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MOVING DOCUDRAMA INSPIRES, CHALLENGES

*By Michael Grossberg THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH September 22, 2002 Publication:
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Theater has the power to inspire, heal and illuminate. When so much of today's theater is mere entertainment, clever spectacle or empty experiment, a truly successful effort to realize the higher potential of theater deserves to be applauded -- and seen -- widely. Contemporary American Theatre Company has launched its professional season with a sterling production. In *The Laramie Project*, a recent off-Broadway hit, Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project blend interviews with the citizens of Laramie, Wyo., and journal entries by the actors who interviewed them into a mesmerizing mosaic of modern America.

Inspiring and touching, thought-provoking and challenging, but laced with humor and folksy personality, *Project* chronicles the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, and its impact on the town.

Divided into three acts with two intermissions and briskly running just more than 2 1/2 hours, *The Laramie Project* spotlights complex issues, from hate crimes and homophobia to media sensationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Guest director A. Lorraine Robinson's staging brims with a fluidity and subtlety rarely seen in Columbus. Robinson, who directed CATCO's fine *Having Our Say* last season, has a knack for

bringing the personal testimony of docudrama to vivid life.

Kudos to the cast, which earned a standing ovation at Friday's opening: Damian Bowerman, Linda Dorff, Annie Fitzpatrick, Robin Amy Gordon, Wolf J. Sherrill, Dudley Swetland, Ed Vaughan and Crystal Wolford.

These actors play more than 60 roles, each recognizably human. With one of CATCO's strongest ensembles in one of the decade's most powerful ensemble pieces, it's hard to single out any actor. Yet, many piercingly emotional moments resonate.

Among the best: Swetland's troubled Dennis Shepard delivering his mournful judgment upon the boy who killed his son; Vaughan's hospital spokesman breaking down in tears at a news conference before announcing Shepard's death; and Sherrill's awestruck doctor awakening to a divine sense of compassion toward two boys under his care -- one a victim, one a killer.

Also compelling: Gordon, as a wryly insightful Muslim and an out lesbian; Bowerman, as an amusingly frank driver and the conscience-stricken bartender; Dorff, as a worried mother; D. Glen Vanderbilt, for his mythic scenic design; and Cynthia Stillings, for her dappled lighting.

Like *Our Town* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Laramie Project* is a profoundly moving play about community in America.

Those who embraced CATCO's *Grapes of Wrath* last year or *Of Mice and Men* in the mid-1990s will find much to love here.

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