



In Practice: Sean Dorsey, Fresh Meat Productions, and Trans Joy

By [Sima Belmar](#)

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Photo by Lydia Daniller. [ID: Headshot of Sean Dorsey, a white trans masculine person, with short dark hair and glasses, looking at the camera with a confident smile. He is wearing a black tshirt.]

As he looks back on 20 years of making and producing performance by trans, gender-nonconforming (GNC), Indigenous Two-Spirit, and queer artists in the Bay Area and across the country, Sean Dorsey, Artistic Director of Sean Dorsey Dance (SDD) and founder of Fresh Meat Productions (FMP), is positively glowing.

Founded in 2001, Fresh Meat Productions is a trans-led-and-serving, history-making organization committed to shining a light on and reflecting the light of artists who, despite increased visibility in popular culture, continue to struggle to find their voices amplified, uplifted, and represented in theatrical contexts.



KnowShade Vogue Photo by Kegan Marling

[ID: Front-diagonal view of four dancers from KnowShade Vogue kneeling in a column formation with each making a different gesture with their arms and hands. Each of them is wearing varying costume pieces in black with glitter and accents of color.]

To mark the milestone, FMP has launched [*The Lost Art of Dreaming Project*](#), a constellation of online events spread out over the course of 2021, a Spring 2022 premiere, and a 10+-city tour through 2024. This year, *The Lost Art of Dreaming* will feature SDD's [AT-HOME Season \(April 16-18\)](#) that includes a series of gorgeous site-specific dance films and messages from Dorsey; a second season of ["Stay Fresh At Home,"](#) a free online series of videos dedicated to creative wellness; the [20th Anniversary Fresh Meat Festival](#) (June 17-19, online), showcasing an incredible lineup including the work of commissioned artists, Antoine Hunter/Purple Fire Crow, J Mase III, Jahaira & Angelica, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, Mark Travis Rivera, and Randy Ford, supported by FMP's FRESH WORKS! program; and a monthly release of free activities, including [Postcards from the Future](#), which highlights the work of four commissioned visual artists, and [The Dictionary of Joy and Pleasure](#), a free, interactive online A-to-Z with contributions by ten commissioned artists. There's even a "Futurist Pledge" that folks can download, print, and sign.

The Lost Art of Dreaming is a project with a singular yet expansive mission: “to explore and create expansive futures” for trans, GNC, Indigenous Two-Spirit, and queer communities. Dorsey and I had two lengthy conversations about what it looks like to center joy and pleasure in artistic and social practice.

Sima Belmar: Have you always been a dancer?

Sean Dorsey: Yes! But I always say that I did not grow up at the ballet barre. I loved dance with every cell in my body. I spent all my time in my leotard, dancing around to records. I was always making up dances. I did have a lot of early training and performing in theater and music, mostly piano, choral stuff, youth theater. But most of my dancing was in my living room. I took a “ballet” class series when I was 5 and remember having an awesome tambourine with long ribbons attached to it, so I’m pretty sure it wasn’t classical ballet.

SB: I too remember having a tambourine with ribbons attached to it among other things with ribbons attached to them. I remember being around four and dancing with these wire things with flowers attached to them to the song “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.”

SD: I had no other formal dance training until right after I graduated from high school when I did a summer session largely based on the choreography of Janet Jackson—it was amazing. And then I started taking classes, mostly modern dance, some jazz, in college [University of British Columbia], but community level, drop-in stuff. I remember loving it so, so much, but my career and my heart’s trajectory was on the community organizing, social justice path. I felt clear that my calling was to be of service and do justice-seeking work.

SB: So that’s why you’re able to make work *and* organize so many events and programs! What was your major?

SD: I did a double major in Political Science and Women’s Studies. After that, I started a graduate program in community economic development, and also started taking classes in the dance department. When I was 25, I started thinking about getting more training. I couldn’t dance often enough! I was taking ballet with this one teacher who one day asked me to stay after class. When she asked me if I’d ever thought about being a professional dancer, my mind exploded. It was a landscape-altering moment. Up until that moment I had

literally *never* imagined I could become a professional dancer: how could I, when I had never seen another person like me in dance? So I took a year off of grad school, entered a two-year studio-based Dance program, and never looked back.

