

The Laramie Project

Research for the *The Laramie Project*, Moisés Kaufman's internationally successful play, began one month after a horrific crime occurred in the city of Laramie, Wyoming. Members of Kaufman's theatrical group, Tectonic Theater Project, volunteered to travel with their director from New York City to the wide-open ranges of the West in order to gather in-person interviews from Laramie's populace. The idea was to capture the emotions, reflections, and reactions of the people who were most closely related to the crime—a brutal beating and subsequent death of a young college student. Was this a hate crime? Or was it a random, senseless assault and robbery? No matter which, Kaufman's objective was to learn through the town folks' raw responses how the issues of homosexuality, religion, class, economics, education, and non-traditional lifestyles were reflected through this crime. How did this crime define the culture, not just of this Western town, but of the entire United States?

In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old gay student registered at the University of Wyoming, was tied to a cattle fence, beaten about the head, robbed, and left to die on a bitterly cold night in October. Eighteen hours later, he was accidentally discovered by a biker, who had trouble believing that the figure he saw attached to the fence was human. Police and ambulances were dispatched, and Shepard was taken to a local hospital; but this was all done to no avail. Shepard was beyond recovery. He never regained

MOISÉS KAUFMAN

2000





Moisés Kaufman Photo by George De Sota. Getty Images

consciousness and died several days later due to his head injuries. Two local young men were charged with the crime.

The play is based on over 400 interviews with about 100 Laramie residents, as well as journal entries from the members of Tectonic Theater Project and Kaufman, as they reflect on their own reactions to the crime and to the interviews they carried out. It is structured as if it were a documentary as it attempts to re-enact the events that occurred on that fateful night.

The play opened at the Denver Theater Center in March 2000 and two months later moved to Union Square Theater in New York, where it ran for five months. Later, HBO, working with the Sundance Theater Lab, turned the play into a film, which Kaufman also directed. It was presented as the opening-night film at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, with Robert Redford, the founder of Sundance, making a special appearance to introduce the movie. For his work, Kaufman received two Emmy Award nominations for director and writer of the film.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Moisés Kaufman is an award-winning director and playwright, whose plays have engrossed audiences

around the world. He is also the founder and artistic director of the New York-based Tectonic Theater Project, the group that traveled to Wyoming with Kaufman to help research the play *The Laramie Project* (2000).

Kaufman was born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela. He attended a business school for a while but soon grew bored with that subject and joined a local dramatic group, Thespis. At the age of twenty-three, Kaufman decided he wanted to become a director. It was around this same time, writes Don Shewey for *American Theatre*, that Kaufman also came "to grips with his homosexuality" and decided to move to New York. While in the States, Kaufman continued to study his dramatic art at New York University.

Kaufman's homeland, however, has not forgotten him. Venezuela demonstrated its pride for its native son by presenting a retrospective of his work at the Consulate General of Venezuela in 1993. In 1999, Venezuela once again honored him with the Artist of the Year Award, presented by the Casa del Artista.

Kaufman's adopted home, the United States, has also celebrated Kaufman's creative genius by bestowing him with several prestigious awards. He won the Joe A. Callaway Award as writer and director of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, a play that ran for over 600 performances in New York City alone. First published in 1997, the play went on to win many other prizes, including the Lucille Lortel Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Garland Award, and the GLAAD Media Award. This play, which explores what Victorian men and women thought about such topics as homosexuality, class, religion, and the British monarchy, also won the Lambda Book Award when the play was published as a book in 1998. It was the money made from the production of *Gross Indecency* that would finance Kaufman's subsequent and also extremely successful venture, *The Laramie Project*.

Kaufman directed the 2004 Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play *I Am My Own Wife*, a story about a German transvestite. In addition to his roles as director and writer, Kaufman has taught the art of direction at the 42nd Street Collective in New York. As of 2005, he was working on an original piece called *33 Variations*, a story inspired by Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Act I

The Laramie Project begins with what is titled, "Moment." It is in this brief section (which is repeated throughout the play) that the members of Tectonic Theater Project read entries from the journals they have kept during the process of interviewing the people of Laramie. This repeated section also affords special characters a chance to deliver longer monologues than those given in the rest of the play, which is set up as interviews. After an opening comment by the narrator, one of Laramie's long-time residents provides a bit of personal history about living in Laramie. Through this narration, the audience also gains some insights into the history of the town. Other people join in: some are newcomers to the town; others have lived in **Laramie** for a long time. All of them provide background information on what it is like, in general, to be involved in the culture of the town. This sets up the atmosphere of the play. It gives the audience an idea of what life was like before the murder of **Man Shepard**.

The tension of the plays turns when **Jedediah Schultz** begins to talk. This is the first time that there is an allusion to the fact that something seriously wrong has happened to Laramie—that the town has changed. **Jedediah** begins with the statement: "It's hard to talk about **Laramie** now." Then he continues: "If you would have asked me before, I would have told you **Laramie** is a beautiful town." Things have obviously changed.

Another "Moment" is provided. In this one, **Rebecca Hilliker**, a college professor, offers her opinions of the students. They are different from ones she has taught before in other towns, in other states. They speak their mind. They have **strong** opinions, which **Hilliker** likes because this creates a "dynamic in education." The "Moment" next changes focus, returning to the thoughts of **Jedediah**, who relates the story of how he won a scholarship to the University by performing a scene from the play about homosexuality, *Angels in America*. He concludes by stating that his parents were opposed to his doing this and did not show up for his performance. His statements begin to demonstrate the chasm in the community between those who are open-minded about homosexuality and those who are not.

The play returns to the interview format, with several more community members giving their views of the town. They provide more history, such

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- *The Laramie Project* was adapted as a film by HBO in 2001. It starred **Christina Ricci**, **Steve Buscemi**, **Peter Fonda**, **Janeane Garofalo**, **Dylan Baker**, **Amy Madigan**, and many others.

as the presence and influence of the railroads. **Marge Murray** discusses the class distinction that she feels between those who are educated and those who are not. But overall, **Marge** believes that the general sentiment of the people is "live and let live." However, when **Marge** is told that what she is saying will eventually end up in a play, she decides that she had better not tell the interviewer **everything** that she knows.

In the next "Moment," **Andy Paris**, a member of Tectonic Theater Project, reveals that they have finally come across someone who really knew **Matthew Shepard**. This person is **Doc O'Connor**, a limousine driver who befriended **Shepard**. **Doc** provides a description of **Shepard**, depicting him as a slightly built young man, who was not afraid of speaking his mind. The next few people who are interviewed continue with a description of **Shepard**. They talk about how friendly he was despite his initial shyness.

