

## **Theatre Review: The Laramie Project**

**By Kerry Corrigan**

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Laramie, Wyoming isn't an evil place, nor is it a bad town.

It may have as many close-minded bigots as the next town, but basically it's peopled with kind, well-meaning folk who wish no harm on anyone.

So how did it breed the two young men who committed the atrociously brutal acts that left Matthew Shepard beaten, tied to a fence in a remote rural area, in a coma for 18 hours before he was discovered by a passing bicyclist, who at first mistook Matthew's frail figure for a scarecrow?

Shepard's murder, referred to as a "lynching" in Time Magazine shortly after the fact, was a classic example of a hate crime, where a victim was chosen because of the minority to which he belonged—Shepard was a homosexual.

The Laramie Project is the work of the Tectonic Theatre Project, a New York City based theatre company who made numerous trips to the small Mid-west town to conduct over 200 interviews with the townsfolk, to see where that answer lies, and to chronicle the effects of the media circus which ensued.

They find that Laramie, just like Walkerton, Ontario as seen in the Fringe Festival's *Water*, refuses to be "a town defined by an accident, a crime."

Piccadilly Circus, a Hamilton based theatre company, uses a crack ensemble of eight actors with minimalist staging to present *The Laramie Project* in the Players' Guild's Queen St. space. Director Willard Boudreau's eight performers—Derek Arnold, Diane Brokenshire, Maureen Dwyer, David Fraser, Tom Mays, Jamie McRoberts, Lyla Miklos and Derek Peels—project over 50 characters during the course of the three acts, with an intense connection amplified by the skill with which they delineate the varied personalities, using all kinds of shifts in body language, accent and tempo.

Each stands out in their own moments, portraying the anguish of loved ones, the confusion of policemen, the attempt at detachment from the doctors, the sullen attitude of the murderers found guilty.

Teachers, students, barkeeps and the NY actors conducting the difficult interviews all appear on stage, providing an arrestingly sad look at the tragedy of homophobia, while avoiding any slides into maudlin sentimentality or emotional indulgence.

Playwright Moises Kaufman creates a carefully structured play while maintaining that free-wheeling feel of a collective. Each act sweeps us through a phase of the action. First we're given an introduction to the town and its people, and the events that led up to that horrible, fateful night of Oct. 6, 1998. The second

act covers the five days that Shepard lay in the hospital in a coma, and the third has a vivid depiction of the funeral, the trials and the town's attempts at healing.

Especially helpful to that end are the kind words of Matthew's father, which have since become a rallying cry for tolerance. Speaking at the sentencing of his son's killer, he states in a quavering voice, "I would like nothing better than to see you die. However, this is the time to begin the healing process, to show mercy to someone who refused to show mercy... I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives."

Matthew Shepard was a gay 21-year-old, University of Wyoming student with a slight build and a mischievous mind, secure in his sexuality, not known to flaunt it.

Described as "a blunt little shit," he sounds like a guy you'd have liked to know. Boudreau's production gives us that chance.

#### THE LARAMIE PROJECT

Directed by Willard Boudreau

June 18-19, 8pm

HAMILTON PLAYERS' GUILD

THEATRE

80 Queen Street S.

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