts a trans and queer lens on masculinity, returns to Z Space in mid-March for four performances before it embarks on a 20-city tour.

SDD is also expanding its TRANSform Dance platform—the education, engagement and advocacy arm of the company—thanks to a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. And the company begins research for its next project, “The Lost Art of Dreaming,” slated to premiere in April 2021. In this new endeavor, Dorsey will, he says, “investigate and explore expansive, optimistic future thinking, something trans communities are often denied; at a time in America when our communities are under attack, I want to give my communities love and space to dream and imagine.”

Milestone years are a time to reflect on the journey thus far: in SDD’s case, a decade and a half of collaborative exchange and artistic expression as well as carving out space in the modern dance ecosystem for trans, queer and gender non-conforming voices.

When Dorsey thinks back to the troupe’s first year, he sees both differences and similarities to today. One big difference is scope.

“In the early years, the company had two or three dancers and the evening was a collection of short works, all duets and one solo; our presence was very local,” he says. SDD now tours nationally and internationally, which this year includes a trip to Stockholm. Dorsey also sees a shift in subject matter. His earlier work was largely autobiographical; SDD’s more recent compositions embody broader trans/queer themes.

“Fifteen years back, there was almost zero context in modern dance for receiving and relating to the trans experience, so I really needed to dance my own story into being, to disrupt the cis-gender frame in modern dance and assert the worth and value of trans/queer bodies and spirits,” Dorsey says.

And while that will always have importance for him, in the last decade his work has taken him in different directions and ignited a passion for sharing trans/queer lineage with audiences. Examples include 2012’s “The Secret History of Love,”

which looked at the love stories of queer ancestors, and 2015's "The Missing Generation," which explored the devastating early days of the AIDS epidemic.

At the same time, Dorsey can point to many through lines in his work, like a passion for storytelling. SDD productions have always been and continue to be narrative-based (if not necessarily conveying a linear story) and are reflective of the human condition.

"SDD has an ardent interest in creating and sharing work that is deeply emotional and visceral; abstraction isn't our thing," Dorsey says. Pulling from a variety of disciplines and theatrical devices is another common thread. Combining dance and physicality, language and text, and—though some recent pieces have been weightier—playfulness and humor.

Most important for Dorsey has been the company's commitment to artmaking from a trans/queer point of view.

"All the work we've made, and are making, transcends my wildest dreams 15 years ago," Dorsey says. "I wanted so passionately to help change the landscape for people like me, and it's really lovely in this moment to recognize the impact SDD has had."

Boys in Trouble

March 14-16

Z Space

450 Florida St.

seandorseydance.com

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