Doc reappears, and he provides more background information about the people of Laramie, stating that **Shepard** was by far not the only gay person in town. Most gay people of the town will not make this information public, **Doc** believes, but that does not mean that they do not exist. **Doc** also believes that the overall belief that underlies the community is that of "live and let live."

Next, the interviews switch to a variety of religious opinions. A Baptist minister appears; his message from the pulpit is that the Bible does not condone homosexuality. A representative of the Mormon Church reinforces this statement. A member of the Unitarian Church speaks next; this person is open-minded about homosexuality. Then a young Muslim woman is interviewed. She talks about how difficult she found it to wear a scarf, a symbol of her religion's prescribed modesty. She

believes that people in the community challenged her right to wear it.

The scene changes to that of the Fireside Bar, the last place that **Shepard** was seen alive. The owner and the bartender **are** interviewed. Matt Galloway, the bartender, relates what happened in the bar on the night that **Shepard** was killed. It was in the bar that the accused murderers, Aaron **McKinney** and Russell Henderson, go over to **Shepard**, talk to him, and later leave with him.

In the next section there is a discussion about **McKinney** and **Henderson**. Residents give their opinions about the young men, most of them talking about how nice the two boys are. **Henderson**, they say, was an Eagle Scout. **McKinney** was a "good kid."

The last section of the first act provides the description of how Aaron **Kreifels** finds **Shepard** after he was beaten and left for dead. There is also a statement from **Reggie Fluty**, the first police officer on the scene and from **Dr. Cantway**, the emergency room doctor who treats **Shepard** upon his arrival at the hospital.

Act 2

Act 2 begins with an account of how the media arrived in Laramie after the news story about **Shepard** was released. There are also comments from the people of Laramie about how they responded to the media, as well as how they responded to the news. There is disbelief, anger, and fear. At the arraignment, most of the people who witnessed it broke down in tears. There are discussions that question how such a thing could have happened in Laramie.

Interspersed between various interviews are medical updates on the physical condition of **Shepard**, who had fallen into a coma. Meanwhile, both **McKinney** and **Henderson** plead not guilty to the charges. Citizens reflect on how they might have prevented this from happening. The bartender, Matt Galloway, believes he should have stepped in and stopped **Shepard** from driving away with **McKinney** and **Henderson**, sensing that the two young men were looking for trouble.

Reggie Fluty tells her story about finding **Shepard**. She also relates the fear she has of having contacted A D S from having handled **Shepard**'s bloody body without gloves. She must go through a series of tests to see if she is infected.

Jedediah reflects on **Shepard**'s beating and questions his minister's belief that it is wrong to be a homosexual. Several other residents keep hammering

home their concepts that homosexuality is against God's wishes. There is a vigil, organized by the Catholic priest. But none of the other ministers **will** attend. During the homecoming parade, a large group of **Laramie** residents come together, marching behind a banner for **Shepard**. As the parade winds around town, the group keeps growing in size.

There is another medical update. **Shepard** has died.

Act 3

A funeral is arranged for **Shepard**. It is held in the Catholic Church. Not attending is Reverend **Fred Phelps**, who makes a statement that even God has hate. And the Reverend believes it is his job to preach God's hate. "WE [sic] love that attribute of God, and we're going to preach it. Because God's hatred is pure." The Reverend adds: "If God doesn't hate fags, why does he put 'em in hell?"

This causes a reaction in **Romaine Patterson**; she organizes a group of friends who decide to dress up as angels after they hear that the Reverend is coming to Laramie for **Henderson**'s trial. "There'll be ten to twenty of us that are angels—and what we're gonna do is we're gonna encircle **Phelps** . . . and because of our big wings—we are gonna com-plete-ly block him."

There is the jury selection scene and then a scene in which **Henderson** changes his plea from not guilty to guilty. **Henderson** makes a statement that he is sorry. The judge, however, does not believe **Henderson** is truly remorseful and sentences him to life in prison. A year later, **McKinney** is put on trial. During the trial, a tape of his confession is heard. The details of the beating are related. The jury **finds him** guilty of felony murder, which means he could have been given the death sentence. **Shepard**'s father, however, asks that he be given life in prison instead.

I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew.

CHARACTERS

Sherry Aanenson

Sherry is Russell Henderson's (one of the men convicted of Matt Shepard's death) landlord. She found Russell to be "so sweet."

Baptist Minister

The Baptist Minister (who does not want his name used) believes that it is stated in the Bible that homosexuality is wrong.

🌀 **Stephen Belber**

Stephen is one of the members of Tectonic Theater Project who traveled to Laramie, conducted interviews, helped to write the play, and played himself, as well as several other characters in the play.

Dr. Cantway

Dr. Cantway is an emergency room doctor at Iverson Memorial Hospital in Laramie. He helps try to save Matt Shepard's life. He describes Matt's injuries as looking as if he had been in an accident in a car going "eighty miles an hour."

Catherine Connolly

Catherine is a professor at the University of Wyoming in Laramie and she considers herself to be the "first 'out' lesbian or gay faculty member on campus." She feels fear grip her after the death of Matt Shepard and is afraid to walk down the street.

Rob DeBree

Rob is a detective sergeant for the Albany County Sheriff's Department in Laramie. He is the chief investigator of Matt Shepard's murder.

Philip Dubois

Philip is the president of the University of Wyoming. He is a relative newcomer to Wyoming but prefers it to big-city life. He used to feel that Laramie was a safe place to raise children.

Tiffany Edwards

Tiffany is a local Laramie reporter. She describes the outside media that descend on Laramie after the news of Matt Shepard's death is broadcast as "predators."

Reggie Fluty

Reggie is the police woman who responds to the 911 call and has to be tested for HIV after attempting to save Matt Shepard's life. She is the first police official on the scene.

🌀 **Leigh Fondakowski**

Leigh is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who traveled to Laramie to conduct interviews. She is a character in the play but does not play herself or any other characters.

Matt Galloway

Matt was the bartender at the Fireside bar. He was also a student at the University of Wyoming. He witnessed Matt Shepard leaving with Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney on the night of the murder. He later regretted not having done something to prevent the events that happened later that night. He disbelieves that Shepard would have approached these two men as some other people believed.

Jim Geringer

Jim is the governor of Wyoming. He makes a statement against the "heinous crime," but falls short of calling it a hate crime. He is challenged by a reporter who asks him why he has not pushed for hate crime legislation.

🌀 **Amanda Gronich**

Amanda is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie and conducted interviews. She plays herself and several other characters in the play.

Russell Henderson ✕

Russell is twenty-one years old when he offers Matt Shepard a ride home, then beats and robs him and leaves him to die. He later changes his plea from not guilty to guilty of the crime and is sentenced to life in prison.