The very first piece of choreography I made at dance school was a duet and it was definitely queer. At that point I hadn't seen a lot of dance-theater or "talking dance," but from the beginning I've always felt called to bring in elements of story and text. The local dance community came out to these student recitals, and was very supportive of young students and their burgeoning craft. I don't remember feeling nervous at all about my work being queer. People were awesome: I was blown away by the incredibly positive response and feedback from professional dancers to my baby-choreography. They were "interested in my voice" and "were excited to see what I did next." The day after the show, in morning technique class, the school director pulled me out, sat me down in her office, and told me sternly that my piece "made people feel very uncomfortable" —which was not even a little bit true. I had experienced the exact opposite. I don't know how I had the wherewithal to feel sure of that truth at the time, but I did. She actually withheld my graduation certificate at the end of my program. In that moment, the years of all the awful experiences in gendered bathrooms, gendered costumes, everything came crashing down on me. But at the same time, I realized that this was how I could forge change in the world, this was my calling, and this was how I could be of service. Her words made me realize the power of dance-theater work that's based in the body, in story, and in language.



KnowShade Vogue Photo by Kegan Marling

[ID: On a dimly lit stage, the main dancer wears a black and glittery leotard, dark tights and socks, and a colorful garter. With their arms in the air, the main dancer and three others in the background are kicking one leg past the level of their heads.]

SB: What do you love about dancing?

SD: Feeling into my love of dancing, there is both the love of velocity and the momentum of movement, the embodiment of energy and emotion, but also a real love of the relationship and response to music. But I have also always loved storytelling. Those were not separate things. You know a lot about me if you know that my favorite childhood movies were *Fame* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *Rocky Horror* was so huge for me. Here's this amazing, sexy, gender-expansive, fierce, totally embodied character in Frankenfurter.

SB: *Fame* came out in 1980, when I was 9 and you were 7. It was not a thing to watch at that age!

SD: When I go back and watch it now, I'm like, This is the most depressing movie about trauma and abuse ever! But at the time all that mattered was Leroy, roller skates, and the romantic notion of bottle caps on the bottom of your shoes. That was my dream high school, but I never imagined my own adult life being about dance and performance. I never saw anybody like me in those fields doing those things. So it wasn't like, gosh, I wish someday I could do this. There was literally no brain pathway for that dream because I literally didn't exist in the world.

Trans people of my generation and older—and maybe just a little bit younger—we had to work so hard to find any proof of our existence other than our own selves in the world. For example, my partner, [Shawna Virago](#), a trans woman musician, filmmaker, and director of the [San Francisco Transgender Film Festival](#), talks about going to the public library just to find anything, and there being like one weird medical book on transsexuality. There was no internet, no blogs, no Gay Straight Alliances in high school, there was nothing, unless you saw maybe a transsexual on the Donahue show. If I had been lucky enough to know or been connected to ballroom culture and voguing, I would have been like here's this amazing trans/GNC leadership, lineage, and ancestry. Here's this long lineage of

Black and Latinx trans women, queers and GNC folks with this amazing dance and performance form and huge chosen-family/community network.

Flash forward to today, and so much has changed while so much has still *not* changed: in pop culture we still have cisgender people being cast as trans. Totally unacceptable when there are so many talented trans and nonbinary actors. But in dance also, we've seen many institutions investing in works for the stage that portray trans characters as pathological, disturbed characters; and even more institutions and companies bringing exactly *zero* trans bodies, dancers or leadership to the stage. And not having dance educators who are trans, nonbinary, or GNC. The Bay Area, like the rest of the country, still has to do a lot better.



Left: Toby MacNutt, Right: Javier Stell-Fresquez and Ivy Monteiro
Photos by Kegan Marling

[ID: Left: Toby MacNutt in a dark red fitted top and bottom with loose black pants layered over. They look to the side into the distance while supported by a standing support device with one leg wrapped around one of them. Right: Javier Stell-Fresquez and Ivy Monteiro hold a large, translucent white sheet aloft so it swirls with their motion. Both have flowing long hair and wear loose maxi skirts; one is bare-chested while the other wears a bra.]

