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The Laramie Project *Continued from Page 1*

And they're still dealing with the traumatic, divisive aftermath of a crime that shattered their peaceful (complacent?) existence and brought their hometown national scrutiny and, many felt, disgrace.

It was those stories—the ones surrounding and underlying The Big Story, the lives touched by Shepard when he was just a resident of Laramie and not an involuntary martyr—that were uppermost in the minds of New York playwright Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project (which won numerous accolades for its previous play, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*). Kaufman and several members of the company traveled to Laramie in November 1998 to begin interviews for what was to become *The Laramie Project*, a theater piece that opened two years ago in Denver and is crossing the country in local productions, generating waves of acclaim.

The Tectonic group traveled to Laramie six times during an 18-month period following the murder, eventually compiling, transcribing and editing more than 200 interviews with Shepard's friends and acquaintances, the local authorities, the town's clergy and everyday Laramie residents. What they heard was a story that, depending on the speaker, revolved around religion, sexuality, class and the image and/or values of small-town America.

Rather than focusing on Shepard himself, his horrifying experience was used by Kaufman and company as a catalyst to create an objective, documentary-like focus on the environment in which he lived and died. Though his specter hangs indelibly over the proceedings, he is not a character in the play.

Contributing to the documentary feel, Kaufman and his group are also characters in the play, detailing the interview process and

their own feelings about being in this unfamiliar place where this incomprehensible thing happened and interacting with the people whose lives were directly affected.

The play is structured in "moments" wherein excerpts from the interviews are played out, on a loosely chronological, thematic timetable, around a series of talking points about Laramie, Shepard and his murderers. Dramatic tension comes from the sequencing of moments, the juxtaposition of one event or point of view with another.

Each character is introduced by the play's narrator, who also indicates the basics of time and place. Re-created interviews explicate life in Laramie before Shepard's beating, the events leading up to the vicious crime and what unfolds

in its wake: a disruptive, often sensationalistic media frenzy; Shepard's hospital bed fight for survival and eventual death; a time of personal and community upheaval.

Because the work's approach is fresh and un-presumptuous (modernizing the theater through focus on form and technique is one of Tectonic's explicitly stated goals) and because it's so astutely written, the effect is less cacophonous than pacific. It feels like a humane act of patient, inclusive listening—a measured, sane counteraction to the animalistic violence that is its ultimate subject.

Laramie's multiplicity of viewpoints—from the press-release statements of Shepard's parents in the days before he dies to killer Aaron McKinney's frighteningly stoic confession—also has the effect of implicating the audience.

"Hopefully it will provide...a lot of questions," says Jon Kretzu, the director of Artists Repertory Theatre's production. "We're definitely not trying

to provide any answers. I think the audience has to constantly question their own feelings all the way through and constantly see the ambiguity, perhaps, of their own feelings. It's very important to bring them into every aspect of what these people are feeling and just how complex and conflicted their emotions and thoughts are."

Rather than seeing the play as somehow preaching to the choir, Kretzu sees the play as the choir. He emphasizes "really getting at what people are saying and not commenting, not making the easy choice that lets the audience off the hook, that allows them to go, 'That's just the stupid redneck or stupid preacher's wife; I'm not that person!' What happens if they start to feel what [the characters are] feeling? It's the gray areas that are most fascinating to me."

Kretzu first saw *Laramie* during its off-Broadway run and knew immediately he wanted to mount a Portland production. "It was one of those shows that, as you're watching, you go, 'Oh, yeah, this is something I've got to direct.'"

He also knew Artists Rep was up to it, noting it's a play that works "extremely well in our intimate setting. I feel strongly about the theater being political—that any play is political, really—so it just spoke to all the things we do. Since our mission is to do plays that deal with the human spirit, it was sort of a no-brainer. As soon as we could do it, we were committed to it."

Kretzu, who is gay, actually made a trek to Laramie in preparation for the show, more as a quest for direct inspiration than to replicate the fact-finding mission of Tectonic. "I just wanted to soak things up and really honor these people," he says, noting he didn't take any recording equipment or photos. "I was really surprised that many of them told me I was the only director who had bothered to come to Laramie, aside, of course, from the Tectonic Project people."

But Kretzu thought the trip was necessary for the integrity of the production. "This piece is so ingrained in...those specific places and those specific people. I managed to talk to six or seven who are actual characters in the piece...and to go to all the spots that one would want to go to, and that was really amazing, very personal."