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Big Opening for Epilogue to 'The Laramie Project'

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

The creators of "The Laramie Project," the acclaimed play about the 1998 murder of a 21-year-old gay man, [Matthew Shepard](#), are finishing work on an 80-minute epilogue to the original work that will be given its debut simultaneously at dozens of theaters across the United States on Oct. 12, the 11th anniversary of Mr. Shepard's death.

[Moisés Kaufman](#), the playwright and director who, with his Tectonic Theater Project company, wrote and produced the first "Laramie Project," said the epilogue would explore the impact of the Shepard killing on the residents of Laramie, Wyo., where it occurred. The dialogue will be drawn from interviews with dozens of people there, some of whom were involved in the crime, including Aaron McKinney, who was convicted of murdering Mr. Shepard and who gave an interview to the Tectonic artists.

"We wanted to see what occurs in a small town in the long run when it's been subject to such a devastating event," Mr. Kaufman said in an interview. "What has been the long-lasting effect of this watershed moment? Is the fallout of these events positive, negative or perhaps a better question, is it measurable in those terms?"

In holding multiple premieres of the play on the same night, Mr. Kaufman said he was taking a page from the Federal Theater Project, the New Deal program that often opened plays in a multitude of cities on the same night.

Tectonic's goal is to recruit 100 regional theaters, universities and other arts organizations to hold staged readings of the work, which is called "The Laramie Project — 10 Years Later." More than 40 theaters have committed to the readings, including Arena Stage in Washington, Seattle Repertory Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theater and the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles. The Tectonic company will hold its performance in Alice Tully Hall at [Lincoln Center](#).

"We're also taking advantage of contemporary technology so that at the New York performance we'll be connected to the other productions across the nation via the Internet," Mr. Kaufman said. "We're giving each production a video recorder so that they can document the event, and we'll be answering questions live from across the country," after the performances on Oct. 12, a Monday.

Mr. Kaufman and his epilogue co-writers — Stephen Belber, Leigh Fondakowski, Andy Paris and Greg Pierotti — returned to Laramie last fall to reinterview several townspeople who originally gave accounts to Tectonic in 1998 about Mr. Shepard, Mr. McKinney and the events preceding and following the murder. Those accounts were threaded together verbatim to create “The Laramie Project,” which has had several thousand productions since it opened Off Broadway in 2000.

In writing the new work Mr. Kaufman and his colleagues said they would reflect the range of views currently held by Laramie residents and others about whether Mr. Shepard’s murder was a hate crime by two homophobic men (Mr. McKinney and his accomplice, Russell Henderson) or the result of a botched attempt by the two men to rob Mr. Shepard.

Some Laramie residents, in defending their community during the interviews last fall, argued that they had come to see the motives and circumstances leading to the murder as more complicated than a hate crime. But others there insisted that Mr. McKinney and Mr. Henderson had been driven by their personal disgust toward Mr. Shepard, who was well known as an openly gay man in their town.

Mr. Kaufman declined to reveal details of the interview with Mr. McKinney, who, like Mr. Henderson, is now serving two consecutive life sentences. The two men lured Mr. Shepard from a Laramie bar on the night of Oct. 6, 1998; Mr. Shepard was ultimately tied to a fence, pistol-whipped and left to die.

“As always, what we found defied expectations,” Mr. Kaufman said. “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.”

“But one of the things that was very clear from the start is the question of how does one measure change,” he continued. “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?”

Natalie Bohnet, executive director of UApresents, which will stage the reading at a 2,500-seat theater at the [University of Arizona](#), in Tucson, said the campus is expected to sponsor other events in conjunction with the performance in hopes of turning that Columbus Day weekend in October into “a major learning experience.”

“We’ll have some professors of constitutional law holding a forum, and students on campus are expected to hold their own events, so we can look more deeply at hate crimes in America and issues of justice,” she said.

It is unclear if the new work will be performed on that October night in Laramie, but it will be produced as close as Denver, about two hours away by car, at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts. Stephen Seifert, executive director of the Newman Center, at the University of Denver, said he chose to hold a reading in part because of the theater's proximity to Laramie. (Mr. Shepard died at a hospital in Fort Collins, Colo., several days after the attack.)

"I was a history major in college, and my focus was the history of the American frontier," Mr. Seifert said. "No matter what differences of opinions exist about Matthew Shepard, his murder is now a part of the West's history, of American history."

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