

The Laramie Project

BY MICHELANGELO SIGNORILE

In a time of all-night cable news and Web sites that update information by the minute, it is no small triumph when a medium such as theater meticulously unravels further facts and perspectives surrounding a news event. When this happens it is like a splash of cold water in the face: a sudden reminder that there is no universal truth about an experience, just countless interpretations of occurrences. Some are shaped for the marketplace — sold with visuals that shock and entertain — while others are infused with the politics, philosophical strains, religious beliefs and other grand themes on life that the interpreters hold dear.

With a jolt, The Laramie Project reveals that and much more. The members of Moises Kaufman's Tectonic Theater Project, the New York troupe acclaimed for its Off-Broadway production of *Gross Indecency: The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, push us to rethink everything we've seen or read about Laramie, Wyoming, and about the gay-bashing murder of the 24-year-old University of Wyoming student, Mathew Shepard. Kaufman and the Tectonics ask a couple of bold questions: Is there an undeniable, agreed upon set of facts surrounding a gruesome killing like Shepard's, an event so unfathomable to most of us that we need to grasp onto concrete motivations? Or does telling a story further and through more eyes only result in a greater number of complicated, interesting perspectives that nonetheless do not bring us closer to the answers we so desperately seek?

The mainstream press's inadequacy in exploring how hate is cultivated in small town America, beyond the pat clichés and stereotypes that bombarded the airwaves in the weeks and months following the slaying, is a theme that runs throughout The Laramie Project. Video clips depicting television news reports barge in at peaceful and reflective moments, reminding us just how much the people of Laramie were seized upon by the international media but often weren't heard above the din of recriminations.

The Laramie Project looks at a tragic event through the eyes of those at ground zero, documenting their thoughts, their memories and their reve-

lations, and then literally plays them back to us. Director Kaufman, assistant director and writer Leigh Fondakowski and the eight actors in the company traveled to Laramie several times over the course of more than a year, beginning two weeks after Shepard was beaten by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson and left hanging on a fence post to die.

Collectively, Kaufman and the Tectonics conducted over 200 interviews with Laramie residents. Using bare sets and maintaining a rapid succession of characters, the actors offer up their reportage and commentary, alternately playing themselves, the townspeople, and even director Kaufman.

The writers and actors have the perspective of outsiders who appear to be taking on the daunting task of trying to "say it right," as one of the characters in the play, a

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Catholic priest named Father Roger, implores the troupe to do. With those words some might accuse the writers and actors of profound arrogance — of believing they are showing us the truth that no one else could. But Kaufman and the Tectonics more so seem to be confronting us, telling us that the narrative of every event we see in the media is crafted in a similar manner: a slickly-produced mini-drama attempting to "say it right" by using real people whose words (in the form of the "sound bite") are tweaked for effect. The Laramie Project posits that in the case of the Shepard murder as well the media had a set narrative going in: small town, Christian values, gay haters. The writers and actors thus seem to openly and admittedly offer an alternate, equally manipulated narrative, using the very same people — and many others who were

ignored — tweaking their words no less for effect but to a different end.

It is complicated and conflicted voices like that of The Laramie Project's Father Roger that were rarely heard in the media whirl, which tended to focus on the black and white: the voices of fire and brimstone preachers or of the educated, liberal, heterosexuals associated with the university, in addition to the usual sound bites from police and family.

"I'm not gonna sit here and say, 'I was just this bold guy — no fear,'" Father Roger says. "I was scared — I was very vocal in this community when this happened — and I thought, 'You know, should we, uh, should we call the Bishop and ask him permission to do the vigil?' And I was like, 'Hell, no, I'm not going to do that.' His per-

mission doesn't make it correct, you know that? And I'm not knocking Bishops, but what is correct is correct."

That kind of tension and emotion is excavated from the people of Laramie with precision. One after another, the varied perspectives of a diverse assortment of individuals, from a lesbian professor to a waitress, from a rancher to a Muslim student, are fleshed out. The high-profile figures who dominated news reports surrounding the murder and the funeral are of course present too, including the infamous Kansas-based Rev. Fred Phelps, the antigay crusader who traveled to Laramie to protest at Shepard's funeral, complete with his followers and their "God Hates Fags" signs. But even through these more obvious characters, something new about the story

is unearthed, often a detail or a perspective that was previously lost or perhaps distorted.

When Laramie police officer Reggie Fluty, who took Shepard's bloodied body down from the fence, is told by doctors that Shepard was HIV positive, the morbid sensationalism that characterized much of the media's reporting of this news is non-existent in the play. So is the fear and anger directed at Shepard. The Laramie Project rather displays the compassion of people who'd been previously portrayed as one-dimensional and closed-minded. Fluty had possibly been exposed to the virus because she came in contact with a great deal of Shepard's blood, having had several cuts on her hands — due to "building, uh, a lean-to for my llamas," as she describes it. She had to begin taking the

anti-HIV drug
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in America, draws a few howls as well. Just enough levity is brought to two colorful characters who seem to represent quintessential Laramie men: Doc, a no-nonsense, gritty cab driver who befriended Shepard as he drove him from place to place in town; and Matt Galloway, the quirky bartender at the Fireside Bar, the last person to see Shepard before he left the bar with Henderson and McKinney.

The humorous bits underscore the writers' basic point: The narratives we'd so far seen about this murder, alternating between maudlin and angry, were superficial at best. Most of us, after all, have experienced moments of laughter at a funeral, or have told a joke during even the most tumultuous personal crisis. Often, this is in fact how we get by. Kaufman and the Tectonics straightforwardly reject the notion that a story must be stripped of its humor and laced with syrupy sentimentality so as to underscore its gravity.

Perhaps in a similar rejection of mawkishness, Mathew Shepard himself, whose smiling face was beamed around the

LARAMIE world countless
POP 2668 times during cov-
ELEV 7165 erage of the murder,

never appears in The Laramie Project, nor does his likeness. Yet almost everything about him — his sense of

humor, his sexual habits, his likes and dislikes — is more than adequately weaved throughout the play via the descriptions of both the people who knew him intimately and those who only knew bits and pieces about him.

This is significant simply because Shepard's blond good looks were no doubt very much a reason why his murder — and not those of scores of other gay-bashing victims — received enormous media attention and became the cause celebre for the issue of hate crimes. For Kaufman and the Tectonics, there are many ways to tell a story — even without the protagonist. In breaking from the pack to detail its own version of events The Laramie Project shows us how we're often influenced by visual images, by deep-seated stereotypes and by our own fears. Using words and depictions to influence us to an equal degree but in a different direction, The Laramie Project above all else challenges us not to ever accept that there is a final word.

before 36 hours from the time of exposure had transpired.

"Quite frankly, I wanted to lash at somebody," Flutie's mother, Marge, a social services worker, tells the audience. "Not at Mathew, please understand that, not one of us was mad at Mathew." She pauses, and then adds, "But we maybe wanted to squeeze McKinney's head off."

Marge's last line, with her signature Wyoming inflection, gets a big laugh out of the audience. For all the brutality and horror on which The Laramie Project is focused, it does not lose sight of the humor of every day small town life. Marge is chock full of quips, and her spats with daughter Reggie are comical. Jedediah Schultz, a student in the theater department at the University of Wyoming who struggles with his parents over playing a gay men in Tony Kushner's *Angels*