SB: How did you make your way to the Bay Area?

SD: I had been dancing in some small companies in British Columbia, and on a visit to San Francisco in 2000, I took classes at ODC with Lizz Roman and Ellie Klopp. With Lizz's class, I was like, "What is this magic?!" It was my real introduction to upside down, release technique. There was very little of that in Vancouver. It was this room full of all these glorious people, and Lizz was singing and Daniel Berkman was accompanying; it was this magical, mystical experience. And then

Lizz asked me to join her company! I danced with her for six amazing amazing years, hanging from rafters, climbing up walls, and dancing on furniture.

SB: So, if I have my math right, you're dating your 20th anniversary from 2001, right? What happened then?

SD: In June 2001, I performed my first work in the Bay Area for the final Lesbian and Gay Dance Festival at Dance Mission. I had seen Dance Brigade perform in Vancouver a few years before. It was one of the first times I'd seen dance theater that was fiery and political, imbued with text and story; they were just gloriously ripping into colonialism and misogyny. I kept presenting work under my name, and then I date my company, Sean Dorsey Dance, from when we had our first full-evening home season, which was 2005.

SB: How did you come up with the name Fresh Meat Productions?

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SD: In 2002, I brought together a group of artists and activists to put on what we thought would be a one-time festival of trans and queer performance. We wanted to center trans artists, center BIPOC queer/trans artistry, and do it gorgeously. At an early planning meeting at a Mission café, we were like, "What do we call this thing?" Jesse Bie said, "Let's call it fresh meat," and there was this collective gasp of excitement. So saucy at the time!

SB: Jesse is the sauciest!

SD: Absolutely! He had already long been bringing BIPOC queer dance-theater to theaters and to the streets across the Bay with his company STEAMROLLER Dance.

This was when we founded Fresh Meat Productions. At that time (2002), there was an amazing groundswell of trans performance and artists, but nobody was programming, presenting, or curating trans and gender-nonconforming artists. Nobody would touch us. There were queer events, but most were majority white cis non-disabled artists. So we came together—dance peers, trans artist activists, friends—to put on a festival that centered majority BIPOC, trans, queer, and GNC artists including disabled artists. It was about reclaiming ourselves, our bodies, and our creative expression as powerful, sexy, and worthy of taking up the space that had hitherto been denied to our communities.

Elizabeth Gorelik did our first photo shoot at ODC: there were lots of chaps and leather harnesses and tighty whities and wigs. So good! Andrew Wood rented us the theater for super cheap on Tuesday and Wednesday night, and we were sold out, standing room only, packed like sardines.

And there was an immediate torrent of love, an extraordinary response from the community, that YES there was a clear hunger for this in the Bay. It became clear shortly after that first festival that this needed to be an organization. I'm proud that from the beginning, all our artists and crew were paid well. We're so proud of really changing that landscape, of breaking down so many barriers for trans and GNC performing artists. I have so much love, gratitude, and awe for our tiny but mighty core staff, Shawna Virago, Eric Garcia, and StormMiguel Florez, the "Fresh Meat Family"—and it really is a family.



LeahAnn Mitchell

Photo by Kegan Marling

[ID: LeahAnn Mitchell, a Black trans woman, wears a black top with a gray skirt, knee socks, and Converse sneakers. She's standing on stairs surrounded by clapping and cheering audience members. She's singing into a microphone with her other arm held high.]

SB: Reflecting on the last twenty years, what has changed about the Bay Area performance landscape in terms of both trans representation and influence?

SD: It's painful to witness the continued refusal of most Bay Area dance leadership and spaces to take any actual action around trans equity. There are a lot of trans supportive "values" but almost no action or policies and procedures put in place. It's absolutely unacceptable that most of our dance spaces don't have any trans/non-binary faculty, trans programming, all-gender changing rooms or all-gender bathrooms. I call upon Bay Area dance venues and spaces to use the

shutdown period of the pandemic *to fix this*—AND PUT NEW SIGNS ON YOUR BATHROOMS, DARNIT! I will mail you the sharpies if you don't have any.

