

# Hard-hitting play focuses on 20-year-old hate-crime killing

Jon Lewis, Special to the Record Searchlight Published 10:22 a.m. PT April 25, 2018



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The set for “The Laramie Project” is an intentionally bare-bones collection of platforms. Cannon Knapp, who is co-directing the Riverfront Playhouse production with Samantha Fork, wants the audience to focus what the actors are saying.

And the cast has plenty to say in this hard-hitting drama based on the reaction to the 1998 hate-crime killing of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming.

A cast of eight portrays more than 60 characters drawn from interviews with Laramie residents, university students, doctors, law enforcement officers, pastors, bartenders and others.

“They come from every walk of life and every perspective. The scriptwriters did a fantastic job of coming at this unfiltered and unbiased,” Knapp said.

The set allows the audience to be easily transported from acquaintances sitting in a living room to a rancher with his foot on the fence, to the courtroom “and all over,” Knapp said. “It’s an opportunity to take you to all these different locations a year and a half after the attack.”

A big-screen TV is positioned in the center of the stage and is employed to add a sense of immediacy to the story, including when a judge (played by John Welsh) hands down consecutive life sentences to Shepard’s two assailants.

“The two assailants met Shepard at a bar, took him out and attacked him and left him tied to a fence. He was found 18 hours later. They left him out there to die. The judge found they had no remorse,” Knapp said.

To help keep the dozens of characters straight, each actor has been given a totem (a vest, a hat, a badge, etc.) and their names are introduced on the TV. The cast includes Ian Dalziel, Sean Sampson, David Rutherford, Mary Spencer, Malorie Glavan, Tammy Jones, Samantha Bautista and Michelle Davis.

“The actors are doing a phenomenal job of taking you to the scene with very little else. We wanted to take you into that courtroom element with some heaviness,” Knapp said.

“The Laramie Project” was written in 2000 by Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project and was based on newspaper articles, hundreds of interviews with Laramie residents and journal entries by Tectonic project members. The three-act play is broken up into 51 short scenes.

Knapp said he's been struck by how much the play matters "no matter where you stand on the issues of LBGQT. It is about a man who was punished for just living his life and he paid for it with his life. That's why we chose this show. It's the 20th anniversary of his death. There are certainly some echoes today of back then. We're proud of how far we've come but there's still a lot more to do."

What: "The Laramie Project"

Where: Riverfront Playhouse, 1620 E. Cypress Ave.

When: 7:30 p.m. April 27-28, May 4-5, 12-13 and 18-19 with 2 p.m. matinees May 6 and 13.

Tickets: \$20, evenings; \$15, matinees; \$25, closing night; available at [www.riverfrontplayhouse.net](http://www.riverfrontplayhouse.net) or at Enjoy the Store, 1475 Placer St.; call 246-4687 ext. 4.

Note: Due to adult language and mature themes, this play is not recommended for children.

**Scenes from Riverfront Playhouse's production of "The Laramie Project"**



*The Laramie Project image by: Jon Lewis*



*"The Laramie Project" is co-directed by Cannon Knapp and Samantha Fork. Image by: Jon Lewis*



*"The Laramie Project" is a production by the Riverfront Playhouse. Image by: Jon Lewis*



*"The Laramie Project" opens April 27. Image by: Jon Lewis*



*"The Laramie Project" is a production by the Riverfront Playhouse. Image by: Jon Lewis*



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