

Huge Cast Pulls off Authentic Tone

Actors, backstage participants deserve our admiration

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist, January 15, 2011

What: The Laramie Project

Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To Jan. 29

Rating: 4 1/2 (out of five)

The Laramie Project will surely be a highlight of this city's theatre season.

The Victoria Theatre Guild has done a simply superb job in bringing this ambitious and moving play to the stage. Beautifully directed by Roger Carr, it's a remarkable project that succeeds absolutely. The experience is unforgettable.

The Laramie Project is about the killing of Matthew Shepard, a young man who was murdered in Laramie, Wyo., in 1998. The slaying sparked international headlines. It was reported as a hate crime -- Shepard appears to have been killed because he was homosexual. He was beaten in an unusually brutal manner (a hospital worker said his injuries were compatible with a high-speed car accident). Shepard was left to die lashed to a fence, where a passing cyclist discovered him 18 hours later.

Enter the Tectonic Theatre Project, a New York-based theatre company. Headed by the innovative director Moisés Kaufman, the troupe visited Laramie where members did more than 200 interviews with townsfolk. This raw material became The Laramie Project, which takes the form of ordinary people talking about the murder.

In interpreting this tragedy through theatre, the potential for catastrophe was great. Shepard's murder became an emotionally and politically charged cause célèbre. Kaufman and company formulated an approach that works well; it's almost theatre-as-journalism.

Sixty-eight characters state their opinions, often "interviewed" by other characters representing members of Tectonic Theatre Project. It's a slice-of-life approach. We hear from 68 characters, including police officers, university students, clergymen, doctors and waitresses. We also meet the killers. The only absentee is Shepard himself.

This journalistic approach sidesteps sentimentality or politicized finger-pointing. We, the audience, sense we are hearing all sides of the story. Wisely, Kaufman avoids portraying Shepard as a saint or his killers as the personification of evil. Some people in the play suggest Kaufman was a barfly who might have been HIV-positive. Friends of the killers, meanwhile, suggest they were just regular guys who on that night made terrible decisions.

What makes The Laramie Project a transcendent experience -- and a bona fide work of art -- is Kaufman's decision to approach the play as a portrait of Smalltown, U.S.A. The citizens of Laramie, we learn, are truly ashamed their town is besmirched forever by the killing. It is a good place to live, they insist. It is sort of town where everyone knows everyone's business and looks out for one another. The citizens of Laramie just want to live out their lives as happily and as well as possible.

In this way, The Laramie Project recalls Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, in which small-town American life is also revealed by examining the daily lives of ordinary people.

Director Carr's most inspired decision was enlisting a cast of 33 to play the 68 characters. In a surprisingly visceral manner, this gives the sense of a community coming together to which Kaufman and his team aspired. It's especially evident in crowd scenes, such as when the actors gather for a candlelight vigil.

Using a huge cast also says something about the power of community theatre, in which actors come together -- on a volunteer basis -- to participate in an art form they care deeply about.

Many powerful performances were offered Thursday night. The size of the cast prevents giving everyone their due, but standouts included Eric Holmgren, Kevin Stinson, Michael Romano and Kyle Kushnir. Near the end, Dusty Smith managed -- in a very fine performance -- to move some audience members to tears, delivering an emotional speech as Shepard's grieving father. Nicole Evans, playing an on-scene police officer, also impressed, tapping admirably into her character's salt-of-the-earth personality.

Carr has successfully encouraged his cast to tackle their roles with openness and lack of artifice. Quick scenes were navigated smoothly and were well lit. A backdrop video screen effectively provides moving images such as rain, candles or the killers' red truck. A minimalist set, multiple layers of platforms, is set off by the spectral presence of the barbed wire fence to which Shepherd was bound.

To truly work, The Laramie Project must project a sense of universal humanity. The play calls for people to rise above their moral and political beliefs. It's a hard tone to capture -- it must seem 100 per cent authentic. On this night, the cast and crew conspired to make this happen.

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