

Laramie Project helps crowds remember, reflect

Jan. 27, 2011, Brooke English, The Martlet

“I believe in the death penalty. I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process, to show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy . . . Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of someone who no longer lives.” — Denis Shepard

In October 1998, Denis Shepard’s son Matthew was murdered by Aaron McKinney in a homophobic attack. Today, Matthew Shepard’s memory lives on not only through his family, but also through *The Laramie Project*, a play about the reaction to his murder.

A cunning combination of journalism and theatrical presentation, *The Laramie Project* is based on hundreds of real interviews conducted with the real residents of Laramie, Wyoming after the brutal murder. The play — written by Moisés Kaufman and other members of the Tectonic Theatre Project — also takes material from the journals theatre company members kept during the time of interviewing, as well as published news reports.

Now Victoria is getting a chance to see *The Laramie Project*. The scene is set in Langham Court Theatre, a building that has hosted theatre productions since 1938. While it’s a long, complex production running about two-and-a-half hours and boasting over 30 actors, it’s certainly worth the effort.

“This show is more than just one story, and it’s not about hate . . . it’s about humanity,” said Alexis Kuss of the production team.

With one too many subplots going on within the rich character development, *Laramie* is both physically and emotionally exhausting. It’s a challenge not everyone is up for apparently, as the snoring audience member to my left proved single-handedly.

Regardless, *Laramie* is one roller-coaster of a show that can get audience members to completely re-evaluate their way of thinking, and subsequent use of discriminatory slurs and behaviours. The production starts off with typical, everyday conversations in the Midwest, with the playwright and his posse interviewing residents, but slowly the intensity builds. Many subplots of the various residents involved ensue, each unique and some more well-acted than others. The female police officer who finds and treats a bloodied and barely breathing Matthew discovers she had open cuts on her hands and worries about contracting AIDs. A male actor, attending the same university as Matthew, plays a gay character in a production and has his own realization about how he treats gay people.

Laramie is fascinating in the fact that it never once attempts to depict Matthew, or the horrifying event that unfolded on the night of his murder, but instead focuses on the event’s monstrous effects. The most telling sign of hatred, powerfully depicted in the play, are the religious groups openly protesting at Matthew’s funeral, holding signs saying “God Hates Fags.”

But by far the most powerful scene in *Laramie* comes when Dennis Shepard is faced with a choice Matthew Shepard never had: life or death for his son’s murderer.

The Laramie Project is an emotional journey, one which some might find difficult to come to terms with due to it’s complexities and themes. But in the end, it shows how Matthew Shepard’s story continues to touch, inspire and change people today.