Rebecca Hilliker

Rebecca is the head of the theater department at the University of Wyoming. She has recently moved to Wyoming and found the people there to be generally nice to one another. She states that she likes the fact that her students are such "free thinkers," unlike other students she has had. "You may not like their opinions," she says, "but they are honest."

Sergeant Hing

Hing is a detective at the Laramie Police Department and third generation resident. He offers a history of Laramie in the beginning of the play.

Sherry Johnson

Sherry was an administrative assistant at the University of Wyoming. She is a bit disheartened by the news coverage that the death of Matt Shepard has received, while the death of a Laramie policeman receives no attention at all.

Aaron Kreifels

Aaron is a student at the University of Wyoming. He was riding his bike the night Matt Shepard was murdered. He found Matt tied to the

fence and called an ambulance. He felt that God had wanted him to find Matt and that is why he took a different route on his bike.

Doug Laws

Doug is the leader of the Mormon Church in Laramie. He believes that the word of God proclaims that "a family is defined as one woman and one man and children."

Aaron McKinney ✕

Aaron is one of the young men who offered to drive Matt Shepard home on the night he was murdered. He is put on trial and found guilty.

Bill McKinney

Bill is the father of Aaron McKinney. He makes the statement that if this had been a murder of a heterosexual man, "this never would have made the national news." He is concerned that his son will be proven guilty before he even gets a trial.

Matt Mickelson

Matt is the owner of the Fireside Bar, the place where Matt Shepard was last seen. He offers some history of the place.

Marge Murray

Marge is mother to Reggie Fluty. She was very wowed about the possibility of Reggie contacting AIDS from Matt Shepard after Reggie administered medical services to him. Marge has lived in Laramie all her life and knows just about everyone. She offers a cultural history of the place, but when she finds out that all this information might be used in a play, she decides not to tell her interviewers all that she knows.

Doc O'Connor

Doc was a limousine driver and had driven Matt Shepard to Colorado on occasion. He is from the East Coast, originally, but has lived in Wyoming for quite some time. He offers his reflections on the type of people who live in Laramie. He says that he liked Matt Shepard "'cause he was straightforward."

☞ **Andy Paris**

Andy was a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to conduct interviews and to help write the play. Andy plays himself as well as several other characters in the play.

Romaine Patterson

Romaine is a close friend of Matt Shepard's. She says she used to call him "Choo-choo." What

she remembers most of him is his "beaming smile." He was friendly with everyone, she says. At his funeral, she and a group of her friends dress up in angel costumes in order to block the Fred Phelps' group of protestors.

Jon Peacock

Jon, a professor of political science, was Matt Shepard's academic advisor at the University of Wyoming. He helped Matt open up when he first came to Laramie. Matt wanted to work on issues of human rights, Jon states. And when Matt figured this out, he was excited by it.

Reverend Fred Phelps ✕

Fred is a minister (in Laramie). He is extremely anti-gay and comes to the funeral with a group of people to protest. He is concerned that everyone is making "Matthew Shepard into a poster boy for the gay lifestyle."

☞ **Greg Pierotti**

Greg is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to collect interviews and help with the writing of the play. Greg plays himself as well as several other characters in the play.

☞ **Barbara Pitts**

Barbara is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to collect interviews and help with the writing of the play. She played herself as well as several other characters in the play. She records the words of a sign she sees upon entering Laramie. It reads: "Hate is not a Laramie value."

Father Roger Schmit

Roger is a very outspoken Catholic priest in Laramie. He sets up a vigil as Matt lies dying in the hospital. He is disappointed when other ministers in the town will not become involved.

Jedediah Schultz

Jedediah is a student at the University of Wyoming. He used to love Laramie, but after Matt Shepard's death, he's afraid that everyone in the world will look at Laramie as another Waco—a place of a violent crime. Jedediah won a scholarship to the University based on a performance he did, a scene from the play *Angels in America*, which deals with homosexuality. His parents refused to come to see the play. Later, despite his minister's statements that homosexuality is wrong, Jedediah comes to his own conclusions.

Dennis Shepard

Dennis is ~~the father of Matt Shepard~~. He makes a very emotional statement at the trial of Henderson, stating that he would not seek the death penalty.

Lucy Thompson

Lucy was ~~Russell Henderson's grandmother~~. She makes a plea for his life at his trial.

Harry Woods

Harry is an older man who lives in the heart of Laramie. He offers the information that he is a homosexual and he secretly celebrates the addition of hundreds of people who join the homecoming parade in honor of Matt Shepard.

THEMES

Prejudice

The theme of prejudice is an undercurrent in *The Laramie Project*. Whether it is a prejudice caused by class, education, economics, religion, or sexual preference, when one person rigidly believes in one side of a concept and cannot perceive the other side and more importantly, will not tolerate someone else accepting another side, prejudice rears its head. In this play, the town must deal with its prejudice. Some of the people in the play represent the extreme edges of prejudice, such as the Reverend Fred Phelps, who believes so deeply that homosexuality is wrong that he preaches that God, himself, has hate. Other people, such as the parents of Jedediah Schultz, who refuse to go to Jedediah's tryout for a scholarship because their son is acting out a scene that involved homosexuality, have prejudice that is less strident. They miss the opportunity to share in their son's important moment. But this prejudice, at least in this one act, causes no physical harm to their son. Whether the accused murderers of Matthew Shepard were prejudiced against homosexuals or just used that as an attempt to excuse their murderous actions is not clear. In other words, the question remains, did they beat Matthew so severely because they did not like homosexuals or would they have done the same to any other student whom they might have robbed that night?

Marge Murray talks briefly about a prejudice that is possibly based on a combination of class, education, and economics. There are those without an education who work minimum-wage jobs and those who work at the university, she says, splitting the

town into two different groups. She insinuates that one part of the population looks down on the other, which is where prejudice begins.

After the murder of Matthew Shepard, some members of the gay community in Laramie fear for their lives because they are concerned that other straight people in town might want to do the same to them. Their fears are based not only on the prejudice people might hold against the gay members of town but also on the prejudice that some of the gay community might hold against the townspeople. Yes, there was a murder that might have been a hate crime. But the fear that someone in the straight **community** might commit a similar crime is in some ways another form of prejudice. The stereotyping of a macho cowboy is just as much a prejudice as that of a stereotyping of a gay person.