SB: And not everybody sees themselves in the new equity, “everybody is welcome” statements.

SD: Right. When white cisgender non-disabled people say something generic like “everybody is welcome,” it often means “you’re welcome in *theory* but our facility, staff, and practices might still be harmful or excluding.” Welcoming needs to be a *verb*, not a passive value.

We white people in leadership don't get to claim to be “anti-racist” or say we care about white supremacy unless we can back it up with daily, concrete, meaningful and accountable action.

At FMP, when we have any kind of public event we always list a bunch of information right on our website, ticketing page, and social media that we hope is helpful for people to feel that they are thought of ahead of time and welcomed into that space. For example, we will share that the entrance, bathrooms, and seating are wheelchair accessible, the front row seats are all armless for fat or superfat folks, we only ever use venues with all gender bathrooms, we provide a monitored scent-free seating area, we never require “legal ID” to purchase or pick up tickets. This is to say, I'm specifically thinking of *you*, I want you to feel like you are welcome, and here are the loving accommodations we're providing. I'd like to see those statements on a venue's ticketing page.

Z Space is our artistic home for a reason — they've always been awesome. Part of their leadership staff team includes a trans person. After years of temporarily allowing us to make their bathrooms all-gender during our events, they permanently and lovingly made *all* their bathrooms all gender.

It's also awesome that CounterPulse intentionally planned for and built their new facility with *only* all-gender bathrooms, and regularly presents/supports trans/Indigenous Two-Spirit/NB artists, unlike most other Bay Area dance venues. Shawl Anderson as a home for dance has been supportive of trans/NB artists, including trans faculty, producing their Queering Dance Festival—that's so huge and amazing.

This is something that I'm also proud of: because Sean Dorsey Dance's Tech Rider *requires* theaters to convert all lobby and backstage bathrooms to be all-

gender during our tours, I have left behind a swath of permanently-altered all-gender restrooms in theaters across the country, from The Joyce in NYC to The Young Auditorium in highly conservative Whitewater WI.



Randy Ford

Photo by Kegan Marling

[ID: Randy Ford has her hands clasped in front of her and looks over her shoulder smiling while jumping joyfully onstage. She wears a mesh white dress with black socks.]

SB: I love all of your trans love t-shirts, and your current project emphasizes trans joy, pushing back on the sort of spectacle of suffering cis folks may expect from trans artists.

SD: The reason I create work and founded FMP is because of the exquisite joy, wisdom, ebullience, radiance, depth of spirit, innovation of craft, and positively extraordinary resiliency of trans and gender-nonconforming people and artists. I love trans people and I love trans artists. When I'm in our workshop spaces, our audiences, our community forums, I'm so blissed out. There's so much creativity and depth and shimmer, sparkly creativity. That's what drives us—our beauty and our gifts.

So many people in so many communities live amidst harm, daily oppression, violence, but what gets forged out of that is joy, resilience, awesomeness, sass,

beauty. Part of the agonizing frustration, anger, and sadness I feel is so much because all of these cisgender dance leaders and funders are totally missing out on all of this community's incredible work, innovation, and beauty.

SB: I called you a trans ambassador, a moniker you accepted and that also frustrated you to some extent because of the way it erased your identity and work as an artist.

SD: I'm so proud to be trans and love being an ambassador, but there is a profound level of exhaustion I've worked myself into. So much traveling and speaking and advocacy, and teaching and touring, prior to the pandemic, I'd totally worked myself into the ground. I will keep advocating and fighting for intersectional trans equity, but I also have to stop and find a balance for Sean the artist.

When I think back to 20 years ago and how I brought some folks together to put on this "one-time" Fresh Meat Festival, it was about the fact that at that time almost nobody was putting trans artists on stages with high production values, and nobody was paying us for our art. Probably for the next 8-10 years, if I had press interviews as Sean Dorsey and Sean Dorsey Dance, writers would hyper-focus on my trans identity and ask me Trans 101 questions. Nobody was like, "Tell me about your craft." It was years before I got to talk about that in interviews.



