

Uncovered: The Diary Project

Sean Dorsey shines a spotlight on trans issues with *Uncovered: The Diary Project*.

By Justin Ocean



FLESH DANCE Sean Dorsey, center, drew from his own diary, along with those of others, for *Uncovered*.

Photograph: Lydia Daniller

There's nothing quite like the body—the instrument—of a dancer, who spends hours learning its limits and configurations in precise detail. But what happens when that dancer's external body clashes with his or her inner self?

"It's both a blessing and a huge challenge," admits Sean Dorsey, a female-to-male trans dancer and choreographer. This week, the critically acclaimed San Franciscan brings his latest work, *Uncovered: The Diary Project*—featuring special guest Kate Bornstein—to town as part of Dixon Place's HOT! Festival. "Almost all modern dance is completely, traditionally gendered. Yet there's something really magical about being in your body and your skin in an honest, full way and being able to share something physically. In my work, I strive to articulate that which is most human and visceral and honest about us."

In the case of *Uncovered*—the culmination of a year-and-a-half-long research project in which Dorsey, 36, read diaries of and conducted interviews with other trans and non-trans gay men—that has meant drawing upon "the specific experience of being transgendered," he says, "to explore universal issues of difference, belonging, love, loss and history." It's a mouthful, for sure, but a surprisingly accessible one once it's translated onstage through Dorsey's capable hands (and body).

That accessibility makes sense considering Dorsey's background. A Vancouver native with graduate work in political science and community economic development, he came to a dance career not through the conservatory but through the pragmatic world of community organizing around antipoverty, women's and queer issues.

"It wasn't until I was 27 that I allowed myself to pursue dance in a serious way," says Dorsey, who then left grad school for dance school. "It took me several years to not feel guilty about wanting to be a full-time artist. I came to peace as I realized that my art was my activism, that this was the best way I could personally effect change."

Soon Dorsey relocated to his "artistic home," San Francisco, and in 2001 he founded Fresh Meat Productions, the nation's first nonprofit dedicated to a year-round trans arts program. It's racked up the accolades ever since.

Dorsey has a style that eschews the heady and abstract (“I’m just not interested in gossamer-clad dancers creating geometric patterns in space,” he admits), and instead combines movement with music and narration to focus on the concrete, lived nuances of being a trans person.

“My audiences are an amazing mix of transgender, queer and straight people...and they howl with laughter, murmur with identification and get moved to tears—at a modern dance show!” Dorsey enthuses. “As human beings, we move and we speak. It’s the most organic thing in the world.”

“Lost/Found,” the first dance in the two-part *Uncovered* program, captures the confusion, innocence and whimsy of youthful longing in a duet sparked in part by Dorsey’s own early childhood diary. In part two, “Lou,” a quartet of performers brings to life the devastating and evocative journals of Lou Sullivan, a pioneering FTM trans man who died in 1991.

“The subject matter was incredible,” details Dorsey, who pored over and hand-transcribed 30-plus years of material at the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California (due to the delicate nature of the archive’s collection, photocopies were not allowed). “A young girl yearns to be a man, grows up and obtains hormones and surgery, becomes a pioneering activist, cruises and fucks and loves wildly, contracts HIV and struggles to leave a legacy while facing his own death.”

Bornstein, another legendary trans activist, kicks off the bill. A former neighbor of Sullivan’s and currently a big fan of Dorsey’s, she hopes to contextualize his performances with what she sees as a major shift from MTF- to FTM-centric trans culture.

“Twenty years ago when you said the word *transsexual*—*transgendered* wasn’t around then—it was to mean male-to-female, middle-aged, either übersexy or überfoolish,” explains Bornstein. “But in the short time of 15 years, the iconic face of transgender is female-to-male. How did that happen? What did that?” Weaving her own writing with footage, pictures and quotes from five key forebears into a prologue, she hopes to answer just that.

As for where Dorsey fits in, Bornstein sees him as a young Laurie Anderson, comparing his mixing of artistic styles beyond strict dance theater to the acclaimed experimental musician’s own performance art. But her admiration is personal too. “I think about Sean like a proud parent—proud of where he’s taken the field of transgender theory and how he’s managed to put it into context of art and make it more and more and more accessible,” she says. “He’s gone far over anything I’ve ever done. This guy rocks.”

Uncovered: The Diary Project plays Thu 30–Sun 2 at the [Dixon Place Laboratory Theater](#). See [hotfestival.org](#).

[See more in Gay](#)