

THE LARAMIE PROJECT: TEN YEARS LATER

AN EPILOGUE

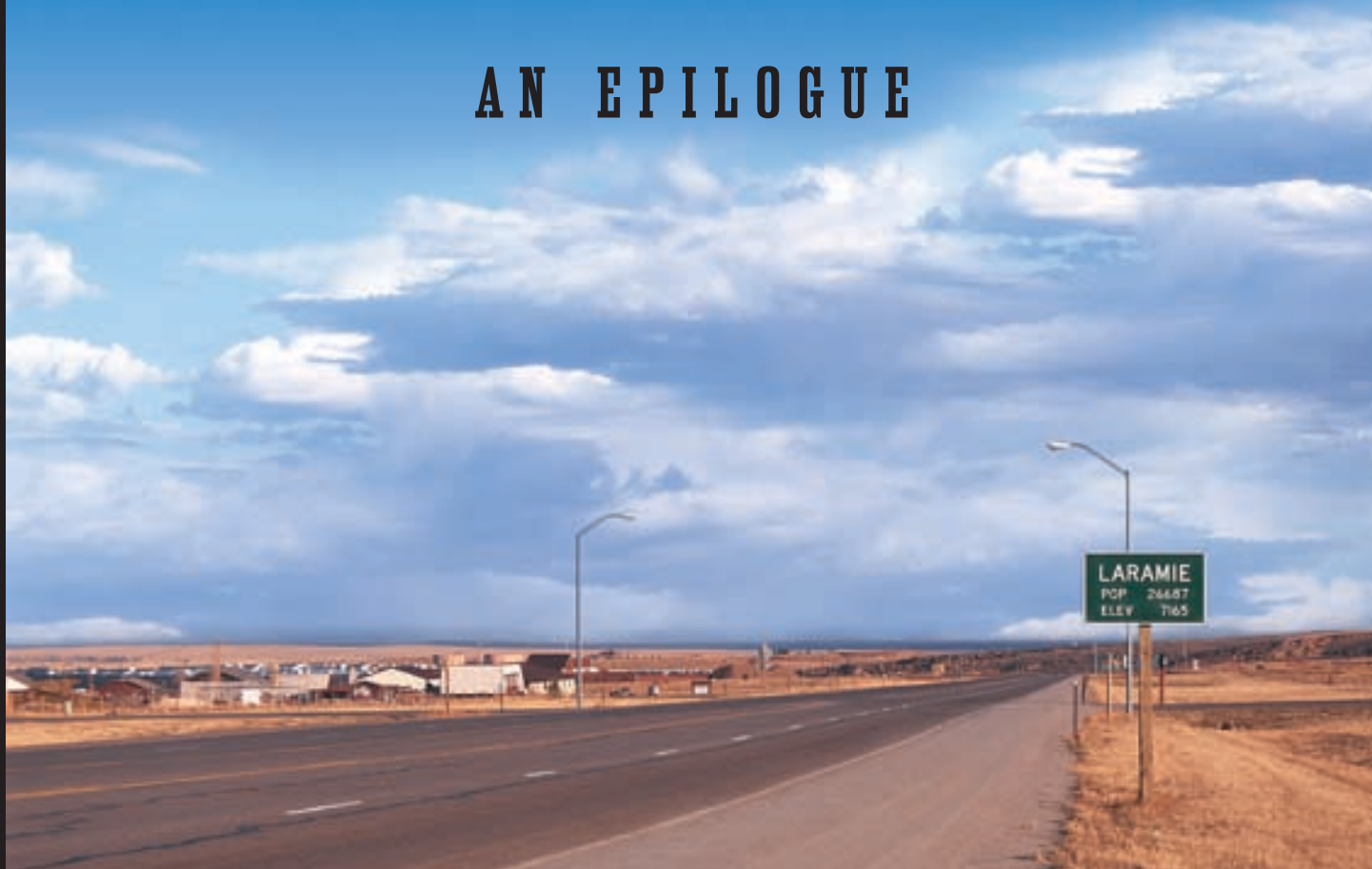


PHOTO: TIM CHEWITT

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INTRODUCTION TO THIS GUIDE



KEN FRIEDMAN

“It’s a fallacy to try to define Laramie the way one would describe an individual. There are 27,000 people in Laramie. There are at least 27,000 Laramies.”