Hate Crimes

There is a discussion in part of this play about why the murder of Matthew Shepard received so much media attention. After all, the statement goes, there was a policeman who was killed during the same period, and no one paid much attention to it. Aaron McKinney's father also makes the statement that if Matthew Shepard had been a heterosexual, not as much would have been made of the crime. So what is the difference? Why was Shepard's murder so heinous? For some reason, a random murder, such as one that might occur during a robbery, seems less sensational. Whereas a crime committed out of hate seems more pointed. Is it the attitude behind the crime that arouses so much attention? Currently there is a national debate going on as courts attempt to define hate crimes. Are the definitions to include crimes committed against disabled people, people of color, or of different nationalities? What about crimes against people of a different sexual orientation? And how does one prove that the crime was a hate crime? There are no conclusions made in this play. The facts are presented. The interpretation of the facts is left for the audience to think about. Was Shepard's death the result of a hate crime? The facts, as well as the media attention, seem to say yes. **Or was** it a random crime with no premeditation or specific hate? The truth may never be known.

Conflict

Conflict drives a dramatic work, and this play has a lot of it. There is the obvious conflict between those who live a gay lifestyle and those who live a straight lifestyle. There is also the conflict between the various religions and their interpretations of the

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Find an organization that supports gay rights in your community. Gather information about this group and prepare a paper that covers such issues as current legislation, the challenges that face homosexuals in your community, the history of homosexuals as a group, and common political goals of homosexuals.
- Matthew Shepard was majoring in political science at the University of Wyoming at the time of his death. He was interested in the issue of human rights. Choose a specific country and research that country's human rights' issues. What legislation has been passed? What is the history of the fight for human rights in that country? What are some of that country's major organizations that focus on human rights?
- Research hate crimes in the world. First, what is the definition of a hate crime? How do hate

crimes differ **from** other types of crimes? What **are** the statistics of hate crimes in each country? Which countries have laws that specifically address hate crimes? Since the passing of legislation in each country, have the **incidents** of hate crimes decreased?

- Read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Try to figure out which scene in that play might have been used by Jedediah Schultz for his competition for a scholarship to the University of Wyoming. Memorize the scene and perform it in front of your class.
- Pretend to be the defense attorney for Aaron McKinney. Prepare the closing remarks that you would present to the jury in an attempt to save his life. Find some reason that McKinney should live, and build an emotional plea that might sway some of the jurors.

~~Bible or their spiritual value systems. There is also the conflict between parents and children, especially in the case of Jedediah Schultz and his parents.~~ who do not want him associating with anything that has to do with homosexuality. But there are also internal conflicts, such as those expressed by Jedediah. He wants to believe that his parents and his minister are right. But he senses that something is wrong with their beliefs against homosexuality. So Jedediah struggles within himself, trying to come to terms with the conflict between the basic tenets of the adults in his life and his own experiences.

Another emotional conflict revolves around the death penalty. Is it justified to kill someone who has killed another? Should the accused murderers be given death sentences? The most poignant conflict is the one that occurs in the mind of Dennis Shepard, the father of Matthew. He admits that he would like to see McKinney receive the death penalty for having murdered his son. But he concludes that Matthew would not want that. So Dennis Shepard has an internal conflict, much like

Jedediah, and finally concludes that he will defer to what he believes his son would have called for—an end to violence.

STYLE

Docudrama

The docudrama is a fact-based representation of real events. Unlike other forms of drama, the docudrama tries to represent the truth of an event that really happened. To think of it in another way, you might say that a docudrama is a non-fiction play.

The Laramie Project is a docudrama. It was written as if it were an actual documentary. Moisés Kaufman took his group, Tectonic Theater Project, to Laramie, Wyoming, to gather interviews concerning the murder of Matthew Shepard. This was a real event, and the interviews were given by real citizens of Laramie, where the murder occurred. The point of the play was to present the reactions of

the people of Laramie to this horrendous crime. Kaufman believed that a reflection of this event by the people involved would provide a vehicle for discussion about homosexuality and hate crimes around the world. In order to present the information that he and his troupe had gathered as closely as possible to the truth, Kaufman created the illusion of reality by formatting his play, not as a fictional story, but rather as a re-enactment of those interviews. The fictional part, or artistic part, of the play was in how Kaufman pulled all this information together and made it tell a story. There were few props in the play, and only a handful of actors to play the multiple roles. The material was grouped according to themes that were used to build up the tension in the play. In a few cases, some of the Laramie residents asked that their names not be used, but overall, real names were used. And much of the dialogue came from the recorded interviews.

Structural Patterns

The format of the play followed a regular pattern, broken down into three different shapes. The first shape was called a Moment. These were interspersed throughout the play and provided the audience with a more focused look at specific parts of the drama. Often, the Moments were reflections by Tectonic Theater Project members as they thought about their reactions to being in Laramie and having to face the comments and emotions of Laramie residents. At other times, the Moment sections were used to explore the reactions and emotions of specific residents in order to give the audience a deeper appreciation of some of the people's fears or beliefs.

In between the Moments sections, the play used short segments of interviews. Sometimes a person's comments would be interrupted by the comments of someone else, who either agreed or disagreed with them, offering the audience a balanced approach to the reactions to the murder. The interview segments were loosely structured to provide a sort of timeline to the events that lead up to the crime, as well as to those that took place afterwards. The interviews were also used to provide background information on the town of Laramie and the culture of the people who lived there.

The third portion of the pattern were direct announcements or comments offered in interviews. For example, there are announcements made by the medical staff at the hospital where Matthew Shepard fought for his life. There were statements from the press, supposedly taken from actual news accounts. There was also

the speech that Matthew's father presented in the courtroom.

Contrast and Juxtaposition

The snippets of conversations that were held between the members of Tectonic Theater Project and the residents of Laramie are arranged in such a way in the presentation of the play that the audience feels the emotions of the people who felt them. In order to do this, Kaufman has placed actual statements in positions of contrast or juxtaposition—either against one another or complimenting one another. For example, in one section of the play there are a series of comments offered by various religious leaders of the town. Some of these leaders are very much against homosexuality, while others have more open minds concerning this lifestyle. While one interviewee speaks of Biblical passages that provide the right to hate homosexuals, another religious person denies this, offering a counter-interpretation. Another example is provided when the interviews focus on the accused murderers. The people of Laramie cannot understand how two of their children could have committed such an awful crime. In order to present the emotions they are feeling, or to further enhance these emotions, Kaufman offers the audience not only a discussion of the crime and its hideous details, not only the scene in which it is noted that Matthew's face was washed in his tears, not only the transcript of McKinney's confession of the crime, but also comments by people who remember what a sweet child McKinney was.

