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ARTS SECTION page 1
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Sean Dorsey tells transsexual gay man's story

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You might expect Sean Dorsey's dances to be aesthetically transgressive or politically provocative. Dorsey - born female but now preferring the pronoun "he" - is the founder and director of Fresh Meat Productions, which he says is the nation's first year-round presenter of transgender arts.

Sometimes the most progressive thing an artist can do with a marginalized experience is to present it in a familiar, easily relatable form. Weaving movement with story, the 36-year-old Dorsey tells finely crafted, poignant tales of transgender life. In "Uncovered: The Diary Project," premiering this weekend at Dance Mission Theater, Dorsey turns his attention to the life of Lou Sullivan.

A female-to-male transsexual gay man, Sullivan lived in San Francisco from 1975 until his death in 1991, founding groundbreaking peer-support groups and publishing newsletters and informational booklets. The voluminous journals, medical records and letters he bequeathed to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society form the source material for "Lou," Dorsey's new suite of dances.

Q: You didn't know anything about Lou Sullivan when you undertook this project.

A: A lot of transgendered people haven't even heard of Lou Sullivan. That revealed to me the need to bring his story forward. I researched several people in letters and memoirs, knowing I

wanted to work on a single life story. Lou's actual writing is gorgeous and articulate and sensual and so clear and beautiful. As soon as I read it, I knew he was the one.

Q: Three other excellent dancers star in this show with you. How do you, as a quartet, bring Lou Sullivan's story to life?

A: I'm not trying to physically embody Lou onstage or impersonate him.

I open the piece with my own writing as a witness narrator. All the rest of the text is taken from his journals and grouped into thematic episodes like love, transition, loss. They follow the arc of his life and journey, but some are in a more storytelling voice, some are more abstract and poetic.

Q: Lou Sullivan's achievements as an activist could fill pages and pages. What stands out to you?

A: Lou clarified the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity, that they are separate things. What an incredible and brave pioneer he was. It was so hard at that time to be granted hormones, and you were not allowed them if you identified as a homosexual. Lou was rejected three times by the gender clinic, but he persisted. He opened the door for thousands after him.

Q: And yet "Lou" is not just about his political achievements.

A: The reason I chose to work with Lou's life is the phenomenal activism he undertook. But what I'm concerned with in my work is the deeper emotional life.

Lou wrote about his very deep struggle and insecurity and pain around his body pre-transition. And then he has an absolute explosion of pleasure and sexuality post-transition, in San Francisco in the '90s. This transgendered man lived and hooked up and cruised and got busy on the non-transgendered gay scene. He was out there and alive.

Q: How important is it to you to speak to transgender and straight audiences alike?

A: For me, making a dance is about revealing what is honest and vulnerable about being human. I bring a specific transgendered experience to the stage, but I do it to bring out universal themes of loss and longing.

I have people still who come up to me in tears, saying, "I never see myself onstage like that." They feel they're finally seeing themselves mirrored onstage in an honest way.

Other people tell me, "I'm straight as a board, but you had me in tears." People who are not transgendered can relate to the deeper journey of change and authenticity.

Q: Lou Sullivan spent much of his later life making sure that documentation of his experience would be preserved. Do you think he'd be happy with "Lou"?

A: I get very emotional when people ask me that question. I never knew Lou, never met him, but I've come to know him so intimately through his writings. We share a passion for bringing forward life experiences. I hope he'd be pleased.

Sean Dorsey Dance: "Uncovered: The Diary Project." Thurs.-Sun. Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St., San Francisco. \$15. (415) 273-4633, www.freshmeatproductions.org.



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This article appeared on page E - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle