

A publication for our valued theatre patrons

Volume 4 , No. 2

The Laramie Project

A Play by Moisés Kaufman and
The Members of the Tectonic Theater
Project



On October 7, 1998, a young gay man was discovered bound to a fence in the hills outside Laramie, Wyoming, savagely beaten and left to die in an act of brutality and hate that shocked the nation. Matthew Shepard's death became a national symbol of intolerance, but for the people of Laramie the event became deeply personal, and it is their voices we hear in this stunningly effective theater piece.

Moisés Kaufman and fellow members of the Tectonic Theater Project made six trips to Laramie over the course of a year and a half in the aftermath of the beating and conducted more than 200 interviews with people of the town. From these interviews as well as their own experiences, Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater members have constructed a deeply moving theatrical experience. *The Laramie Project* chronicles the life of the town of Laramie in the year after the murder, using eight actors to embody more than sixty different people in their own words - from rural ranchers to university professors. The result is a complex portrayal that dispels the simplistic media stereotypes and explores the depths to which humanity can sink and the heights of compassion of which we are capable.

“Deeply moving.... This play is *Our Town* with a question mark, as in ‘Could this be our town?’”

-New York Times

“Astonishing. Not since *Angels in America* has a play attempted so much: nothing less than an examination of the American psyche at the end of the millennium.”

-Associated Press

“Kaufman is pioneering a new genre of theater. He aims for radical redefinition of what theater is capable of.”

-Time Magazine

The Tectonic Theater Project

In an age when film and television are constantly redefining and refining their vocabularies and tools, the theatre has too often remained entrenched in the 19th century traditions of realism and naturalism. The company's main objective is to explore new theatrical vocabularies and theatrical languages that use the full potential of the stage. TTP's approach to creating theater consists of a rigorous process of research, writing, acting, designing, and directing, collaborating over time in an experimental environment to produce vital, vibrant, innovative and beautiful theater.

Over the past five years, TTP has been able to use theatre to instigate national debate with its productions of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and *The Laramie Project*. Both pieces focus on what Mr. Kaufman calls “watershed historical moments” — times when all the ideas, beliefs and ideologies that are the pillars of a certain culture at a certain time surface around a specific event. When this happens, the event itself operates as a lightning rod that allows us to see clearly, for a brief time, what ideas that society is made of.

In *Gross Indecency*, the company explored Oscar Wilde's trial as such an event. In the play, we hear Victorian men and women tell us in their own words how they thought and talked not only about homosexuality, but also about class, religion, the monarchy, etc. The event itself was of such magnitude that it forced people to speak.

That was the reason TTP decided to go to Laramie in the aftermath of the Matthew Shepard murder in 1998. Kaufman took ten company members to Laramie, Wyoming to conduct interviews with the residents of the town just four weeks after the tragedy occurred. The hypothesis was that if the company listened to the people of the town at this moment in their history, we would be able to create a document that would serve as a portrait of that town — and, by extension, the country — at the end of the millen-

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Laramie

Artist Spotlight Scenic Designer Connie Smith

Most of you know *The Laramie Project* scene designer Connie Smith's work. She is the Scenic Artist responsible for the beautiful backdrops in Theatre USA productions of *Raisin In The Sun*, *Dancing At Lughnasa*, and *The Rivals* to name just a few. She could work in any theatre market she wanted to, but we are lucky enough to have her here. So I asked her "How did you get here?" "Well, it's actually a long story and it wasn't in the original plan." The plan was to work for a few years after she graduated with her BFA in Theatrical Design and Technology from Auburn University and then head for New York for painting school and to find work there as a scenic artist.

With that goal in mind she took a job as Scene Designer and Technical Director at Meredith College in North Carolina. That was a colossal undertaking or as she puts it. "A lot too soon." She burned out. She also discovered she really hated cold weather. Originally from Baldwin County, she came back home and became a Graphic Artist. Not that she turned her back on theatre completely. She was very active at Jubilee Fish Theatre (Fairhope/ Grand Hotel Small Professional Theatre) as a Lighting and Scene Designer. When it closed she discovered that after nine years she was really very bored sitting behind a computer. She missed theatre and decided it was time to make a comeback. She called Lyn Lockrow, her mentor at Auburn University, for advice. "He told me to call around or email people to see if there were any openings in the Mobile area. That's not how you usually get jobs in theatre, but I gave it a try." The try brought a response from Dr. R. E. Jackson, then chair of the Department of Dramatic Arts. "I thought, well, if this is supposed to be..."

And obviously it was. She discovered something about herself. She has a passion for the students. "I get more fulfillment talking to Kenny (Kenny Kudulis B.F.A. 2004) who is in New York with an internship at Julliard as a Scenic Artist than if I were doing it myself. I've received great comments on the backdrops I've worked on here from lots of people whom I respect. It's cool to be able to do this, but touching people is more important."

She is also passionate about the work of Art in everyday life. "I like actor driven pieces, which is strange for a scenic artist I realize." She especially likes pieces like *The Laramie Project* which she believes has an extremely important message. As the Secretary for the Board of Directors of M.A.S.S. (Mobile Aids Support Services), she was instrumental in involving that group in the production. "I'm proud of the department for doing it. It challenges our students, our audiences and the community."

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nium.

Over the next year TTP traveled to Laramie seven times and interviewed over 200 people. Using the interviews and company members' journal entries, along with trial documents and other found texts, Mr. Kaufman wrote *The Laramie Project* with the members of the company.

Because of the suddenness of the Shepard tragedy, TTP decided to use the royalties it had earned from *Gross Indecency* to fund the initial trips to Wyoming to develop *The Laramie Project*, enabling the company to conduct research, gather texts and engage artists to shape the stories of the people of Laramie while the tragedy was still fresh in people's consciousness. TTP's investment was later matched by the generosity of the Rockefeller Foundation, the NY State Council on the Arts, the Sundance Institute, and the Joseph P. Sullivan and Jeanne M. Sullivan Foundation, along with a small band of individual patrons who believed in TTP's work.

The play premiered as a co-production with the Denver Center Theatre Company in February 2000 prior to its Off Broadway run at the Union Square Theatre. The production received critical praise (including a citation as one of ten best plays of 2000 by Time Magazine) and was nominated for a 2001 Drama Desk award.

Like *Gross Indecency*, *The Laramie Project* is having a life in theatres around the world. TTP has presented the play in Laramie and recently produced the play on the West Coast in association with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and the LaJolla Playhouse. As of today, *The Laramie Project* is the second most performed play in America, and has already been produced in Japan and Australia. Mr. Kaufman has just finished directing the film version of *The Laramie Project* from his own screenplay for HBO and Good Machine. The film is opening the Sundance Film Festival and also has been invited to the Berlin Film Festival.

TICKET & BOX OFFICE INFORMATION PHONE (251)-460-6306

Tickets for Theatre USA's Production of *The Laramie Project*

General Admission \$12.00
Faculty/Staff/Seniors \$10.00
Students * \$8.00

The Box Office will open Monday Nov. 1 and remain open Weekdays 10:00 am to 5:00 pm through Sunday Nov 21 and one hour before each performance.

The Box Office is located in the lobby of the Laidlaw Performing Arts Center on the main campus of The University of South Alabama. Tickets are sold on a first come first served basis. All seats reserved. All sales final. No refund or exchange.

*Students tickets available for all students with valid ID. One ticket per ID.

Notes from the Director Matt Ames

Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Company's *The Laramie Project* marks a sea change in the way theater on the American stage is created. With its mix of personal interview transcripts, court documents and media reportage as source material, *Laramie* is everything that reality television could have been instead of game shows about who is willing to eat bugs or marry a stranger.

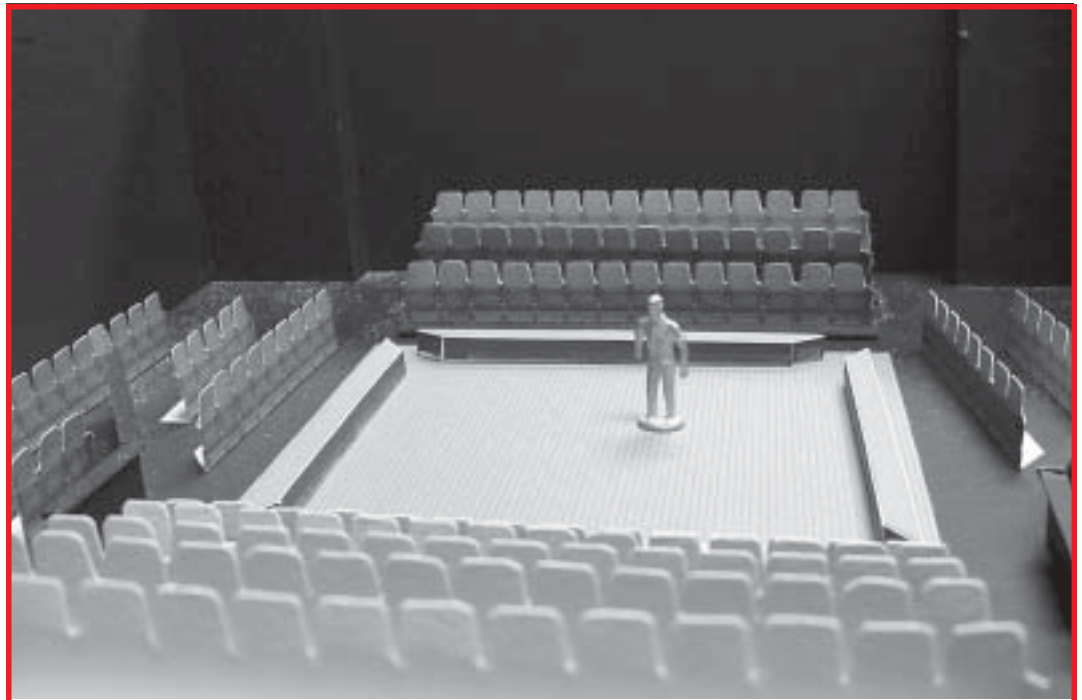
Laramie's text is largely made up of interviews with members of the community of Laramie, Wyoming, a community that was thrown into a national spotlight against its will after a brutal murder took place there in October of 1998. A young college student, a homosexual man named Matthew Shepard, was kidnapped and murdered by two young men who later claimed he had "come on to them." The murder was particularly cruel. Shepard was beaten, tied to a buck fence in a rural area, and left to die. He was found early the next morning by a bicyclist and died in

The Laramie Project is sometimes perceived as being a play about being gay, or a play that is merely a weapon in the fight to advance the mythical "gay agenda." It is neither of those things, nor is it primarily a play about a trial, although all of these certainly make up important parts of *Laramie's* story. It is a play about a place, and about how a typical American community responds in a time of crisis. The "characters" of the play are all real people, and the words that come out of their mouths are their own, and their largely ambivalent response to the horror that took place in their midst is as riveting and emotionally complex as any of Shakespeare's works.

The decision to do *Laramie* here at South Alabama was an easy one, as the play is ideal in every way for the educational experience. First, for student actors, there is the opportunity to play a number of roles in one project. Second, the numerous social issues that the play addresses make for rich fodder for actor research and for outreach to the community. Third, the artistic and commercial success of this new kind of theater text (*The Laramie Project* has won a number of awards and was made into a film for HBO), once described as a "theatrical collage," should not be ignored by those of us who purport to prepare young men and women for careers in the theater.

Unfortunately and most importantly, however, we at South feel it is important to remind our peers, that hate crimes, are anything but unheard of in our own backyard. In February of 1999, near Birmingham, Billy Jack Gaither was killed by two associates because he was gay. The pair cut his throat and burned his body with some old tires. In the summer of this year, the summer just past, Scotty Weaver of Bay Minette was murdered by a roommate and her friends who had tired of the young "fag" in whose house they were living, bossing them around.

I for one sometimes wonder what my "legacy" will be when I die, whether I live a long and fruitful life or get hit by a bus tomorrow. There can be little question that Matthew Shepard left this world too soon, but his legacy is clear. We can learn from what happened to him. Learn about ourselves, learn about our world, learn what about our world allows for young men like Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, Matthew's killers, to be created. We may even learn how the theater can be important again. Maybe find a reason to turn off the TV.



The staging for *The Laramie Project* is a departure from the traditional style at Theatre USA. The format will be arena style, and we will configure the performance space so that we will have audience on all four sides. One reason a theatre may opt for this format is to move the themes or issues of a play closer to the audience. This summer, when I was doing preliminary work on set design, I heard the news about Scotty Weaver. I was struck by the parallel of his story with that of Matthew Shepard. At that moment it made perfect sense to move our production closer to the community that is unfortunately, currently wrestling with these same issues.

The Laramie Project Ensemble

(Each Actor plays multiple character)

Maura Odom Sean Alexander

Jill Kelly, Carly York,

Leah DeButts,

Crystal Williams,

C amille Perillo,

Camryn Duff, Brad Bryant,

Zeb Brown,

Michael Waldron,

Robert Wells, III





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A black and white photograph of a young man with short, light-colored hair, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. The background is dark and indistinct.

The Laramie Project

November
11-13, 15, 19 & 20 @ 7:30 pm
14 & 21 @ 2:00 pm

Laidlaw
Performing Arts Center

Ticket Information
(251) 460-6306



University of South Alabama
Theatre