—MOISÉS KAUFMAN, CREATOR OF
THE LARAMIE PROJECT

On October 12, 2009, audiences in more than 130 cities in the United States and abroad will attend the premiere of *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later — An Epilogue*. This publication is designed to enhance audience members’ experience at the theater; offer background and context; and guide students, teachers, parents and other community members as they engage in discussion of—and reflection on—this groundbreaking piece of theater.

Between now and October 12, this Web guide will be updated and expanded weekly to include:

- Background on the town of Laramie and on *The Laramie Project*
- Brief history of Tectonic Theater Project and description of its unique process of creating innovative, cutting-edge theater using interviews and other documentary elements
- Information essential to understanding the Epilogue, including:
 - Timeline
 - Synopses
 - Character identification
 - Analysis of theatrical elements
- Discussion questions and activities linked to key themes and concepts in the Epilogue, to be conducted before and after audiences attend the October 12 performance
- Primary-source document analysis with links to the sources
- Resources, reviews and reactions

THE EPILOGUE: OVERVIEW



COURTESY MATTHEW SHEPARD FOUNDATION

“ I don’t know what the hell [Matthew] was trying to do, but I beat him up pretty bad. Think I killed him. ”

—AARON MCKINNEY, IN A TAPE-RECORDED CONFESSION TO THE ALBANY COUNTY, WYOMING, SHERIFF’S DEPARTMENT

In October 1998, on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, a 21-year-old gay college student named Matthew Shepard was savagely beaten, tied to a fence and left to die in the frigid night. Characterized as a hate crime, the murder became a watershed historical moment in civil rights in America. In the aftermath of Shepard’s death, Moisés Kaufman and members of Tectonic Theater Project made six trips to Laramie; over the course of 18 months, they conducted more than 200 interviews with residents of the town. Using interview transcripts, court documents and media reportage as source material, they created *The Laramie Project*, a play that chronicles how the community grappled with the slaying. The play won numerous awards and is one of the most-performed pieces of theater in America today. It was made into a film for HBO and has been seen by more than 30 million people across the country.

Ten years later, in the fall of 2008, company members Moisés

Kaufman, Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris and Stephen Belber returned to Laramie to interview the same people. These interviews focus on how Laramie has changed: politically, socially, religiously and educationally. Using “Moment Work,” Tectonic’s unique approach to developing plays, the new interviews have been crafted into an Epilogue to *The Laramie Project*.

On October 12, 2009—the 11th anniversary of Shepard’s death—*The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* will premiere simultaneously in New York, Laramie and more than 130 cities across America and around the world. The New York production will be performed by the original cast members of the play and film, while other participants include professional regional theaters, community groups, high schools and universities. To assist artists in performing the play, Tectonic company members will travel the country prior to the October 12 premiere and conduct workshops with partners as they set up their productions. For a list of performance sites, visit www.laramieproject.org.



HBO

“ One of the things that was very clear from the start is the question of how does one measure change. Is it in the number of public monuments that have been erected? Is it in the number of laws that have been passed? Is it in the number of people whose views have been changed? ”

—MOISÉS KAUFMAN, CREATOR OF
THE LARAMIE PROJECT

In conjunction with the premiere, an **interactive community** has been launched at www.laramieproject.org where participants can blog, upload video and photos, and share their experiences in preparing and presenting the Epilogue in their communities. The members of Tectonic Theater Project will be active participants in the online community, offering participants feedback and encouragement as the project develops.

Tectonic Theater Project and its Mission

Since its founding in 1991, Tectonic Theater Project has used theater to instigate national debate with productions including *The Laramie Project*. Tectonic focuses on watershed historical moments—times when 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,” says Tectonic’s Artistic Director Moisés Kaufman, “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. The issues in the Epilogue are just as relevant now as they were in 1998. These last 10 years have not been the best 10 years for social change—not only for the gay and lesbian community, but also for any issue of social justice. As an artist, I feel like the question is: ‘What can theater do now in America? How can we play a role in the national dialogue?’”

GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION

The following guidelines, developed by the editors of *Teaching Tolerance*, can help ensure that discussion of *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* remains constructive:

- Participants should agree on a set of ground rules that will steer the discussion. Ask for input on what these principles should be. Examples include a commitment to confidentiality and to respect others, a ban on the use of slurs, and an agreement that only one person will speak at a time.
- When discussing issues related to sexual orientation, it is imperative that participants and moderators resist the urge to place lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender youth, those who are perceived to be LGBT, or those with LGBT friends or family members in the spotlight. Participants will enter into the conversation as they feel comfortable.
- It is the moderator’s role to establish as comfortable a setting as possible and to establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas. Special care must be taken to ensure that those holding a minority view are not vilified by those on “the other side.” The moderator should also pose questions to help keep the conversation on track.
- For an activity and handout on how to discuss controversial issues—focusing on the pervasive putdown “You’re so gay!”—visit www.tolerance.org/activity/controversial-issues.

FACTS AND RUMORS:

Understanding the events that led to a brutal killing—and assessing its legacy

“ It’s not that I think Matt was meant to be murdered or that Henderson and McKinney were driven by anything other than their own hatred when they killed my son. That’s certainly not the case. It’s just that, after things went so horribly off track that night—in that typical local bar in that typical American town—it seemed to all of us that somebody, something, or some power stepped in to, as much as possible, set things right. ”

—JUDY SHEPARD,
MATTHEW SHEPARD’S MOTHER,
IN HER NEW BOOK,
THE MEANING OF MATTHEW

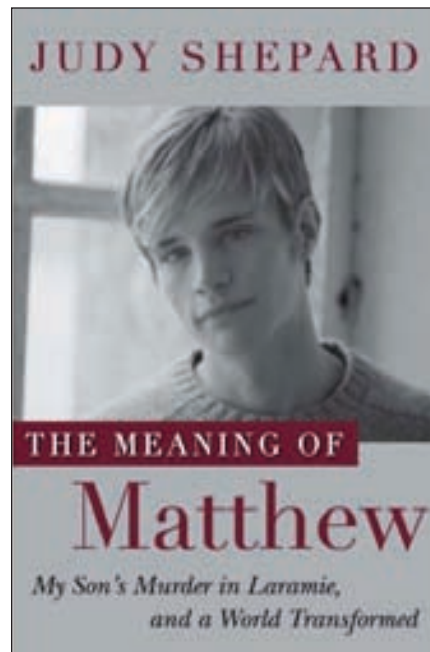
A good first step in preparing to see *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* is to brainstorm with the group about **prior knowledge and pre-conceptions** about the murder of Matthew Shepard.

Brainstorm and list answers to the following questions:

1. What do you know about Matthew Shepard and the events surrounding his death in Laramie, Wyoming, in October 1998? How did you learn this information? Name your sources.
2. Have you seen *The Laramie Project* in play or film form? What do you remember most? Make a distinction in the discussion between facts and speculation or rumor, and between primary and secondary sources. What have you learned about the case since?
3. What is a hate crime? List recent and historical examples.

LAWS AGAINST HATE: **The Meaning of Matthew**

Read “11 Years After Shepard’s Death, Mom Pushes for Hate-Crime Law,” *USA Today’s* recent article about Matthew Shepard’s mother Judy and her new book, *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie and a World Transformed*. (The article is online at www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-09-07-shepard_N.htm.) Then discuss the following questions:



FOR DISCUSSION

1. What facts about Matthew Shepard’s murder are reported in this article? What controversies have arisen over the facts of the case?
2. What do those who claim Shepard’s murder was not a hate crime believe happened? What evidence exists to the contrary?
3. How have Judy Shepard and Dave O’Malley been transformed by the death of Matthew Shepard? How are they attempting to turn the tragedy into positive action?
4. According to the article, what is the Matthew Shepard Act? What impact would this new law have on the prosecution of hate crimes?
5. What is the history of this legislation? On what basis have opponents objected to it?
6. Where does the Obama Administration stand on federal hate-crime legislation?

PREVIEWING THE SCRIPT:

“That’s what we’re famous for”

After reading and discussing the *USA Today* article presented on page 5 of this guide, consider this excerpt from the script of *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*.

Excerpted Moment: Two Guys at the Strip Mall

NARRATOR: Company member Greg Pierotti.

GREG PIEROTTI: One of the first things we did when we got to Laramie this time was walk around the town conducting informal interviews. Talking to two guys at the strip mall on Third, I ask: What do you remember about the Matt Shepard story?

GUY 1: I’ve only been here four months. The only thing I know about it is I remember it from the news when it happened. He took me out where it happened.

GUY 2: Yeah, I just brought him out to the area there, out by Walmart.

GREG PIEROTTI: You showed him the fence?

GUY 2: Well, you know, just to that area out there. They took the fence down.

GREG PIEROTTI: They took it down?

GUY 2: Oh yeah.

GREG PIEROTTI: Really? The fence ... where Matt Shepard was killed?

GUY 2: Definitely. It’s gone. For a while now.

GREG PIEROTTI: Why did they take it down?

GUY 2: The owners didn’t want people coming on their property. People still do, though, even though it’s gone. They got “no trespassing” signs all over the place out there.

GREG PIEROTTI: So, why’d you bring him out there then?

GUY 2: Because that’s what we’re famous for.



Romaine Patterson at the fence where Matthew Shepard was left to die

NANETTE MARTIN

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What and where is the fence? What makes it significant?
2. Who is Greg Pierotti and why is he surprised that the fence is gone? What is the explanation for its disappearance?
3. Discuss what Guy 2 means when he says, “That’s what we’re famous for.” Is this how Laramie will always be known? To what extent should the town be allowed to forget and move on?
4. What is the difference between fame and notoriety? What does it mean that the fence is gone and yet people still visit the site? Should there be a memorial at the site or elsewhere in Laramie, given that the land where the fence stood is privately owned?
5. What kind of memorial would you propose to honor the memory of Matthew Shepard? What would it look like? Consider modern memorials and controversies over them: the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, Ground Zero, Columbine, the FDR Memorial and others—including those in your community.



KEN FRIEDMAN

“ My friend Matthew created more change in his death than he may have ever achieved in his life. He was one man. One man that knew he could change the world. He serves as a reminder to all of us that as one person we too can create a change in our community and schools. ”

—ROMAINE PATTERSON,
MATTHEW SHEPARD'S BEST FRIEND

WHEN EVENTS BECOME LIGHTNING RODS

In this excerpt from the introduction to *The Laramie Project*, playwright Moisés Kaufman explains where the idea for this play came from:

There are moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus. At these junctures, the event becomes a lightning rod of sorts, attracting and distilling the essence of these philosophies and convictions. By paying careful attention in moments like this to people's words, one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large...

The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard was an event of this kind. In its immediate aftermath, the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance.

The idea for The Laramie Project originated in my desire to learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered; about what happened that night; about the town of Laramie. The idea of listening to the citizens talk really interested me. How is Laramie different from the rest of the country and how is it similar?

For Discussion

As you learn more about Laramie, consider these questions:

- How is Laramie similar to and different from your own community?
- Could a hate crime happen in your community—or has your community experienced hate crimes?



