

Youngblood Reviews for... **THE LARAMIE PROJECT: TEN YEARS LATER (AN EPILOGUE)**

Shepherd Express – Curtains

October 13, 2010

The Laramie Project Ten Years Later: An Epilogue - Youngblood and UWM's Involvement In A Historic Theatre Project

I ducked out of the Milwaukee Rep party Monday night to make sure that I could make it to the Zelazo Center on time. UWM and Youngblood Theatre Company were staging the Milwaukee end of a worldwide theatrical event put together by the Tectonic Theatre Project. I ran into local actor Robert WC Kennedy on the way out to the show. We talked Spring Awakening and Warhol on the way out to the show. It was kind of a weird experience arriving at the show and seeing so many other people who had rushed out there from the Rep party. There's Amy Geysler from Milwaukee Chamber: Hi. There's . . . well quite a lot of people from local theatre showed-up and it's nice to see so many people make the transition from celebration downtown to reflection on the east side. It was kind of a big night for theatre. Odd for a Monday night . . .

Years ago, the Tectonic Theater Project traveled out to the small town of Laramie, Wyoming to interview people living there. The sleepy little western town had become the center of national attention for the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a young homosexual man. The murder had shaken the town, which still harbored the kind of closeted and not-so-closeted hatred for homosexuality that lurks in every town in the country. Ten years later, the Tectonic Theater Project returned to Laramie to see how things had changed since their first visit.

I went in a bit skeptical. I'd seen a really powerful production of the original play put together by Soulstice Theatre Company last October. The power of the story delivered in full production in a very, very intimate space at the Marian Center was profoundly moving. I wasn't certain that a space the size of the one at Zelazo would have the same kind of immediacy. Also--it seemed like the original script covered things pretty exhaustively. The lessons learned from Laramie need to continue to be explored, but how much more insight are you going to be able to cull from a single small town? As it turns out, the sequel—the epilogue to the original piece adds quite a bit to the discussion. Where as the original covered the psyche of the town and its attempt to move on from the tragedy, the epilogue got into the more tricky issues lurking below the surface. In the future, the two could theoretically be done in repertory by theatres across the country. Performances could alternate between the original play and the epilogue. It'd be a really exhaustive exploration into a lot of issues.

The evening started with a simulcast from New York to the 149 other theatres in the world where the play was being read. After initial technical difficulties, The project's Moises Kaufman and other Tectonics addressed audiences across the world. There was a brief statement read by Glenn Close on the occasion. The feed was cut and the show started. The cast consisted largely of people from the recently formed Youngblood theatre company as directed by Jonathan West. The sound system wasn't perfectly in synch with the venue, but the minor audio glitches were a remote concern as the cast effectively drew-in the audience with a remarkably well-written script. The most compelling bits of the new script included:

--Michael Cotey as both of Shepard's attackers individually interviewed ten years later. Cotey made both very distinct. His performance here really puts a face on the murder

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and shows a remarkable amount of courage and depth on the part of Cotey to be able to identify with the two men strongly enough to put forth a textured portrayal of both men.

--An interesting bit about a television news crew from 20/20 doing a story that had been designed to re-write the murder story as a robbery and drug deal gone bad. It was a story that was embraced by many people in Laramie. Rich Gillard's plays someone interviewed by the crew . . . someone who finds evidence that 20/20 had an agenda going into the town. Gillard's delivery in that moment was really well executed.

--A portrayal of a defense of marriage law being cut-down in Wyoming that prompted spontaneous applause from the audience. If there was any doubt that these actors and this story could hold an audience's attention in a relatively large venue for a staged reading, they ended here. It was a very powerful moment.

What might not have hit me when I saw a production of the original play with Soulstice Theatre some time ago was just how much *The Laramie Project* is about a town trying to move on from an inexplicable brutal event. There are parallels between the social aspects of the Matthew Shepard tragedy and those of Jeffrey Dahmer's string of murders here in Milwaukee. Wherever there is a big, highly publicized act of brutality in a community, there is an almost instant desire to eliminate all memory of the brutality from public consciousness. Nearly all the major buildings involved with the Jeffrey Dahmer story have been torn down and replaced. We've moved on. But the reality of what happened and some of the more complicated factors involved have never really been satisfactorily addressed. It's a cosmetic shift. It's the deeper psychology behind that cosmetic shift that's addressed here. It's a really, really compelling story and one that needs to be addressed in the ever-expanding world capable of staging the same play at the same time on 150 stages around the world with 150 sets of living, breathing actors.

~ *Russ Bickerstaff*