



'Laramie Project' shocks with LGBT tragedy

The Barn Players, Ashley Jones Rivers



Shock, outrage, and anger set the tone for the sad, tragic story of Matthew Shepard, a gay young man who was beaten, tortured, tied to a fence post and left to die on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. in a play that sheds light on the plight of some LGBT persons in 1998.

The play, "The Laramie Project" by Moises Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project streams as the current offering from The Barn Players as its first production since the pandemic closed their season after they mega-hit version of "Titanic" last season. As with many production companies, COVID forced them into finding alternative ways to keep the Arts alive throughout the nation. This docu-drama revisits some of the horrifying events suffered by LGBT individuals, and, specifically Matthew Shepard who gave his life to uncloak the devastating hatred to an apex.

“In October 1998, Matthew Shepard, age 21, was brutally beaten and left to die on the plains outside Laramie, Wyoming,” The Barn Players posted on their website. “Because he was gay. Over the next year, Moisés Kaufman and a team of writers and actors from the Tectonic Theater Project took six trips to Laramie, where they interviewed citizens of the town – some unconnected with the tragedy, and some intimately involved. Using short scenes called ‘moments,’ the company created The Laramie Project, a stunning theatrical examination of the immediate reactions of Matt Shepard’s community to the murder and to the underlying bigotry and hatred that enabled it.”



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Matt Shepard suffered death to enlighten the world of the prejudice piled on persons who are conceived to be different or out of the norm. The systemic problem continues today, but not solely aimed at the LGBT world, but to all persons who appear different from the “acceptable.” We are seeing this play out with the use of body cams that capture some of the injustice to persons of color. Years ago, the novel “Flowers for Algernon” (later the Academy Award-winning Charlie demonstrated the injustice of special needs persons. “The Diary of Anne Frank” showed Hitler’s attempt to rid the world of Jews. It is through The Arts that these injustices remind the public.

“The Laramie Project” presents the horrifying story of homophobia that results in death of an innocent man. The play definitely needs some serious editing to pare it down in

length, but not in message. Everyone knows the outcome and knows it is going to be gut-wrenching, but the length of the play could accomplish that in less time. Sometimes, even the best playwrights love their words far too much.

“I am so thankful for my incredible cast, who presented the production team with the most beautiful gift – a generous donation in our names to the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

Not only is “The Laramie Project” cast filled with talent, they are filled with heart. I’m so lucky to be their director, Ashton Botts, director, said.



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In the play, actors cover many roles and the parts are uneven with some characters having more lines and opportunities to develop characters. That being the case, some actors had only a few lines to present and develop a character. Because of that focusing on character development remains a challenge.

The play’s focus lies on Matthew Shepard’s life and the circumstances surrounding his death and the aftermath. Male characters dominate the play. Female characters generally deliver information and color but their characters do not allow for much else.

For the men in the cast, the strongest characterizations were

from Matt Fowler, Christoph Cording, Ron Meyer, and Brent Custer. For the women, Larissa Briley and Christa James did have characters to develop. Two young performers to watch as they grow and progress are Ryan Bernstein and Gideon Madison.

The production team for “The Laramie Project” is: Ashton Botts, director; Cassandra Nguyen, stage manager; Nathan Wyman, scenic design; Chuck Cline, lighting design; Jeron Rivers, sound design; Brenna McConaughy, costume design; Abby Wolff-Smith, properties design; Brioni Garvin, costume assistance; Ryan Bruce, videographer; Kevin Fullerton, graphic design.

Members of the cast wore many hats and covered many characters. All are local actors, some still in college. “The Laramie Project” cast is: Josh Jackson (Greg Pierotti, Sergeant Hing, Matt Mickelson, Juror, Reverend Fred Phelps, Shannon, Various Narrators); Amanda McCoy (Amanda Gronich, Waitress, Newsperson, Sherry Johnson, Juror, Foreperson, Various Narrators); Christa James (Romaine Patterson,



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Reporter, Newsperson, Jen, Various Narrators); Matt Fowler (Phillip Dubois, Moises Kaufman, Jeffrey Lockwood, Governor Geringer, Cal Rerucha, Dennis Shepard, Various Narrators) Brent Custer (Aaron McKinney, Matt Galloway, Jonas Slonaker, Stephen Mead Johnson, Bill McKinney, Juror, Various Narrators); Kipp Simmons (Andy Paris, Doug Laws, Phil Labrie, Dr. Cantway, Gil Engen, Murdock Cooper, Juror, Gene Pratt,

Various Narrators) Gideon Madison (Jedidiah Schultz, Stephen Belber, Newsperson, Russell Henderson, Various Narrators) Larissa Briley (Officer Reggie Fluty, Leigh Fondakowski, Newsperson, Juror, Various Narrators) Ryan Bernsten (Shadow, Aaron Kreifels, Rulon Stacy, Andrew Gomez, Newsperson, Bailiff, Various Narrators) Kathy Murphy (Rebecca Hilliker, Newsperson, Lucy Thompson, Alison Mears, Various Narrators); Cierra Gonzales (April Silva, Trish Steger, Kristin Price, Tiffany Edwards, Various Narrators); Dana Wardle (Eileen Engen, Barbara Pitts, Marge Murray, Sherry Aanenson, Kerry Drake, Various Narrators); Julia Masterson (Zubaida Ula, Anonymous Friend of Aaron McKinney, Juror, Email Sender, Various Narrators); Ron Meyer (Jon Peacock, Judge, Father Roger Schmit, Priest, Various Narrators); Christoph Cording (Doc O'Connor, Baptist Minister, Rob Debree, Various Narrators); Cally Beckman (Zackie Salmon, Catherine Connolly, Baptist Minister's Wife, Various Narrators).

"The Laramie Project" opened, streaming, on May 21, and continues May 22, 23, 24, & 27, 28, 29, 30, 2021. Tickets can be purchased from The Barn Players website: thebarnplayers.org.

Tags: The Barn Players, Arts Asylum, "The Laramie Project", Kansas City Theatre, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City