

# Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn

## “The Laramie Project” 10 Years Later

Can theatre make a genuine cultural impact? Can it so deeply affect its audience members that they leave the theatre in a different mind set or with a changed personal philosophy?

After attending a staged reading of “The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later” at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland last Monday evening, I can say with extreme conviction: yes.

“The Laramie Project” was premiered in 2000 by the Tectonic Theatre Project, a New York theatre company known for developing innovative works that explore theatrical language and form, fostering an artistic dialogue with audiences on social, political and human issues. (Learn more at [TectonicTheatreProject.com](http://TectonicTheatreProject.com).)

“The Laramie Project” explores



the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student from Laramie, Wyo., who was robbed, pistol whipped, tortured, tied to a fence in a remote, rural area, and left to die simply because he was gay.

The crime received national attention, putting the town of Laramie in the spotlight, thus prompting members of the Tectonic Theatre Project to travel to Laramie five weeks later to conduct a series of interviews with the people of Laramie, which they eventually compiled into “The Laramie Project.”

The play is frequently performed by schools and colleges, as well as by professional playhouses in the United States and around the world.

Performers who do this play read the actual words of real people interviewed in Laramie as well as words by the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project with the help of narrators and theatrical devices to break the fourth wall, or address the audience directly.

A year ago, the same members of the Tectonic Theatre Project returned to Laramie for the 10th anniversary of Shepard’s murder in order to conduct more interviews, seeing how the people of Laramie have changed (or not), politically, socially, religiously, and educationally.

The group interviewed some of the same people who were interviewed

for the original play as well as other people who offered new insights. These new interviews were compiled into a new play, “The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later.”

While in College Park visiting my girlfriend, I decided to go see the play. I was unaware of what I would be witnessing.

The University of Maryland’s staged reading of this new play was part of an international event in which 150 theatres across all 50 states as well as several theatres around the world presented the same play on the same night.

The performance date — Oct. 12, 2009 — was the 11th anniversary of Shepard’s murder.

The performances were united by a live video feed from the Lincoln Center in New York City with brief remarks from actress Glenn Close and Judy Shepard, Matthew’s mother. After the feed ended, all the theatres all over the world started their simultaneous performances. More than 50,000 theatergoers watched the play at the same time.

The staged reading at UMD was very ably performed by a cast of 12 actors, performing multiple roles. Five of the actors were UMD students and seven were members of Actors’ Equity Association, the labor union represent-

ing American actors in the theatre.

The play was deeply moving, as much, if not more moving than its predecessor. While the original play dealt with the immediate effect of Shepard’s murder, “The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later” focuses on the growth and changes of Laramie residents as well as the cause of the vicious crime.

In the time between the plays were written, an important aspect of the crime came to light. It is now believed by some the crime was not motivated by homophobia as originally thought, but by a robbery gone wrong.

Outrage is reflected in many of the interviews by Laramie residents and even law enforcement officers, who are thoroughly convinced the crime was a hate crime motivated by homophobia.

“That’s nonsense. All you have to do is look at the evidence,” says Dave O’Malley, lead investigator of the Laramie Police Department. “I’m convinced that these guys killed Matt because he was gay.”

The play is filled with interesting testimony and interviews I found deeply affecting.

The most shocking moment in the new play is an interview with Aaron McKinney, one of Shepard’s murderers, who was interviewed in prison, where he remains. He recounts the

events leading to the murder, which, at the time of the interview, was 10 years prior. His testimony is so frustrating, because he has apparently no remorse for his crime and at one point remarks, “Matt Shepard needed killing.”

He is asked over and over if he feels remorse and his response is that he has remorse, “but for all the wrong reasons.” He also delivers inconclusive insight on whether the crime was motivated by homophobia or robbery.

It’s evident in this play that many Laramie residents and others affected by the Shepard murder have moved on. “Moved on to what?” asks Reggie Fluty, the policewoman who was the first to arrive at the fence where Matthew was tied. “If you don’t want to look back, fine. But what are we moving towards?”

This play and the original Laramie Project play are deeply moving pieces. I left the University of Maryland performance with a fresher and changed perception of the effects of homophobia and hate crimes.

So can theatre make a genuine cultural impact? Can it so deeply affect its audience members that they leave the theatre in a different mind set or with a changed personal philosophy? I maintain theatre can do this as well, if not better, than any other medium of expression and communication.