Another example is the various comments by people of the town who claim that the overall atmosphere of the people was a "live and let live" attitude. There are claims made that most people do not mind that one person or another might be a homosexual. It is nobody's business but their own. But in contrast to that opinion are the comments offered by gay members of the community, who express their fear for their own lives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gay Rights

The Society for Human Rights, established in Chicago in 1924, was the first organization in the United States that promoted the rights of people who classified themselves as homosexuals. But it would take almost thirty more years before a national gay rights group would be founded. That

came in the establishment of the Mattachine Society, headed by Harry Hay, whom many people consider the father of the gay rights movement. Five years later, in 1956, a group devoted completely to women, the Daughters of Bilitis, was created to bring together a focused movement specifically for lesbians. But it was during the 1960s, a time when the attention of the nation was focused on civil rights for African Americans and for women, that the movement for gay rights truly gained momentum. One particular incident, called the Stonewall Riots, which occurred at a New York gay bar when customers resisted arrest, ignited the gay rights movement in the United States. This night in 1969 would go down in history as the first time gay people fought back. As the news of the resisted arrests spread, the movement for gay rights became more determined and people began to demand civil and social rights for homosexuals.

Homosexual acts were illegal in the United States until 1962, when Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexual acts in the privacy of one's own home. By the end of the twentieth century most states had repealed these laws that prohibited homosexual acts. Those states that continued to enforce laws against homosexual acts were made invalid by a Supreme Court ruling in 2003 in the case *Lawrence v. Texas*, which invalidated the criminal prohibition of homosexual acts.

In the twenty-first century, the fight for gay rights is focused on civil unions and the right for same-sex marriage. Although this is a contentious issue in the United States, several European countries and several provinces in Canada do recognize same-sex marriage.

Matthew Shepard

Matthew Shepard was born in Casper, Wyoming, in 1976. He attended college first at Catawba and Casper Colleges before transferring to the University of Wyoming in Laramie, where he was majoring in political science. On the night of October 6, 1998, Matthew left the Fireside Bar in Laramie with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Eighteen hours later, Matthew was found alive but unconscious, tied to a cattle fence outside of Laramie. After being taken to the Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, it was determined that he suffered from a skull fracture that extended from the back of his head to the front of his right ear. He also had several deep lacerations on his face, neck, and head. The medical team decided that his injuries were too severe to operate. Matthew never regained consciousness and died on October 12, at 12:53 a.m.

McKinney and Henderson were apprehended shortly after the beating. The bloody gun that had been used to pistol-whip Matthew was found, as well as Matthew's shoes and credit card. McKinney's and Henderson's girlfriends supplied false alibis for the two suspected murderers.

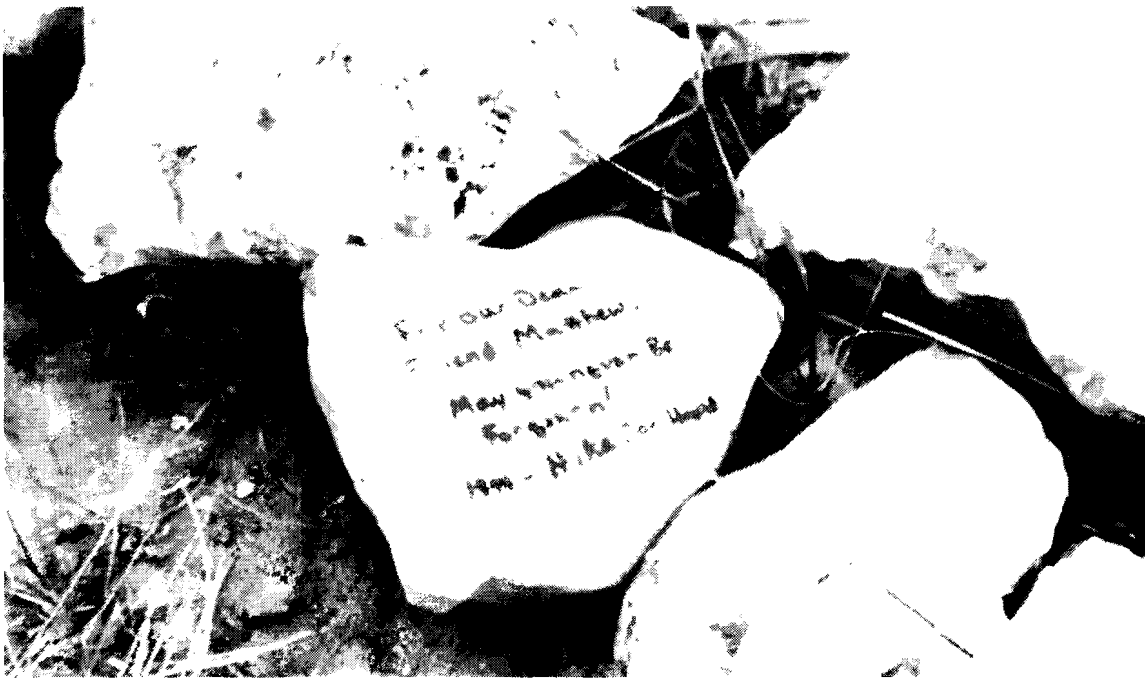
Henderson pleaded guilty of the crime on April 5, 1999, and agreed to testify against McKinney in a plea bargain for his life. In exchange for his testimony, Henderson received two consecutive life sentences with no chance for parole. McKinney was tried and found guilty. After Matthew Shepard's father made a statement against the death penalty, McKinney was given two consecutive life sentences without chance of parole.

Wyoming

Ancient tribes lived in Wyoming at least 12,000 years ago. Remnants of this old culture can still be seen at places like Medicine Wheel, outside of Lovell. More modern tribes, like the Sioux, Shoshone, and Cheyenne were cultivating the land when the first white explorer, John Colter, arrived in 1807. Fur trappers soon followed and included such legendary names as Kit Carson and Jedediah Smith. When gold was discovered in California, more and more settlers drove their wagon trains through Wyoming, creating a need for re-stocking stations and military forts. Fort Laramie was one of the most important military installations in Wyoming. More people streamed through the state, and many of them decided to settle there, creating some of the first cattle ranches, where huge herds of buffalo once roamed.

Wyoming is known as the Equity State, being one of the first states in the Union to recognize the rights of women. In 1869, Wyoming was the first government in the world to give the right to vote to women. One year later, Ester Hobart Moms became the first woman appointed as a justice of the peace. In 1924, Nellie Tayloe Ross was elected the first female governor in the United States.

Laramie, named for the trapper Jacques LaRamee, was first established by the confluence of a small settlement building around a military fort (Fort Buford) and a later need by the railroad, which was being built across the West, for a place to maintain the trains. Two things that made Laramie a good site were the abundance of fresh water, the Laramie River, and a nearby forest of trees in the Medicine Bow Mountains. But by the end of the nineteenth century, two more additions to the town—the University of Wyoming and the



Memorial message for Matthew Shepard written on a rock at the site of his attack © Adam Mastoon/Corbis

Wyoming Territorial Prison, provided economic stability. The finding of gold and silver in the mountains at the turn of the century was also a welcomed boost.

