

When hatred eats us up - Laramie Project looks at brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard

By Rob Faulkner

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Theatre maven Willard Boudreau has done big -- directing splashy plays like *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Sound of Music* and the gender-bending nightclub romp *Victor/Victoria*. But this time, less is more.

His eight-member cast just did the first run-through of *The Laramie Project*, the bare-bones masterwork about a Wyoming town torn apart by the brutal slaying of gay college student Matthew Shepard in 1998. He wants it real.

"I wanted actors who didn't come off as actors, but as real people," says Boudreau, 59, a retired teacher with four decades in local theatre. "You're shaped by the times you live in. And in the '50s people were looking into minimalism."

As in stripped-down sets. Or no set at all. Hard, tight dialogue. No Victorian flourishes. Just the facts. Even when they're tough to take, as they certainly are in Moises Kaufman's documentary-style play about Laramie, Wyo., in the aftermath of a horrific hate crime.

Boudreau first saw *Laramie* in Toronto more than a year ago and immediately fell in love with it, as an actor and as a director. He wanted the rights to it for his *Piccadilly Circus Productions*, confident no other troupe would bring it to Hamilton.

Then something happened.

After Hamilton witnessed its own attack on restaurateur Ronn Mattai, the Dofasco Centre for the Arts held a one-night benefit performance of *The Laramie Project*. It made news because Mattai's welcome address was the first time he had spoken publicly since the Feb. 21 attack on him.

"I certainly was surprised," Boudreau says of Studio 180's version that drew Mattai supporters April 3. "In one night they could have wiped out my entire audience. I was worried and thought about cancelling. But then I got to thinking, 'There has got to be more of an audience.'"

Naturally, he says, *Laramie* will draw members of Hamilton's gay community, especially those who missed April's show. It has a broader audience, too, he says, as Hamiltonians reconcile a hateful attack with the city they know. In fact, Mattai is slated to speak at the June 19 show.

"There are strong parallels between *Laramie* and Hamilton," says Boudreau. "Compared to its larger neighbour, Hamilton has a small-town feel which is good; *Laramie* is a small town. Both are university towns with a diverse population, different values, different ethnicities. And a very redneck, conservative section as well."

But this is not a Laramie Project you have seen before. Its cast is Derek Arnold, a Sir John A. Macdonald grad about to study theatre; Diane Brokenshire, whose retirement sees her in this edgy play; Moe Dwyer, Boudreau's successor as drama teacher at Sir Winston Churchill high; and David Fraser, a 20-year theatre veteran.

And Tom Mays, a Mac student eyeing a job in radio or TV; Jamie McRoberts, a star Oakville high school student; Lyla Miklos, gay-rights activist and a Hamilton Woman of the Year; and Derrek Peels, ex-football player, actor and filmmaker.

Presented in association with Hamilton Pride 2004, which runs June 14-20, it includes a musical piece McRoberts wrote to sound like broken glass. And Boudreau plans to flesh out the detached docudrama of small town soul-searching.

"The play tends to be generous with Laramie and I admire that, but think it also lets Laramie off too easy," he says. "Instead of coolly standing back, I take a path that becomes more involved. The anger is stronger. There are more tears. It's because I believe, the stronger the emotion, the stronger the thinking will be."

Showtime

What: The Laramie Project.

When: June 11-12 and June 18-19 at 8 p.m.: and June 20 at 3:30 p.m.

Where: Players Guild Studio Theatre (80 Queen St. S. near Main St.).

Tickets: \$20, with \$5 from June 18-19 shows going to Hamilton Pride Festival. Available at The Picture Frame of Westdale (1045 King St. W.), 905-523-5441