

Self-conscious

Jedediah Schultz prepares for the part he was born to play

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Particularly intriguing about the Portland production of *The Laramie Project* is the casting of Jedediah Schultz as, among other characters, himself.

He was one of the many Laramie, Wyo., residents interviewed by Moisés Kaufman's Tectonic Theater Project during its research following the Matthew Shepard murder. Schultz was 19 at the time and applying for college scholarships.

One of the play's most memorable "interview" sequences is his relating of how his normally supportive parents, upon learning that his scene for a scholarship competition was from Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning "gay fantasia" *Angels in America*, decided for the first time not to attend a performance by their (straight) son.

At the beginning of the play, Schultz doesn't feel comfortable disagreeing with his parents' notion that homosexuality is a sin. By the end, a year later, he's saying "I just can't believe I ever said that stuff about homosexuals, you know? How did I ever let that stuff make me think you were different from me?"

Schultz remembers the Tectonic interviews as a turning point in his life, both as an actor and as a human being. "Here I am in the middle of Wyoming," he exclaims, "and I'm able to see how a group of actors from New York work and develop a play and their ideas about theater...as a business and as a craft. But also they were really forcing me to question who I was as an individual and where I wanted to go and how much I could grow."

His ultimate goal to be a professional actor, Schultz has been accepted to Yale School of Drama and counts among his many stage credits a full-fledged production of *Angels in America* at University of Wyoming and another production of *The Laramie Project* in Salt Lake City.

The experience in Utah went so well, he

The research had a profound effect on Kretzu's direction for the production. "It really made me feel even more at peace with doing this. Speaking to them and sharing that time with them made it clearer to me what this piece is about...what I wanted to express. So much of the actors' work...to me is not to do an impersonation of these people but to allow the spirit to come through them.... The words are very powerful and very simple and direct and to the point, and, hopefully, they can embody those words."

Artists Rep's *Laramie* will be unlike any of the other productions that have been staged. Designer Tim Stapleton has come up with a set that remains true to Kaufman's original minimalist concept while evoking the rural through the use of soil and a clapboard walkway that recalls a sidewalk out of the Old West.

"Part of the wonderful thing about directing," Kretzu says, "is taking a text and interpreting it. What I love about this piece is that it is so open, and it allows such a great jumping-off point. It's more a screenplay—and for a really avant-garde film—so it really allows you a lot of freedom."

The production runs May 19 through June 30, which places it squarely during Portland Pride. But Kretzu is unconcerned about the two

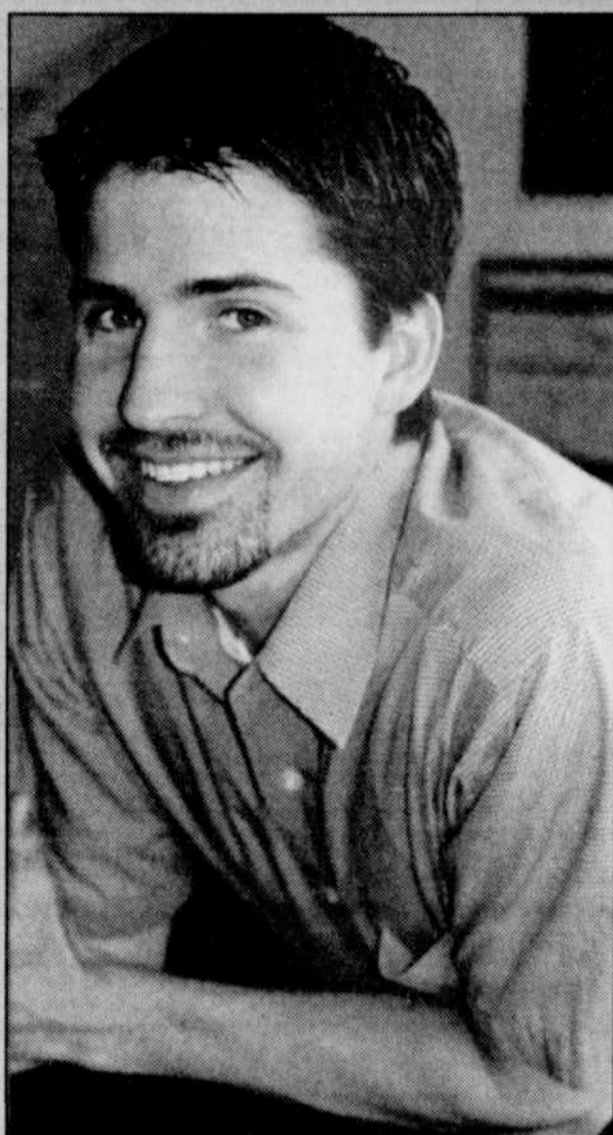


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Jedediah Schultz portrays himself and several other characters in *The Laramie Project*

checked out other cities in which *Laramie* was being produced, he shares, and Artists Repertory Theatre "was one of the more respectable theater companies that was doing the show."

It's the last time he plans to perform in this particular play. "I've been involved in so many ways—seeing someone else play me and now playing myself—so it's going to be nice to have this give me some closure."

So what's it like to audition to play yourself? Schultz maintains a sense of humor. "I had to audition because it's not just a question of how well I can play myself...but take on seven to eight other characters. So it becomes not just about me but about the level of craft that I have." Still, he laughs, "you would like to think you can play yourself pretty well." ■

events coinciding. In fact, he says: "That was always part of the plan. 'Gee, we're doing *The Laramie Project*. Think we should do it during Pride week?' The play has such a broad base of interest for people that I'm not really worried about it taking away from anything. It'll be a nice adjunct to what's going on."

Indeed, it seems *The Laramie Project* transcends its issues of sexual orientation and homophobia to capture a complex, disturbing, very real mosaic of American life.

"It's about so many things," Kretzu states, "that if you come expecting the telemovie version of the Matthew Shepard story, you're going to be disappointed. It's much richer than that...it's about everyone's feelings and how they were changed by this

event. It's about how humanity can come out of something inhuman. It's a transformative experience. It's that way for me, it's that for the actors, for all of us who've been working on it, and we really hope it will be that way for the audience." ■

THE LARAMIE PROJECT plays May 25 to June 30 at Artists Repertory Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St. Tickets are \$15-\$28 from 503-241-1278.

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Director John Kretzu traveled to Wyoming to meet the people his characters portray