Today, Laramie is a small town of less than 30,000 residents that enjoys relatively mild weather, a low cost of living, and below-national-average unemployment. The town sits in the southeastern corner of the state on Interstate 80, about forty miles northwest of Cheyenne. The town is more than a mile high and is surrounded by national forests. The Laramie River runs through the town. It is interesting to note that many websites for the town make reference to Matthew Shepard.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The Laramie Project is often praised, as it was in the publication *American Theatre* by Don Shewey, as "a powerful and evocative work of art." The emotions that were exposed upon the actual murder of Matthew Shepard may have focused the world's attention on the town of Laramie, but Kaufman's play, as Shewey pointed out, provides not only the town of Laramie but the world "an opportunity . . . to talk about things that are on its

mind." As M. S. Mason, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* explained: "The arts can shed light on social problems, but rarely does a region like this one have so much need for clarity and thoughtful response to its recent history." *The Laramie Project*, according to Mason, helps people "put hate crimes in perspective." Mason concludes that Kaufman's play offers "a genuine optimism about human goodness" and a "recognition that evil is not beyond remedy, if we as a society are ready to renounce hate."

Writing for *Time Magazine*, which named *The Laramie Project* one of the top ten plays of the year, Richard Zoglin stated that Kaufman and his troupe were more than capable in expressing "the work's passion and power." Adding to the praise was Victor Gluck, writing for *Back Stage*, who referred to the play as "the most ambitious and powerful new American play of the past year." By the end of his review, Gluck described the play as a "disturbing, haunting theatre experience."

Not all reviews were positive. For instance, the *New Republic's* Robert Brustein concluded that *The Laramie Project* had "its moments, but the piece lacks a powerful protagonist." The play focused too much on the reaction of the townspeople, Brustein found, and too little on who Matthew Shepard and

his killers were. "We leave the theater knowing as little about them as when we first **arrived**," Brustein wrote. Then he added: "Instead of penetrating character, the play prefers to argue for legislation, as if special laws could somehow change the way people behave." **Elizabeth** Pochoda, for the *Nation* had similar comments. "Laramie," she wrote, "is a town with a terrible crime, but no terrible truths come to light here." Then she adds: "This beautifully staged **can-**vassing of its citizens is well paced and absorbing but not ultimately affecting." Pochoda continued that the play does not go deep enough into the information. She believed the play should have provided more details about what was not already known. She found herself, as she watched the play, wondering what the members of the troupe "didn't find."

On the other side of the issue, Ed Kaufman, writing for the *Hollywood Reporter*, found the play to be "a stunning and thought-provoking piece of theater." This reviewer then suggested that the writer and director of this play had asked the question: "Is theater a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?" And that the answer to this question "is yes, especially when **art** and life come together so wonderfully well."

When the play was published in book form, three publications offered reviews. Jack Helbig, writing for the *Booklist*, found that the play "has moments of astonishing power." Meanwhile, Emily Lloyd, writing in *School Library Journal*, referred to *The Laramie Project* as a "remarkable play" and "a thoughtful and moving theatrical tour de force." And finally, Howard Miller, for the *Library Journal* stated: "This true story of hate, fear, hope, and courage touched and changed many lives and will do so for everyone who reads or watches a performance of this theatrical masterpiece."

CRITICISM

Joyce Hart

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart examines Kaufman's docudrama to discover how the playwright created theatrical drama in a work that is almost nonfiction.

Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* is most often referred to as a docudrama, a play that is largely based on real facts. To this point, the play is all but a work of nonfiction. But despite the fact that the basic elements of the play are based

on actual events with their own inherent drama, Kaufman's talents as a playwright were used to enhance the emotional impact of the events and thus create an atmosphere that ultimately stirred his audience more than just the reading of the actual events might have caused. The question is then, how did he do this? How did he formulate the play in such a way that he made the events come alive not with just the details but with all the complexities that surrounded the crime? How did he piece together not only the central events of Matthew Shepard's murder, but also the information that he and the members of Tectonic Theater Project gathered? How did **Kaufman** arrange his material so that people who came to see the play were stirred to the point of wanting to ask more questions of themselves, of their community, and of their society as a whole? In other words, how did Kaufman **turn** real events into a work of creative theatrical drama?

Most of these questions **can** be answered in a very simple way. The overall tool that **Kaufman** uses to create drama is contrast. But what is less obvious is how he uses this tool. To begin this exploration, one needs to go no further than the beginning of the first act. It is here that readers can witness how the playwright pits one thought against another, as he dives into the interviews and arranges the sentences of each interviewee so that one stands either in partial or complete contradiction with the other. For example, several townspeople offer background information about what life, under normal circumstances, is like in Wyoming. "You have an opportunity to be happy in your life here," states Rebecca Hilliker, a professor at the University of Wyoming, where Matthew **Shepard** attended classes. The setting that Hilliker describes is in stark **contrast** to the circumstances that are about to be discussed, of course.

But it is through contradictions such as this that **Kaufman** plays with the emotions of his audience. Another example occurs when Kaufman offers the statement of Philip Dubois, president of the same university. Dubois describes how safe he feels living in Wyoming. In contrast to what he would do if he lived in a large city, in **Laramie** Dubois allows his children to play unsupervised outside at night. "My kids play out at night till eleven and I don't think twice about it," Dubois says. This statement resonates with the audience, which is already aware that **Shepard** was killed at night, possibly in a similar location in which Dubois's children might have played. It is in this way that Kaufman sprays a mist of emotional colors throughout his play, teasing his

audience first in one direction, than jerking them abruptly to the other edge of the spectrum.

Even though the general consensus of the interviewees at the beginning of the play is that of peace and the belief that Wyoming is a nice place to live, Kaufman weaves through these positive comments statements that hint otherwise. Another example is the comment of Doc O'Connor, a relatively new arrival to Wyoming. Although O'Connor agrees that Wyoming is a great place to live, he adds a sinister touch to his statement. "They say the Wyoming **wind**'ll drive a man insane," he says. By including O'Connor's statement, Kaufman throws out yet another hint of the macabre acts that are later recorded—the brutal and irrational beating of Shepard. O'Connor's comment thus becomes a **type** of foreshadowing of the murder or at least a warning that crazy things have previously occurred in Wyoming. It is in this way that the audience—which at first was being lulled into believing in an idyllic environment and is shown a virtual-Wyoming, where everyone is happy and where the "live and let live" attitude of the state's residents allows a seemingly unusual sense of freedom—is suddenly (and quite subtly) reminded that something dreadful is **lurking** in the background. Let the audience beware, Kaufman is suggesting. All is not perpetual goodness in this so-called paradise.

