

The Laramie Project

--- Just finished its successful run at Actors' Theatre



Review from the Good Times Entertainment Weekly

The Laramie Project' plays for the second year in Santa Cruz, and it's as good as it gets

by Christa Martin

At the end of last weekend's performance of "The Laramie Project" the woman seated next to me said one word, "brilliant." She rarely attends local community theater. But this show by Pisces Moon Productions, playing at the Actors' Theatre in downtown Santa Cruz, renewed her faith in the capability of the local theater scene. To my right sat a woman who has never seen a Santa Cruz-based play (besides Shakespeare Santa Cruz). Her words? "I was totally blown away."

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My review could end right now, as I think the words of these two women say it all. These are my words: Go see "The Laramie Project" and buy your tickets soon.

Yes, this is the second year that this show has been produced, but who cares? This year's production is perfectly comparable to last year's. Three of the nine cast members have been replaced by new faces that easily slide into their roles. The only real difference in the show is its new venue. (Last year it played at the Broadway Playhouse. This year it's at Actors' Theatre, which allows for a larger audience.)

The returning cast members seem to have gone even deeper into their understanding of the characters, but each still exudes the freshness found in last year's performances.

"The Laramie Project" is the true story about the heinous and brutal murder of young Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyo., in 1998. He was beaten, tied to a fence, and left there for 18 hours before 19-year-old Aaron Kreifels found him. Shepard was taken to a hospital but died within days.

Following his death a woman named Moisés Kaufman and her acting company, the Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie and conducted about 200 interviews with the people living there, who reported the before and after of Shepard's death. Leigh Fondakowski and a team of writers from this company wrote "The Laramie Project" (about a two and a half hour play with two brief intermissions), which is unique in its theatrical presentation in that the players individually share their testimonies to the audience. The fourth wall (an imaginary thing that "separates" the audience from the actors) disappears. What ensues is a powerful, thought-provoking, heart-wrenching tale.

And, Pisces Moon Productions does it splendidly. Director Susan Myer deserves praise for her ability to strip away all distractions (the set is simple, only a fence and a table or chair here or there, while the costumes are just black clothes, with various accents to differentiate between the 82 different characters).

Instead Myer seems to concentrate everything into making sure that her actors tell the truth with their performances. And most of them do. The standout performers include: Robert Vallerga who plays everything from a conservative, lecturing Baptist minister to the father of one of the accused murderers, Aaron McKinney. Vallerga is so convincing and real at times that you forget he's acting.

This is also an element of the play that constantly happens—the thespians are doing their work onstage and yet it is so seamless that as a viewer you sometimes forget that you're watching a play—instead you feel like you're the interviewer, listening to each person personally tell his or her experiences surrounding the death of Shepard. But then there are other moments when reality sinks in and it hurts because you realize that every word these actors are saying is quoted from real people. Some of the words are charged with hate, and others with compassion. But they paint a vivid picture of a young man who was killed because he was gay.

Christopher Sugarman also did some of his best work thus far on a Santa Cruz stage, which included a range of characters from a cocky bartender eyewitness to one of the perpetrators. Sugarman keeps his acting natural, never going over-the-top as can happen in the theater sometimes. Kristen Vaughan, as always, was exceptional. (Does she ever do bad work?) Robert Colter was handed a number of highly emotionally charged characters and was required to have a few breakdowns, which he did with great aplomb. And newcomer Nathaniel Meek slid right into an already tight cast and offered superb work.

Everything about the show is outstanding. It will make you cry and sigh. It will frustrate you by the words that some of these people say. But it will also make you laugh, smile and experience moments of hope in the middle of a horrific tragedy. It shows you that a little bit of good can peek out of wretched evil, by seeing the responses and actions of various people, including the final sentencing of one of the perpetrators. This play will make you ask questions about whether you ever experience hate, and if you do, to whom, and why. It will make you reevaluate how much love and forgiveness you offer. "Forgive" my soapbox, but "The Laramie Project" brings that out (in a good way) to its viewers.

"The cast works together flawlessly as an ensemble. It is obvious that this play means much more to them than just another performance. They are moved by the story and in turn move the audience. At the end of the evening we are convinced that we have met not 9 actors from Santa Cruz, California but 84 citizens of Laramie, Wyoming."

- Joyce D. Mann for the Register-Pajaronian



Angels vs. Protestors



Doc & Jonas at the fence

"The Laramie Project is back by popular demand. . . Like a four-course meal that leaves you completely satisfied, the three act Laramie Project leaves you full of drama and fat on thoughts. . . Laramie Project includes the full spectrum of theater entertainment: a villain, a hero, intense sorrow at times, humor and social consciousness, all through the eyes of the residents of Laramie, Wyoming and members of the Tectonic Theater Project."

- C.J. Cannino, Capitola Times



Impressive 'Project' a must-see

By ANN BENNETT, SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

In February 2002, Pisces Moon Productions opened their moving and beautiful performance of "The Laramie Project" to critical acclaim and appreciative audiences.

The show was an overwhelming success, with most performances sold out almost immediately, and many disappointed patrons unable to get tickets. Last week, the company reprised the production, which will continue through May 17 at the Actors' Theater, much to the delight of folks who missed it last year — and those who were so impressed they want to see it again.

"The Laramie Project" is a unusual evening of theater. It's not a play, really; it's an experience. The "Project" grew out of a murder that stunned and chilled the country. Matthew Shepard, a

young gay student at the University of Wyoming, was brutally beaten and left to die, tied to a fence in the bleak, desolate landscape surrounding Laramie.

