

Small Santa Ana troupe delivers potent 'Laramie Project'

Jan. 18, 2012 Updated Aug. 21, 2013 1:17 p.m.



Mysterium's cast stars, from left, Meghan McCarthy, Jeff Lowe, Tiffany Berg, Jill Cary Martin, Jessica Runde and Theodore Lance - as well as Gregory Cesena and Joe Parrish (not pictured).

ROBERT LADD

By ERIC MARCHESE / FOR THE REGISTER

'The Laramie Project'

When: Through Feb. 12. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Where: Mysterium Theater, 19200 Dodge Ave., Santa Ana

How much: \$18 (\$15 students/seniors/military)

Length: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Suitability: Adult language and content

Call: 714-505-3454

Online: mysteriumshop.com

The assault and torture that led to the death of Matthew Shepard in October 1998, shocked the nation and brought the town of Laramie, Wyo., the same notoriety as Waco, Texas and Columbine, Colo.

Laramie's residents, though, were unnerved by Shepard's killing and bewildered that two of its own young men could have been the perpetrators of what was eventually deemed a hate crime. The 21-year-old Shepard was gay, and for being so, he paid with his life – abducted and robbed, then tied to a fence and savagely beaten, dying six days later.

The crime was national news, but it took a team of playwrights and actors from New York to visit Laramie, investigate and examine what happened there, and turn their experiences into a play to try to make sense of it all.

If Stephen John's often sober new staging of "The Laramie Project" at Mysterium Theater proves anything, it's that what happened in Laramie more than 13 years ago could have happened anywhere in the U.S., where our open society invites the interaction of individuals and groups not necessarily tolerant of one another.

Completed and staged in 2000, "The Laramie Project" was an ambitious undertaking: Six cross-country visits to Laramie and

hundreds of interviews yielded a complex three-act play covering the town, its general views of Shepard, and both the immediate and long-term aftermaths of the brutal crime.

The characters in this fact-based drama are the dozens of townspeople interviewed – students, law enforcement officers, teachers, clergymen and more. Even the playwrights themselves are active characters in this story.

Mysterium's staging also proves that even small theater companies with scarce resources are capable of yielding as successful a "Laramie" as any larger, wealthier troupe.

John's staging and direction traverse the text's complexities with ease, and he and his company yield a sterling production that's impassioned and intense without being soppy or preachy. Rather than list which performers portray which characters, the cast's four men and four women are each billed as one of the seven members of the Tectonic Theater Project, with Meghan McCarthy serving as an all-purpose "Tectonic Theater Member." Particularly intriguing is how Tectonic leader Moisés Kaufman and his colleagues chose not only to depict what happened to Shepard, and its effects on Laramie, but also the broader picture of their interactions with the citizens of Laramie and the process of creating the play.

Firsthand testimony is what drives "Laramie," and it's the fuel that powers this staging. The cumulative effect is a series of vivid mental pictures that transcends the play's deceptively simple format.

One observer sees "irony and tragedy" in the fact that Shepard had settled upon human rights as a potential career. The town's Unitarian Universalist minister (played by Jeff Lowe) relates that

hundreds of mourners have made a "pilgrimage" to the site of Shepard's beating and torture, deriving "a powerful, personal experience" from it.

The emergency-room doctor (Joe Parrish) who treated Matthew Shepard says his injuries were "not what you would expect from one person doing this to another" – then adds, for emphasis, "it offends us." He also finds incomprehensible "the magnitude of the hatred" evident for anyone to be treated so savagely.

The community suffers a secondary trauma when hundreds of members of the national news media descend upon Laramie, a place "not used to this type of attention." While most residents viewed them as "predators," one noted that their presence "made people accountable – it made them think."

One prominent citizen, a Catholic priest (played by Lowe), even anticipated blowback from the as-yet nascent theater project: "If you people write a play of this, say it right. Don't make matters worse – do your best to do it right."

All of John's performers possess the gravitas so crucial to their characters and to this play. In particular, Parrish's restrained, thoughtful delivery enhances his every portrayal – among others, as playwright Kaufman; Matthew's academic adviser at University of Wyoming; the emergency room doctor who tried to save Shepard and the chief neurosurgeon who worked on him; a homophobic religious leader; the judge who hands down two consecutive life sentences to one of the killers; and Matthew Shepard's father.

Lowe, McCarthy and Parrish are joined by the equally superb Tiffany Berg, Gregory Cesena, Theodore Lance, Jill Cary Martin and Jessica Runde. Like their Tectonic counterparts, these eight

cast members are fiercely committed to their roles – and to a humanistic play that has earned the status of a landmark work that deserves frequent stagings and profound contemplation.

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