So although Kaufman appears to be delivering just the facts of the case, he is cleverly manipulating the information. He could easily claim that he is only re-iterating the statements of the people he interviewed. And this is partially true. But by craftily layering one person's sentence upon another person's, Kaufman orchestrates the overall effect just as inventively as a composer who connects one note to another to build a musical work that creates a symphony that stirs the emotions. Yes, Kaufman raises a lot of questions that he leaves for his audience to answer for themselves. However, the questions that arise are the questions that Kaufman wants the audience to take home with them.

Another example of how Kaufman uses contrast to provide drama is shown with the presentation of the crime scene, which he does in several different ways. Each time the audience is taken there, the emotional reaction is purposefully deepened. The first mention of the field where Shepard was **killed** takes place in the beginning of the play. Sergeant Hing is **talking** about the Wyoming landscape and about how he took some reporters to the murder scene. Hing speaks about the area where Shepard was beaten as being a beautiful place. On



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the day he took the reporters there, Hing recounts that the sky was blue and the mountains had a dusting of snow on them. The area, Hing states, is a popular place with bikers and joggers. Upon hearing this, one reporter asks: "Who in the hell would want to run out **here**?" To which Hing confides that he thought this woman was "missing the point." Hing felt that the media was stupid because they could not turn around and see the beauty of the land. "They were just—nothing but the story," Hing explains.

In other words, Hing has all but erased the memory of the murder that occurred at that place. He was in love with the land and, no matter what had happened there on that specific spot of land, all he saw was the beauty of the surrounding landscape. The reporters, however, were living in a completely different world. They had, of course, come to cover the story, but more than that, they felt the ghost of the murder around them when they stood on that spot. They could not be there and not have their minds cluttered by the thoughts of despair and death as Shepard lay dying there after the beating. These reporters, most of whom had come **from** outside of Wyoming, looked at the crime scene with eyes focused on only one thing—the brutal murder of a young student. For Hing, Shepard's murder might be one of many he has had to investigate, and he might be questioning why the Shepard case had gained such national attention. And Kaufman, through Hing, might want his audience to ask the same question. Why was Shepard's death more relevant than hundreds of other murders that had taken place that year? Why had the crime become so momentous it had caused a media frenzy? Whatever the reason for Kaufman's

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. first produced in 1993, a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award–winning play written by Tony Kushner and mentioned in *The Laramie Project*, was a play described as profoundly moving and yet also funny. It deals with the lives of people who must confront their own homosexuality or that of someone close to them. Tragedy and comedy are mixed just as magic realism and stark reality are. It is political and private. It is a criticism of the Reagan years and its denial of the AIDS epidemic, as well as a meditation of what it means to know that one is dying.
- The Obie Award–winning play *I Am My Own Wife* was written by Doug Wright, directed by Moisés Kaufman, and produced in 2003. It is a one-man show about the German transvestite, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an antique collector living in Nazi Germany. This play's major

theme is that of survivor living in a very oppressive society.

- *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) is Kaufman's other outstanding play. It recounts the trials of Oscar Wilde, a playwright who was sentenced to ten years of hard labor for having made love to another man. In this play, Kaufman explores how Victorian homophobia in politics, culture, and law severely punished the brilliant and witty author.
- The works of Oscar Wilde, one of the most famous playwrights and authors of the nineteenth century, have been collected in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (1989). Some of his most important pieces include *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Salome* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1899). His writing is often compared to that of Shakespeare for its cleverness and wit.

use of these contrasting visions, the results pull the audience into the play. And Kaufman knows that the more an audience invests, the more emotionally involved the audience will become in his play.

As act 1 closes, Kaufman takes the audience back to the crime scene. It begins with one of Kaufman's "moments," which has the subtitle "The Fence." Stephen Mead Johnson introduces this section by telling the audience how this area has become a place of pilgrimage. Johnson's depiction of the area drastically differs from the previous one given by Hing. "It is so stark and so empty and you can't help but think of Matthew out there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing temperatures," Johnson says. Then he relates Shepard's experience to the suffering of Christ on the cross by quoting from the Bible "God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This is the first real reference to Shepard's pain. Previously, the accounts of his death are mentioned merely in an unemotional way. A few details are provided but there is nothing mentioned

of the pain. A young man was killed, is all the audience is really told up until this scene. After Johnson's reference to the suffering that Shepard must have experienced, a member of Tectonic Theater Projects intensifies this moment by offering his own personal reactions to having visited the crime scene. "I broke down the minute I touched it [the fence]." Now the audience not only has a visual image of the fence, they also have a sense of having touched it. And in doing so, the audience is touched in return.

The first act closes with commentary from people who were there on the night of the crime. First there is Aaron Kreifels, the young man who found Shepard. Next is a report from Officer Reggie Fluty, the first police officer on the scene. And the third person interjected into this part of the play is Dr. Cantway, the physician on duty at the emergency room where Shepard was taken. All the bloody details are provided by these three people. And through them, Kaufman provides the audience



Peace vigil for Matthew Shepard © Liss Steve/Corbis Sygma

with an in-your-face reproduction of that night. From three different points of view, the audience sees Shepard's bloody body through the experience of the young boy who found him and called for help. Then Fluty describes the scene in a very clinical manner, noting such things as the position of his body and the way Shepard was tied to the fence. And the doctor, despite all the wounds he has seen in the past, describes the horror of discovering the unimaginable destruction caused by one human upon another.

This is not going to be an easy play to sit through, the audience must be thinking at this point. Kaufman is not going to allow anyone in the audience to passively watch and listen as the story encapsulated in the play unfolds. Kaufman has masterfully crafted this work of art, slowly wrapping his fingers around each person's heart and squeezing it. Pay attention to this, the playwright seems to be yelling. This is important, and I am not going to let you go without feeling the incredible and unforgettable drama of it all.

Source: Joyce Hart. Critical Essay on *The Laramie Project*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Robert Brustein

In the following review, Brustein describes the documentary-like nature of Kaufman's play.

The Laramie Project now playing at the Union Square Theatre in New York, is the joint product of the director-playwright Moises Kaufman and a group of eight lively actors who call themselves the Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP). "Tectonic" refers to deformations in the earth's crust, and *The Laramie Project* suggests that these deformities are often caused by humans. It is a play about the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay Wyoming student who was beaten by two particularly brutal hoodlums who virtually crucified him against a wire fence. (Terence McNally would have done better to have made the crucified Shepard, instead of the crucified Jesus, into the gay hero of *Corpus Christi*.)