SHAWN TIBB

DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY

While *The Laramie Project* is presented in theaters and schools nationwide for its artistic and academic value, the play often attracts controversy that takes on a life of its own. An article in *USA Today*—published on March 16, 2009, and available online at www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-03-16-teacher-laramie_N.htm—reported:

[In January 2009] Debra Taylor showed students at Grandfield High School [in Grandfield, Oklahoma] *The Laramie Project*, a 2002 film based on the play of the same name, about the murder of Matthew Shepard. The students soon decided to film selected scenes themselves for an in-class project.

Taylor, 50, knew the project was controversial with strong language, but got her principal’s permission. A few weeks into it, the principal told her to stop production. After students protest-

ed, she held a 20-minute ceremony in a nearby park in which students wrote their thoughts and rolled them into helium balloons, then released them.

The next day, Taylor says, Superintendent Ed Turlington canceled the class. After she complained to a school board member, Turlington put her on paid leave and recommended that she be fired. The school board approved her resignation...

Activities for Writing and Research

1. What makes *The Laramie Project* controversial? Why do you think it has become one of the most-performed plays in America?
2. Imagine that you could interview Debra Taylor, Ed Turlington and students in Ms. Taylor’s class. What questions would you ask?
3. As you watch the Epilogue, note how and why the interpretation of events surrounding Matthew

Shepard’s death has changed. What factual evidence is presented in the Epilogue regarding Shepard’s killing?

4. Choose a “lightning-rod issue” that has divided your class, school or community. What are the facts? According to whom? Write your own summary of the facts, then create an alternate version from the opposition. Discuss.
5. Identify an issue in the news that has sparked controversy. Using the Web and other sources, find articles, blog posts and other commentary that present the varying sides of the controversy. Which facts are agreed upon by different sides? Where do the facts and interpretations differ? (Example: Consider the address to students that President Obama delivered on September 8, 2009.)
6. Choose a lightning-rod issue in your own life. Write about it and share with a partner if you choose.



“ I cannot mention anyone who has done more for this community than Matthew Shepard. ”

—FATHER ROGER SCHMIT,
CATHOLIC PRIEST IN
LARAMIE, WYOMING, 1998

THE ROAD TO LARAMIE

10 WAYS TO PREPARE FOR VIEWING THE EPILOGUE

- 1 Read or re-read the script of *The Laramie Project*.
- 2 See the HBO film version of *The Laramie Project*. How do the script and film versions differ? For discussion questions, context and activities related to the film, visit www.timeclassroom.com/laramie
- 3 Read these background articles on the Epilogue:
 - **Has Anything Changed?** www.newsweek.com/id/163027
 - **Laramie Killing Given Epilogue a Decade Later** www.nytimes.com/2008/09/17/theater/17laramie.html?pagewanted=2&r=1
 - **Back to Laramie** www.advocate.com/Arts_and_Entertainment/Theater/Back_to_Laramie
 - **The Meaning of Matthew: An Excerpt** www.advocate.com/Arts_and_Entertainment/Books/The_Meaning_of_Matthew_An_Excerpt
- 4 Note which sites are participating in the Epilogue premiere on October 12, 2009. See the list under the “Find a Performance” tab at www.LaramieProject.org. Consider partnering with a site in your state, or choose another site and create a “pen pal” e-mail correspondence.
- 5 Monitor local and national media in the next few weeks for stories about the Epilogue and anniversary; articles about hate crimes; and coverage of legislative issues surrounding domestic partner rights and same-sex marriage. Research and report on your state’s policies on these issues.
- 6 Plan times for your class or community to engage in the activities and discussions suggested in this guide.
- 7 Read and discuss the quotations presented in this guide. Do research to find additional quotes about the impact of Matthew Shepard’s killing on Laramie and/or about the Epilogue. Share your findings with your class or group.
- 8 Assign each participant or small group of participants one or more themes, moments and/or characters to trace and report on before and after October 12, 2009.
- 9 Brainstorm ways to become part of the online community at www.LaramieProject.org. If photography is permitted at your site, plan to videotape or take digital photos of your rehearsals, performance and/or residencies.
- 10 Come up with a list of questions you’d like to ask the creators of the Epilogue. Share your questions with the online community at www.LaramieProject.org.