



THEATRE

THE LARAMIE PROJECT: A TIMELY AND RELEVANT REVIVAL

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Production images: David Hodder

When the first bite of audio hits in the dark, it is “gay student Matthew Shepard “. The cacophony of overlapping media continues and that descriptor is always there. It reaches down these 20 years, two decades and seven weeks, since the bashing murder of the 21 year old Laramie, Wyoming student whose brutal death personalised the debate around hate crime legislation. THE LARAMIE PROJECT understands that naming is important, that reclaiming the boy from the headlines has more longevity than a putting a town on trial in a camera glare.

Tectonic Theatre Project travelled to the town in the aftermath of the worldwide headlines to conduct over 400 interviews with 100 residents of Laramie. The work they created, this play, refined a newly emerging art form, Verbatim Theatre. Studied in schools all over, including being on the HSC syllabus here, THE LARAMIE PROJECT and its follow up THE LARAMIE PROJECT: 10 YEARS LATER is somewhat revered by the LGBTQ community. Theatre Travels is playing both plays in repertory at the Seymour Centre and for those who are uninitiated, it is a tough watch.

This production is a blind casting ... blind to gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity ... with the cast of nine playing 75 characters over the two full length shows. There is an evident trust in the text and style of the work and in the main, the performers take on the characters lightly but with clarity, not only in creation but in relationships. However, the blind casting does force moments when the audience’s suspension of disbelief is challenged. Unfortunately, there is some overplaying of the townsfolk which arches them into a jarring unbelievability and a disrespect of exaggerated stereotype.

That being said, this production is a sum of positive parts. To focus on the occasional negative elements is to do disservice to the polish, fluidity and successful theatricality of the production. Most of the ensemble have a very strong command of the requirements of each individual and their purpose in the narrative, and the co-directors **Rosie Niven** and **Carly Fisher** have successfully harnessed the multiple energies of the slow-build narrative to create a theatre experience worth attending.

The various tempi of the piece are well balanced to allow the audience intimacy with the characters and a grumbling discontent at the wider implications of what is said. Some honestly expressed views are teeth-grittingly difficult to hear. It speeds up when the media hits town and evidences a stylish contemplativeness in scenes such as the funeral. There are vibrant and busy sequences well-orchestrated, seamlessly effected and also well-conceived silent, still moments. Early in the play his name is spoken in the midst of a comically intended scene and the silence brings the venue's air conditioning buzz pounding to the ears.

There are many such flashes of power in the production. There is nowhere to hide and the direct, verbatim speech to the audience has the intended intensity. The cast often watch and respond in small measure but intermittently there is an impassive sitting and it is joltingly effective. The trio work which speaks to the audience of finding Matt Shepard's body is finely calibrated and presented with a powerful synchronicity and the individual speeches are never allowed to slip into contextless monologue.

The costuming works on several levels. Both to indicate character, 'Cowboy Country' T-shirt and shoulder holster, also to key the audience in when a character returns, a priest's collarino or a Unitarian stole. The changes are subtle and placed at unobtrusive moments by the directors and extremely smoothly handled by the committed, well-rehearsed cast. As are the minimal props and set elements.

The setting works well in flexibility and resonance. Not the black box of the original, this production still retains the speakers' chairs but extends the wood. The floor to ceiling backdrop is decaying rural with bar style coat racking and the two large set pieces echo farm buildings. There is a compelling metaphor in three pine box practicalities used as touring theatre trunks. Missing for me was a visual reference to the zigzag sapling fence on which Matt Shepard was found.

Using no colour white as a basic state, the lighting design limits its use of added colour giving the production a required simplicity. However the plotting takes poor account of the space. When the cue is up and the cast walk into the light, the effectiveness is maintained but cueing a light up on an already entered and still character asks too much. The audio is limited but well used in places. The heaven and hell of violin and cello at the funeral, the speeded up marching band and the lovely piano behind an early remembering, melt nicely with well sourced grabs of media and infrequent sound effects.

Beginning with 'What is Laramie?' and concluding with 'This is what Matt Shepard achieved after his death', THE LARAMIE PROJECT is a neo classic work which is treated with respect and a genuine passion for storytelling by Theatre Travels. Slightly flawed though it be, the show has weight and carry in the way it allows tears to rise despite tempering outrage with understanding even as the unspeakable is articulated. A production which wears its heart on its sleeve, this is a timely and relevant revival.

THE LARAMIE PROJECT and 10 YEARS LATER from **Theatre Travels** [[Facebook](#)] continues at the Seymour Centre until December 8th. You can read a pre-production interview with the co-directors [here](#).

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