Some years ago, the same collaborative team gave us *Gross Indecency*, about the three trials of Oscar Wilde on charges of sodomy and pederasty. It is apparent that the tectonic deformations perceived by Mr. Kaufman and TTP are often related to the treatment of homosexuals in a homophobic society. This is an important theme for dramatic investigation. It is also a theme that is getting somewhat overworked. It must seem callous to apply artistic standards to the presentation of atrocities such as the Matthew Shepard case. But it is Kaufman who has made this terrible event into a matter of art; and when you make politics into art, then politics must be prepared to meet an aesthetic



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standard. Kaufman and TTP succeeded in drawing an engrossing evening of theater out of the unjust treatment of the homosexual Oscar Wilde in *Gross Indecency*, partly because the hero was such a brilliant man. The *Laramie* Project also has its moments, but the piece lacks a powerful protagonist.

Actually, the problem with the *Laramie* Project is that it has too many protagonists. It is less concerned with the murder of young Shepard than with the way the local residents reacted to the public notoriety that they received as a result of the crime. It starts from the very sensible notion that when a particularly heinous event occurs, then the entire area is often perceived as sharing in the guilt of the perpetrators. Reporters refer to "Columbine" and "Watts," for example, as a shorthand method of identifying disturbances; but in employing such generic language they manage to implicate everyone in town. As one of the *Laramie* townspeople ruefully remarks, "We've become Waco—Jasper—a noun."

Apparently inspired by the method of Anna Devereau Smith—conducting interviews that serve as material for an enacted scenario—*The Laramie Project* is much more a documentary than a play. Like Smith going to Crown Heights or South Central, Kaufman and his Tectonic actors went to *Laramie* to meet with the citizens and to ask each of them in turn, "What was your response when this happened to Matthew Shepard?" Over two years and six visits, they interviewed about 200 people, most of them only too eager to rescue the reputation of their town from infamy. More than sixty of these characters are represented on stage by the eight actors, who also sometimes play themselves. This is a very generous representation. By the end of the evening, we feel that we have met a fair sampling of *Laramie* residents. The problem is

we cannot tell them apart very well, or even remember their names.

On a bare stage, backed with a brick wall against which "Journal Entries" are projected, and dressed with five tables and eight chairs, the actors represent a police chief, a university theater head, a woman rancher, a limo driver, a university president, a lesbian waitress, a lesbian faculty member, a Muslim feminist, a student defying his family by performing in *Angels in America*, and any number of friendly people just sitting around and mulling over how this sort of thing could have happened in their neighborhood. Some critics have pointed out resemblances between the town of *Laramie* and *Our Town*. Indeed, people even show up at Shepard's funeral carrying black umbrellas. But considering what happened to Shepard, this *Our Town* is at times closer in spirit to Kenneth Tynan's satire of it—that typical American village where they lynch blacks, spit on Jews, and punch out the lights of gays between visits to the drugstore for vanilla sodas.

This is not to say that the people interviewed by the TTP actors are in any way evil or malign. Quite the contrary. Virtually all of them, including the governor of Wyoming, testify to having been "sickened by the murder." "We don't grow children like that here," says another, adding, "But it's pretty clear we do grow children like that here." *Laramie*'s attitude towards gay people, says another, "is live and let live." One clergyman affirms that he does not condone that kind of violence—or, as he feels compelled to add, "that kind of lifestyle." Although this particular murder was motivated by hatred of gays, one woman notes, Matthew was neither a saint nor a martyr. If the victim had been a policeman, would the newspapers have shown the same interest?

Still, most of them—except for a few anti-gay fanatics, one of whom carries a placard reading "God hates fags"—are tolerant of homosexuals. A hundred people march on behalf of Matthew Shepard wearing yellow armbands. Others wave placards reading "Peace and Love." And although one angry lesbian demands the death penalty for Matthew's killers, his father asks clemency for them, and they get it: life imprisonment. The citizens of *Laramie*, in short, are more likely than not to show a benevolent face. And so are the well-scrubbed actors who play them. (Even the cigarettes they smoke are environment-friendly, being unlit.) Sitting on stage watching each other perform, their expressions alternating between piety and sanctimony, these actors work very hard to

avoid the chief danger of this kind of presentation, a tone of self-congratulation.

One can almost sense the director leaping up to squash the impulse towards condescension, not always successfully. With a few exceptions, notably Mercedes Herrero as a tough-minded policewoman worrying about contracting AIDS after cleaning away the blood of the HIV-positive Shepard, the performers are too often unspeakably awed by the inspirational way they are playing their characters; they seem forever on the verge of moving themselves to tears. In a filmed documentary, it is easy to respond to the simplicity of average people. In stage impersonations, that simplicity too easily falls into folksiness. *The Laramie Project* brings up unintended questions about the relationship of the stage to reality, and the responsibility of actors to the actual people whom they are trying to impersonate.

And this brings us to the main problem with the enterprise. Although the play is inspired by one of the worst hate crimes in recent American history, it draws back before the fact of human evil. For all the references to the killers, Russell A. Hendemon and Aaron J. McKinney, by friends, family members, prosecutors and police officers, we leave the theater knowing as little about them as when we first arrived. (We also learn very little about Matthew Shepard.) What kind of people could snuff out the life of a human being because he was perceived to come onto them in a bar? What does that tell us about the nature of the human heart?

→ Instead of penetrating character, the play prefers to argue for legislation, as if special laws could somehow change the way people behave. But passing more laws will not eradicate racial, religious, or sexual hatred. It may just drive it underground to fester in uglier forms. A priest in the play says it sows the seeds of violence to say "fag" or "dyke." But it is a real question whether laundering the language—elsewhere known as "freedom from speech"—would lower the incidence of violence. The crime for which Henderson and McKinney were apprehended, tried, and convicted was not violating speech codes but murder, for which there are already plenty of laws on the books.

Upon reflection, *The Laramie Project* may be more important as a purgative than as a performance, for it succeeds best as a rite of exorcism for a lot of troubled people, as a kind of dramatized encounter group, for the entire town. One resident may insist that "hate is not a Laramie value," but as another replies that "we need to admit we live in a country where shit like this happens."

The play also manages to make an argument for the normality of being gay, foreseeing a time when people will consider homosexuality neither right nor wrong, but simply a fact of biology. This is devoutly to be wished, for reasons moral, political, personal, and aesthetic. Such a condition might very well help to eliminate gaybashing. It might also help restore the theater to its original purpose—which is not to confirm liberal audiences in what they already believe, but to uncover the veiled mysteries of the human heart. And such a dispensation might permit our artists once more to explore the nature of sexuality rather than the issue of sexual preference, which is a condition of the whole of humanity and not just its wounded and divided parts.

Source: Robert Brustein, "On Theater: The Staged Documentary," in *New Republic*, Vol. 222, No. 25, June 19, 2000, pp. 29–30.

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