

Truth meets intense drama - Picadilly Circus portrayal of a 21-year-old gay student's murder represents the best in amateur theatre

By Duane Tucker

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The Laramie Project, an account of the 1998 torture and murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay University of Wyoming student by two high school dropouts, is a significant look at a critical issue, and the Picadilly Circus production does it justice.

After the murder, playwright Moises Kaufman and his Tectonic Theatre project spent a year in Laramie to create a play directly from transcripts of interviews with residents.

Herein lies the problem. What might have been a harrowing exploration of hatred and repression, contracts "documentaryitis" - a (coined) self-inflicted illness which favours recorded truth over dramatic truth.

The perennial headache of every historical drama is how long to stick to the facts before allowing them to drag the drama down. The best ones weave a documented past into an imagined one, and produce a hybrid richer than either on their own.

If you're not going to quarry motive, why write a play? We want to know why? Why did these guys do it? Why hate crimes? Why homophobia? Kaufman serves slivers: one killer was homophobic, a scared kid.

Laramie was a minimum wage town, resentful of university "aristocracy." But that's it? Theatre's genius is ransacking and dissecting the human psyche, not simply recording it.

One could argue that the piece was intended simply as an examination of the collective psyche of a traumatized town, a plea for tolerance. Fine. Write a sermon.

If Kaufman wants us thinking about how to remedy hate crimes, he ought to give us something more to think about than cliches like: "We need to own it (the murder) because we are all like this." That's incitement, not insight.

Still the actors, with a couple of exceptions, were exceptional; particularly Derek Arnold as both of the killers, Maureen Dwyer as the cop, David Fraser as the emergency room doctor, Jamie McRoberts as the lesbian protester and Lyla Miklos as the outted teacher. Arnold and McRoberts have bright acting careers ahead of them.

I liked the spare monastic tone, the prison-like set, and Willard Boudreau's largely invisible (the best kind) direction.

More consideration could have been devoted to differentiating each character's distinctive temperature, music, body language, voice. Moreover, Boudreau might have mentioned to his actors that people rarely try to cry in public; usually, they try not to.

My biggest complaint is the physical condition of the theatre. Since when does a story about an ordeal have to be an ordeal? If you were invited to a friend's home for dinner, forced to sit on a wooden bench all evening with the heat turned up to sauna, would you go back? I wouldn't.

If I wanted to make a better world, I'd start with cushions on seats.

Still, this is an intense production of a flawed but fascinating piece and without doubt the best amateur theatre I've ever seen.

Showtime

What: The Laramie Project

Where: The Players' Guild Studio, 80 Queen St. S.

When: June 18-19, 8 p.m., June 20, 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$20

Info: 905-523-5440