

Eight's a crowd

In CATCO's virtuoso Laramie Project, a small cast creates a town's worth of characters

by Jay Weitz

Eight performers dividing among themselves upwards of 60 characters. It sounds like a formula for dramatic chaos. But the ensemble that Contemporary American Theatre Company has assembled for The Laramie Project summons a vast arsenal of talents to bring virtually every one of those characters to vivid life.

A tone of voice, a slump of body, a setting of jaw, a manner of speech, a way of dress. It adds up to a play that, in spite of its grim subject matter and almost clinical meta-theatrical structure, grows into something both affecting and thought-provoking.

The Laramie Project gained its vibrant life from the horrific death of Matthew Shepard, the 21-year-old gay college student who was brutalized, bound to a fence and left to die in October 1998 by two young men in Laramie, Wyoming. Members of New York's Tectonic Theater Project and its artistic director, Moisés Kaufman, began interviewing folks in Laramie mere weeks after the murder. Eventually, they made six visits to Laramie, conducted more than 200 interviews and distilled a two-and-a-half-hour play that explores the complexity of the human psyche, examines the best and worst of the human heart, and exposes the inner workings of the dramatic process.

Damian Bowerman, Linda Dorff, Annie Fitzpatrick, Robin Amy Gordon, Wolf

J. Sherrill, Dudley Swetland, Ed Vaughan and Crystal Wolford are the tightly knit ensemble, and there's not a dropped note among them. As if to emphasize the play's "Laramie as Everyplace" sensibility, they don't just take on multiple roles, but they occasionally share those roles in different acts and play seamlessly across gender.

Every one of them makes an impression: Wolford as the terrified kid who stumbles on the crime, Fitzpatrick as the officer who recovers Shepard from the fence, Dorff as that officer's anxious mother, Bowerman as the Bible-thumping demagogue Fred Phelps, Swetland as Shepard's heartbroken father tempering justice with mercy, Vaughan as a distraught hospital administrator, Gordon as a savvy young Muslim student.

First among equals, however, is Sherrill, who takes on both of the murderers, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. In what is the single most devastating moment of *The Laramie Project*, Sherrill stands alone at the end of Act One, lit from above and surrounded by darkness. Cynthia Stillings' stark lighting renders Sherrill's eyes as dark, empty sockets. He speaks in the person of Dr. Cantway, the physician who discovers that he has administered care to both perpetrator and victim that day, bays apart in the emergency room. His simple eloquence speaks to our common humanity as well as our common responsibility to each other.

Nearly as simple, D. Glen Vanderbilt's set of wooden slats and corrugated metal evokes the rural West. A central rectangular screen abstractly suggests vast spaces and big sky.

Director A. Lorraine Robinson has brought it all together in a

production that offers hearty laughter, heartfelt grief and heartrending beauty in equal measures. The Laramie Project allows hatred to indict itself with its own words, intolerance to trap itself in its own illogic and goodness to peek through in spite of ourselves.

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The Laramie Project

by: Moises Kaufman

Directed by A. Lorraine Robinson

Contemporary American Theatre Company

Starring: Linda Dorff*, Annie Fitzpatrick*, Robin Amy Gordon*, Wolf

Sherrill*, Dudley Swetland*, Ed Vaughan*, Damian Bowerman+, Crystal

Wolford * Member of Actor's Equity

+ Equity membership candidate

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