

Through a glass, darkly

Staring into the mirror of the Matthew Shepard tragedy.

By Steve Wiecking

Monday, October 9, 2006 12:00am |

[ARTS & CULTURE](#)



Director Chay Yew: shades of gray.

THE

LARAMIE PROJECT

Seattle Center, Eve Alvord Theatre (Seattle Children's Theatre) 547-7500,
\$10-\$30 pay-what-you-can Mon., Nov. 19 7:30 p.m. Tues.-Thurs.; 8 p.m.
Fri.-Sat.; 7 p.m. Sun; 2 p.m. matinees select Sat. and Sun. previews Fri., Nov.
16-Sat., Nov. 17 runs Tues., Nov. 20-Sat., Dec. 15

‘ULTIMATELY, IT’S ONE incident that makes us think of what we are as a society,’ director Chay Yew says. “That one incident has opened up this doorway to how we look at each other.”

He's remembering Oct. 7, 1998, the day a brutalized Matthew Shepard was found bound to a fence in Wyoming's chilly hills, but he could just as well be discussing the tragedy of Sept. 11, and he knows it. So does Alison Narver, who chose *Yew* and *The Laramie Project*, the haunting remembrance of Shepard's murder at the hands of two teenage boys, to open her highly anticipated first full season as artistic director of the Empty Space Theatre (temporarily housed at Seattle Center).

"I do think that there is something about how a community deals with a hate crime that is particularly relevant right now," she says. "Because, yes, it is a homophobic hate crime that occurred in Laramie, Wyo. that resulted in the death of a gay kid—and those facts aren't going to go away. But what I think is really important is: How does a community try to sort through the contradictory emotions that occur as a result of a devastating hate crime?"

The Laramie Project unfolds as a series of interlocking moments—transcribed conversations that playwright Moisés Kaufman and members of his New York-based Tectonic Theater Company conducted in Laramie after the media circus had packed up and left with its safely consumed heartbreak. Kaufman and company actually *listened* to the conflicted words of ranchers, waitresses, professors, even, perhaps most memorably, the staunch Mormon CEO of Poudre Valley Hospital in Colorado—where Shepard spent his remaining days—who broke down in tears on national television when a young gay man finally let go of his life.

For the production to achieve its full potential, however, it has to reach beyond the piece's obvious effect on the heartstrings and into a more complex scrutiny. Yew himself admits to initially wondering if the script could go deeper than tears, until he decided to play against the emotion, exploring his own preconceived notions and delving further into the deceptively simple language of Laramie's everyday folk.

“When I read it, I admitted to Alison it wasn’t my favorite piece of theater,” Yew recalls. “I found it very sentimental. Because we come in the theater, we know already who died, who the ‘evil’ people were, and who the ‘bad’ people were. That’s when you start looking at the transcripts and, maybe, [performing them] matter-of-factly. And that’s when the actors start taking a different tack, and it chills me. It makes me freeze up, and I realize *these are normal people with normal feelings.*”

Bringing out the piece’s subtler shades of gray isn’t Yew’s only challenge: *The Laramie Project* was originally written to be performed by its creators, who appear in the play reflecting on their own experiences in the small town. The Seattle cast will have to portray not only the people of Laramie but the actors of the Tectonic Theater Company, a fact that will put an audience at what Yew acknowledges to be “three levels of removal.”

“That is the core question I’ve been wrestling with,” he says. “So right now, the cast and I are *judging* the Tectonic Theater Company and tracking *them* as they change throughout the piece. We’re trying to find emotional value, which is unexpected.”

That value, and the agonizing contemplation that accompanies it, is certainly everywhere in the citizens’ voices. “These people are trying to distance themselves from this crime,” protests a young Muslim woman in one of the interviews. “Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this.”

“Anything that happens within your community, you in some way are responsible for,” Narver says, recalling the quote. “So that’s the question I want people to start asking: How could this happen? What you find [in Laramie] is a bunch of real people who are as fucked up and interesting and wonderful and complicated and simple as the rest of us. So when there’s hatred in a community, somehow you need to figure out a way to look inside yourself and say, ‘Where is the hatred in me?’”

Matthew Shepard's murder was an outrage, but what it suggested was more terrifying—it was yet another wake-up call to something *out there*, some rumbling, muddled, *human* malevolence of which we're all a part but haven't bothered to properly comprehend. *The Laramie Project* finds hope from an unblinking acknowledgment of that shared confusion, and resonates with the vital understanding that Shepard's death was about much more than the young man himself.

“The play could be about Matthew Shepard, and thank god, it's not,” Yew says. “You don't see him—you talk about him. Then you realize it's this mirror. It's like every incident that happens: It's not about the incident, it's about how people respond to it. And it's never clean, it's never easy.”

swiecking@seattleweekly.com

Talk to us

Please share your story tips by emailing editor@seattleweekly.com.

Recommended for You

Stay Safe, Stay Home  | 