

The Laramie Project

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Eight actors portray more than 70 characters in The Laramie Project (Source:Bad Habit Productions)

Bad Habit Productions continues its season-long theme of "Truth and Perception" with **The Laramie Project**, a production of the Moises Kaufman play that originated when 10 members of New York's Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, in the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was so badly beaten that, as responding police officer Reggie Fluty later described his condition, "his head was distorted."

This production marks ten years since Shepard's death at the hands of convicted killers Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. What the current production explores is how attitudes in America have changed (and remained the same) in the decade since Shepard's death galvanized the GLBT community and made inroads into America's consciousness regarding the threats to the legal rights and physical safety of gay and lesbian citizens.

Since Shepard's slaying, two mythologies have grown up around him. To the GLBT community, Shepard is a martyr and a true life example of the need for comprehensive hate crimes legislation. For others, Shepard is an example of how the media tends to sensationalize and distort events, creating instant legends that carry great emotional weight but do not reflect commonplace reality.

To one side, Shepard was an innocent who was targeted by two young men who had little regard for his life, and little compunction about beating, robbing, and tying him to a fence in the middle of the Wyoming prairie, leaving him to die, because of his sexual orientation.

To the other, Shepard was the victim of a robbery by strung-out addicts that went too far, with Shepard's sexuality being beside the point and hate crimes legislation a "special right" demanded by gays who untruthfully portray Shepard as a saint.

The Laramie Project investigates both sides, not by talking to politicians or activists, but through a boiled-down composite of more than 200 interviews conducted with the people of Laramie, a small city abruptly caught up in a big-time news cycle, and the global infamy that came with world-wide media attention.

In this production, a handful of actors--eight in all--portray more than 70 individuals, ranging from Laramie's chief of police to the president of the University of Wyoming. Among the interviewees are clergy (including a Baptist minister whose views are unfriendly toward gays and uncompromising toward Shepard: in his last moments, the pastor says, he hopes Shepard had a moment to reflect of the Gospels and his "lifestyle;" a Unitarian minister; and a Roman Catholic priest who stepped forward to organize a prayer vigil for Shepard), emergency room doctors, cops, University faculty, everyday people, and transcripts that quote the killers themselves as saying that Shepard was killed for making a sexual advance on them.

A recording of the comments of Baptist minister Fred Phelps, the anti-gay clergyman who picketed Shepard's funeral with placards reading "Matt in Hell" and "God Hates Fags," is also played; "God's hatred is pure," thunders Phelps, "because it's a determination that he's going to send some people to Hell."

As one shocked citizen remarks, "I guess I didn't realize the magnitude with which some people hate."

Worse than hate, perhaps, is the sheer disregard for the humanity of McKinney's and Henderson's victims. The two men were in the habit of robbing people whenever they ran low on drug funds, according to two giggling, boozy girls; "Anyone they could

overpower or outnumber was fair game," they laugh, adding, "We're the product of our community."

But that community, until Shepard's killing, seemed not to know what sort of young people it was turning out--or how deep the divides in attitudes were. Many of the interviewees say they have nothing against gays, but then add that Shepard was "flaunting" his homosexuality and, therefore, was partly to blame for his own murder.

Others see both sides of the equation--victim and killer, straight and gay, a hetero-normative presumption of "normalcy" for straights and "pathology" for gays that leads to a devaluing of gays and lesbians as living human beings--and respond with what might be a form of existential terror. Certainties are ripped away; the illusion of security evaporates.

Berated by a gay correspondent, one straight citizen snaps, "You can't possibly know what I am thinking." That, indeed, is the point gays and lesbians have reiterated time and again as religious and political figures take to their lecterns and spin stories of elaborate, sinister agendas. Like anyone else in rural Wyoming, the resident gays and lesbians simply wish to enjoy the wide open spaces, and the peace and quiet, of America's least populous state--and be let alone, to go about their lives unmolested.

Whatever interpretation one might wish to make regarding the actions of McKinney and Henderson, the unquestionable brutality of their crime brings into focus essential points from both sides of the debate. The authentic voices of Laramie residents--shocked, angered, afraid, resentful of media intrusion and the blackened reputation of their town--make a valid point that any violent crime is an expression of hate. But the gay perspective puts the question a different way: why is that hatred linked so deeply to rage and violence? Who is more likely to find himself on the wrong end of that hatred? And why?

This production makes use of a simple device to focus attention to the different characters. A cluster of platforms at different levels breaks up the performance space; the actors array themselves around the platforms, or venture into the audience (an effective technique, especially when it comes to an "in your face" moment of strident media voices).

The performances can be intimate, almost private; they can also be expansive, assertive, declamatory. It's the difference between listening (as though for an answer) and declaring (as if to fend off any answer that is not the one already invested in), and the tension that arises between the two is propulsive and compelling.

The names of some of the interviewees are stenciled around the set. Original songs from Boston's area musicians enhance the production's many moods. Rear-projected slides provide viscerally powerful illustrations: the split-rail fence where Shepard was tied and left to die, a downtown street in Laramie that almost looks like a set for an old Western movie, photos of a parade that drew hundreds of marchers in Shepard's memory.

This is a play about individuals, rather than cultures, but it gives an unsettling glimpse into the very different cultures that exist, sometimes with catastrophic results, in America's communities--cultures based not on different values, as is often claimed, but on different definitions of who is, and is not, fully human... not just individually, but in terms of family and other intimate relationships.

Ten years later, looking around, we might well ask how much real progress has been made--not just for gays and lesbians, but for the human community at large.

The Laramie Project runs through December 13 at the Plaza Black Box Theatre at the Boston Center for the Arts, located at 539 Tremont Street in Boston's South End.

Performance Schedule: Wednesday, Thursday evening at 7:30 p.m.; Friday evening at 8:00 p.m.; Saturday at 2:00 and 8:00 p.m.; Sunday at 2:00 p.m.

Tickets cost \$25 at the door general admission; students receive a \$10 discount. Tickets available at www.BostonTheatreScene.com

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