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"AN INVOLVING PRODUCTION OF AN IMPORTANT PLAY"

Audrey review: There's a touch of greenhorn in this staging by a brand new company but its nine-strong cast deliver convincingly.

Show: The Laramie Project

Company: Theatre Travels

Where: Seymour Centre, Chippendale, Sydney

When: 28 Nov - 8 Dec 2018

THE LARAMIE PROJECT

By: Jason Blake **Date:** 30 Nov 2018

There's a touch of greenhorn in this staging by the youthful and brand new company Theatre Travels, but *The Laramie Project* retains its power to move us though 20 years have passed since the events that inspired it.

Created by Moisés Kaufman and actors of New York's Tectonic Theater Project, this theatrical investigation of the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard has done much to keep hate crime legislation in the public conscience. It has been produced in professional, amateur and student theatres worldwide.

It's a stylistically influential piece, too. While *The Laramie Project* was by no means the first verbatim theatre piece, it laid down a template many other works have borrowed since.

It's a play within a play, in which the cast double as the citizens of Laramie, Wyoming and the members of Tectonic Theater who somewhat nervously navigate the task of drawing stories and opinions from townsfolk who not always sympathetic to their mission.

As Tectonic's actors fan through the town and the university campus, they uncover the various fault lines in American society – religious, social, educational and economic – that inform the background to the hard facts of the case: that Shepard, 21, was coaxed out of a bar by two young men and driven beyond the city limits, where he was beaten, pistol whipped, tied to a fence, tortured and left to die – which he did, six days later in hospital.

True to their company name, co-directors Carly Fisher and Rosie Niven travelled to Laramie, Wyoming to experience the town and visit some of the locations. If nothing else, they returned with a good ear for the Western American idiom, which this company (which includes accent specialist Linda Nichols-Gidley) reproduce with notable accuracy.

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But *The Laramie Project* requires more than a good accent. It demands economy and transparency from those playing it.

Here, though not all of the characters emerge with the same truthful force, this nine-strong cast deliver convincingly: Francisco Lopez as an ER doctor; Andrew Hofman as a wide-eyed theatre student; Matthew Pritchard as a garrulous bar attendant, and Laura Djanegara as a young activist who deploys an army of angels to drown out the hate speech of Fred Phelps (John Michael Burdon), leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, originators of the “God hates fags” campaign.

Fisher and Niven’s direction is clear and largely unfussy though their staging packages the text into an arm’s length “show”, when something far more stripped-back – along the lines of a town hall meeting, perhaps – would help generate a better sense of immediacy and connection.

Dave Angelico’s set of rough boards is attractive with a back wall of planks that illuminates very prettily (thanks to lighting designer Martin Kinnane). Less effective are the two shed-sized set units flanking the stage. They’re unnecessary and intrusive.

But all considered, this is an involving production of an important play that asks us to revisit our own definitions of freedom, tolerance and forgiveness.

Jason Blake

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