A teenager discovered him still alive some 18 hours later, and he died in a hospital within a few days. The two young men who had committed this atrocity were quickly discovered and arrested. The townspeople were traumatized — first by the murder, and then by the media blitz that followed. Laramie was not a city that accepted homosexuality, and much of the population was openly antigay. The media pounced on this, and closeted local gays were faced with questions about their responsibilities to each other and to the bigger issue.

"The Laramie Project" came to life when award-winning playwright Moises Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie to interview people of the town. Over a period of 18 months, the group made the trip six times and conducted more than 200 interviews, and this material was organized and edited into the final script. The result is a strong and impressive evening of theater, a straightforward and uncompromising look at a community in mourning and at the attitudes of its citizens. No one is ridiculed; no one is sanctified. The "Project" is non-judgmental; it offers the opinions of the people without comment — and leaves the evaluation to the audience.

Director Susan Myer is fully committed to that concept, and her production is uniquely free of any denigration or accusation. Keeping her cast under tight control, Myer permits the voices of the people of Laramie to tell their stories without superimposing an outside point of view. This ability to present an image of such untouched reality, free of pontification, results in a stunning drama. The fact that the play lacks linear continuity enhances the dynamic of the drama — comments range widely in time and context, and in their juxtaposition, we discover a truth we don't necessarily want to accept. The "Project" illuminates courage, fear and hatred with equal attention, and Myer keeps that focus appropriately clear and honest.

Her ensemble cast is splendid. Akwia Diane Knipe is narrator; Robert Colter, Lisa Hadley, Nathaniel Meek, Charlotte Reynolds, Christopher Sugarman, Linda Turner, Robert Vallerga and Kristen Vaughan each take on anywhere from six to a dozen different personalities, often moving like quick-change artists from one guise to another without hesitation. Costumed in essentially nondescript outfits of black and off-black, the actors make use of an assortment of accessory props for identification, and change their voices and stances as readily as they add or subtract bits of clothing. It is a remarkable performance, and all of the actors are obviously deeply committed to the story.

The small Actors' Theater stage is dominated by the central image of a short section of rail fence; a few chairs and a small table are moved from the periphery as necessary. Throughout the evening, the fence is the primary focus. No matter what comments and insights are being presented by the actors, the fence remains predominant. It's always there, an image of unimaginable cruelty, and you're always aware of it. It's an eerie and yet mesmerizing symbol of what human beings are capable of.

Lighting by Django Hulphers is superb. Cast members are highlighted quickly and starkly, and each short presentation is a clear and graphic cameo that clicks on and off with fine precision.

"The Laramie Project" has been described as "a new genre of theater — theatrical journalism," and that's as good a way to describe the production as any. More than that, though, it's an incredibly effective drama created after a brutal murder in October 1998 of a young man who happened to be gay.

Pisces Moon's production is a tribute to the dedication of the Tectonic Theater company, and to the people whose lives touched or were touched by Matt Shepard. If you missed it the first time, or if you just need to see it again, order your tickets now. "The Laramie Project" will probably be a sell-out this time, too.

Read the full **review** from the Santa Cruz Sentinel of the original production

"I've not seen a stronger play or a better production . . . This unique script combines . . . interview-journalism with the dramatic impact of theater, to create an essential relevance in a time of war, as it examines how the murder of Matthew Shepard changed life in the town of Laramie, Wyoming. The play was not written traditionally, but crafted from 200 interviews . . . in the months following that hate crime. The result is a story so real and meaningful that it could only be told by the people who lived it. . . . Real people just tell us what happened and why, and in that way go straight to the heart."

- Santa Cruz Sentinel

"When I saw [Pisces Moon's] "The Laramie Project" first time around, it floored me: a powerful play that takes you through the depths and heights of the human experience. I'll bet it will be equally fascinating the second time around." -- Santa Cruz Sentinel

Director's Notes:

On November 14, 1998, a month after University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard was killed in a gay hate crime, Award-winning playwright Moisés Kaufman (author of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*) and members of his New York company traveled to Laramie and began a series of intimate interviews with the people in the town of Laramie where the crime took place. All different people from all walks of life were interviewed -- from the policewoman who found Matthew tied to the fence to Matthew's father. Over the next year, the company traveled six times to Wyoming and conducted over two hundred intensely personal documented interviews. Many of the writers/actors who compiled the interviews into play form performed in the play's debut. *The Laramie Project* premiered at The Denver Center Theatre Company on February 26, 2000. The Off Broadway play opened May 18, 2002.

The cast consists of four men and five women who assay 84 separate roles. Every word said by an actor was first the expression of a real person who was directly or indirectly connected to the events surrounding Matthew Shepard's death, as virtually all the people being portrayed are still alive. Kaufman's play has been described as a "new genre of theatre - theatrical journalism". Although the texts of other plays have been taken in part or wholly from real-life transcripts of hearings, media coverage, and interviews, the Tectonic Theatre Project, according to David Spencer of "Aisle Say" "...have refined the technique, creating the theatrical equivalent of the best documentary film scope, rhythm and economy, quick-cutting between interviews, inserting media bytes, and providing just enough background and commentary to make the sense of place increasingly vivid and the focus of the evening not merely its events, but its explored themes increasingly more urgent."

I can't describe the intensity, passion and heart-breaking pathos of this play. It is an unique piece of theatre in many ways: conceptually, structurally, and creatively. It takes risks, but it meets the challenges of the risks it undertakes.