Tinky Younger
Photo by Kegan Marling

[ID: Tinky Younger wears a black fitted top with a silver collar along with black shorts, fishnets, shoes, and fingerless gloves. They're seated onstage with one hand caressing their cheek. Behind Tinky, the silhouettes of two people posing against a magenta background are visible.]

So what feels very important at the 20th anniversary mark, is to remember how 20 years ago almost no one was doing this, and now, every week, I have young nonbinary or trans aspiring dancers reaching out to me from all across the country. I came of age having no peers in the dance world and it's so exciting to witness so many gender expansive folks. It's also frustrating that so little has changed, how few trans dance educators we see, we don't see trans artists being presented, trans folks given residencies, on staff, on boards of directors, in leadership and decision-making power at foundations or funding agencies. The values and friendliness are there, but the action is not. Like all the white folks in leadership claiming to have anti-white-supremacist values, with little to no action.

SB: Let's talk about your craft. Your theater, music, and writing background clarifies for me how dance appears in your work, as one communicative piece of a puzzle. In the AT-HOME season videos, which are beautifully made, I noticed a repetition of gesture that had a lot to do with two fingers pulling away from and towards the body. Tell me about those choices.

SD: I'm calling this new series of dance films "video postcards." In them, we're exploring movement research for our new project *The Lost Art Of Dreaming*. The idea is that we can be doing movement investigation or play and create tendrils that may end up in the staged work down the road.

The Lost Art Of Dreaming is rooted in imagining and creating expansive Futures, so the idea of starting here [Sean moves his hands towards and away from his forehead and chest], and getting to here [Sean gestures toward the sky], connecting what's out there, the Future, and what's in the body. Some of that movement you saw was about that swirling cosmos, that Future energy, and how we might connect it to our body. Me and my dancers (Nol Simonse, Will Woodward, Raul Torres-Bonilla) have been doing this "cosmic connective tissue" movement research in our Zoom rehearsals 3 days a week since the beginning of the pandemic.

SB: When you demonstrate and talk about these core-distal relationships, I can start to think about why one might choreograph exaggerated finger extensions and reaches toward the furthest point away from the body. Dance is a tremendously powerful and successful communicator of force and energy and emotion, but it's a shitty communicator of ideas. Because I don't think that's what

it was born to do. And it's a very Western idea that viewers of dance should know what it means, should understand it, "get it," and if they don't know, they're going to get anxious and pissed and dismiss it. I think it's important for me to hear from an artist about the movement choices they make. Now I can revisit the films and think about the relationship between my material reality and my interiority and how far I can reach as I continue to be stuck in these pandemic bubbles.

SD: In most of the video postcards, there's no relationship to language or text. This project is really different for me so far because I generally work with text and writing. *The Missing Generation* (2018) started with a lot of research, a year and a half and 75 hours of oral history interviews I recorded with survivors of the early AIDS epidemic, and then 500 hours editing it down to a sound score, all *before* the movement creation. My current process—I don't know where it will end up. I look forward to getting back into the studio because grand-scale costumes had also been driving our movement creation. Now they're in storage at Dance Mission, these huge gowns with 6-foot trains.

SB: Thinking about Tim Curry's delicious embodiment in *Rocky Horror*, how do we get people to understand the material sensations and pleasures of embodiment as processes and practices that exist on a nonthreatening continuum of embodiments? Are we getting closer to that? How can dance artists help audiences develop an awareness that their embodiments are these rich amazing things that are being limited by social norms?

SD: As an artist and activist I've learned that the crucible, the transformation happens through personal, shared, felt experience. It's a butts in seats thing, getting people in the theater, or into the conversation, or into the workshop, or into the online experience. Whether we're watching a dance film online, or watching dancers on stage, that experience, that witnessing gives us an embodied visceral experience. It involves our breath, our heart, our muscles contracting in empathic reaction. There's something magical about when the lights go down and your guard is dropped, your heart and mind are open in a different way. The magic and change happen there.

Visit freshmeatproductions.org/programs for information about the 20th anniversary offerings and about FMP's collaborators on *The Lost Art of Dreaming*.

This article appeared in the Spring 2021 issue of [In Dance](#).