

Two Perspectives on Hate and Tolerance: Riverside Theatre's "The Laramie Project"

Written by Jill Pearson
Tuesday, 08 April 2003 18:00

Riverside Theatre's presentations of *The Laramie Project* have been sold out for the past two weekends, which in itself speaks for this powerful and brilliantly crafted play. Protests are even scheduled outside the Iowa City theatre on Saturday, April 12, in response to the play.

The Laramie Project is the result of a series of interviews with the citizens of Laramie, Wyoming, after the brutal 1998 murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. The play begins by describing the small town of Laramie, then audiences experience the events surrounding Shepard's death, and finally, we see the aftermath of these events, including the trials of the two students accused (and ultimately found guilty) of the murder.

Playwright Moises Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project made six trips to Laramie in a year and a half, and gathered more than 200 interviews. In the introduction of *The Laramie Project*

, Kaufman says, "There are moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus. At these junctures, the event becomes a lightning rod of sorts, attracting and distilling the essence of these philosophies and convictions. By paying careful attention in moments like this to people's words, one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large. ... The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard was an event of this kind."

Through the voices of the play's characters, we learn that the 21-year-old Shepard was lured away from a bar by two men who hoped to rob him. The young men then took the victim to the outskirts of town, where they beat him, tied him to a buck fence, and left him to die. The next day, a lost biker stumbled upon Shepard and ran to the nearest house for help. The severely injured Shepard was taken to a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, but he died within days.

The play raises issues revolving around sexual politics, homosexuality, hate crimes, education, privilege, and acceptance. The script asks us to tolerate, if not understand, gay and lesbian lifestyles, but it *doesn't* address one crucial question: Can a play such as this really change someone's opinions or values? Or are the people who see this kind of play already tolerant of homosexuality?

In addition to sparking questions, Riverside's performance of Kaufman's powerful script is very well acted, and the set is simple yet visually attractive. Each actor portrays between six and nine characters. All were in casual blue-colored costumes and used simple props – a hat, a jacket – to represent each character. Most memorable and versatile were Robert Wray, Megan McKamy, and Joseph Curnutte. These three really shined in each of their roles, and found individual voices for their characters. Also worth mentioning is Ron Clark's monologue as Matthew Shepard's father. This piece is the climax of the play anyway, but Clark gives the role genuine emotion.

It's a show that shouldn't be missed for many reasons: It's a history lesson that includes powerful ideas, the script is very well-written, the acting is unbeatable, and it's a chance for audience members to test their own beliefs and morals, and to ask themselves what they're willing to tolerate or accept.

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Play Captures the Contradictions of Laramie

by Zach Carstensen

The Laramie Project correctly captures the juxtaposed contradictions of the ghastly murder of Matthew Shepard and the events that follow. It begs the question: How could a crime so primitive and hateful occur in a town and a state that allegedly prides itself on a "live and let live" attitude? It probes our conscience, imploring us to consider whether there has been true societal movement toward acceptance of gays and lesbians, and whether as unique individuals we accept gay and lesbian people.

And, it tests our empathy as humans. Can we comprehend the pain of the Shepard family, the pitiful disdain chirped by Fred Phelps (who has organized protests against the play), the theological equivocation of the Baptist minister, and the upheaval the act forced on Laramie, Wyoming, its people, and the entire nation? In the end, beyond the unanswerable questions and ever-darkening shades of gray, the play returns to its core. As playwright Moises Kaufman explains: "This is not about the case; it's about the town."

Since March 28, the Riverside Theatre has performed the Laramie Project in both Iowa City and Mount Vernon. Most nights have been sold out, and future performances promise to offer not just the emotional and moral tumult of Kaufman's work but also protests by Phelps. A collaborative work between Cornell College and Riverside Theatre, the performance mixes student actors with eastern-Iowa professionals and regional faculty.

Notably, the Riverside Theatre production of *The Laramie Project* is the first Iowa production not to suffer at the hands and pen of an editor or censor.

Built off a two-year study, through interviews, of the town and its people, many of whom were directly affected by the tragedy, the play travels a free-flow, stream-of-conscious path through the history of the event. Kaufman and his group pick up the action and feeling in the days immediately following the attack and continue to the end. It exhaustively charts the anguish, discovery, mercy, and redemption of the town and its people.

Capable performances from veteran actors Robert Wray and Ron Clark and a spirited showing from Megan McKamy anchor the Riverside cast. Though Ryan Hitchon was noticeably sick at the performance last Friday, his lanky physique and dour presence added a profound earnestness to the entire affair.

At press time, limited tickets were still available for several remaining performances of The Laramie Project, which is being performed daily through Sunday. For tickets, call (319)338-7672.

HBO's abridged production of the play, directed by Kaufman, is also available on DVD and video.