The Laramie Project Study Guide

The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman

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Introduction

Research for the *The Laramie Project*, Moisés Kaufman's internationally successful play, began one month after a horrific crime occurred in the city of Laramie, Wyoming. Members of Kaufman's theatrical group, Tectonic Theater Project, volunteered to travel with their director from New York City to the wide-open ranges of the West in order to gather in-person interviews from Laramie's populace. The idea was to capture the emotions, reflections, and reactions of the people who were most closely related to the crime□the brutal beating and subsequent death of a young college student. Was this a hate crime? Or was it a random, senseless assault and robbery? No matter which, Kaufman's objective was to explore the issues of homosexuality, religion, class, economics, education, and non-traditional lifestyles through the residents' raw responses to the incident. How did this crime define the culture, not just of this Western town, but of the entire United States?

In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old gay student registered at the University of Wyoming, was tied to a cattle fence, beaten about the head, robbed, and left to die on a bitterly cold night in October. Eighteen hours later, he was accidentally discovered by a biker, who had trouble believing that the figure he saw attached to the fence was human. Police and ambulances were dispatched, and Shepard was taken to a local hospital; all to no avail. Shepard was beyond recovery. He never regained consciousness and died several days later due to his head injuries. Two local young men were charged with the crime.

The play is based on more than 400 interviews with about 100 Laramie residents, as well as journal entries from the members of Tectonic Theater Project and Kaufman, as they reflect on their own reactions to the crime and to the interviews they carried out. Structured as a documentary, it attempts to reenact the events that occurred on that fateful night.

The play opened at the Denver Theater Center in March 2000 and two months later moved to Union Square Theater in New York, where it ran for five months. Later, HBO and the Sundance Theater Lab turned the play into a film, which Kaufman also directed. It was presented on opening night of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, with Sundance founder Robert Redford making a special appearance to introduce the movie. Kaufman received two Emmy Award nominations as director and writer of the film.

Author Biography

Moisés Kaufman is an award-winning director and playwright, whose plays have engrossed audiences around the world. He is also the founder and artistic director of the New York-based Tectonic Theater Project, the group that traveled to Wyoming to help research the play *The Laramie Project* (2000).

Kaufman was born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela. He attended a business school for a while but grew bored with that subject and joined a local dramatic group, Thespis. At the age of twenty-three, Kaufman decided he wanted to become a director. It was around this same time, writes *American Theatre*'s Don Shewey, that Kaufman also came "to grips with his homosexuality" and decided to move to New York. While in the States, Kaufman continued his studies in the dramatic arts at New York University.

Kaufman's homeland, however, has not forgotten him. Venezuela demonstrated its pride for its native son by presenting a retrospective of his work at the Consulate General of Venezuela in 1993. In 1999, Venezuela once again honored him with the Artist of the Year Award, presented by the Casa del Artista.

Kaufman's adopted home, the United States, has also celebrated his creative genius by bestowing him with several prestigious awards. He won the Joe A. Callaway Award as writer and director of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, a play that ran for more than 600 performances in New York City alone. First published in 1997, the play went on to win many other prizes, including the Lucille Lortel Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Garland Award, and the GLAAD Media Award. This play, which explores what Victorian men and women thought about such topics as homosexuality, class, religion, and the British monarchy, also won the Lambda Book Award when the play was published as a book in 1998. Revenues from the production of *Gross Indecency* would finance Kaufman's subsequent and also extremely successful venture, *The Laramie Project*.

Kaufman directed the 2004 Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award—winning play *I Am My Own Wife*, a story about a German transvestite. In addition to his roles as director and writer, Kaufman has taught the art of direction at the 42nd Street Collective in New York. As of 2005, he was working on an original piece called *33 Variations*, a story inspired by Beethovan's *Diabelli Variations*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Laramie Project begins with a section titled "Moment." It is in this brief segment (which is repeated throughout the play) that the members of Tectonic Theater Project read entries from the journals they have kept during their interviews with the people of Laramie. This repeated section also affords special characters a chance to deliver longer monologues than those given in the rest of the play, which is set up as interviews. After an opening comment by the narrator, one of the town's long-time residents provides a bit of personal history about living in Laramie. Through this narration, the audience also gains some insights into the history of the town. Other people join in: some are newcomers; others have lived in Laramie for a long time. All of them provide background information on what it is like, in general, to be involved in the culture of the town. This sets up the atmosphere of the play. It gives the audience an idea of what life was like before the murder of Matt Shepard.

The atmosphere of the plays changes when Jedadiah Schultz begins to talk. This is the first time that there is an allusion to the fact that something seriously wrong has happened to Laramie□that the town has changed. Jedadiah begins with the statement: "It's hard to talk about Laramie now." Then he continues: "If you would have asked me before, I would have told you Laramie is a beautiful town." Things have obviously changed.

Then comes another "Moment." In this one, Rebecca Hilliker, a college professor, offers her opinions of her students. They are different from ones she has taught in other towns, in other states. They speak their mind. They have strong opinions, which Hilliker likes because it creates a "dynamic in education." The "Moment" then changes focus, returning to Jedadiah, who relates the story of how he won a scholarship to the university by performing a scene from *Angels in America*, a play with homosexual characters. He concludes by saying that his parents were opposed to his doing this and did not show up for his performance. His statements begin to reveal the chasm in the community between those who are open-minded about homosexuality and those who are not.

The play returns to the interview format, with several more community members giving their views of the town. They provide more history, such as the presence and influence of the railroads. Marge Murray discusses the distinction she feels between those who are educated and those who are not. But overall, Marge believes that the general sentiment of the townspeople is "live and let live." However, when Marge is told that what she is saying will eventually end up in a play, she decides that she had better not tell the interviewer everything that she knows.

In the next "Moment," Andy Paris, a member of Tectonic Theater Project, reveals that they have finally come across someone who really knew Matthew Shepard. This person

is Doc O'Connor, a limousine driver who befriended Shepard. Doc provides a description of Shepard, depicting him as a slightly built young man who was not afraid to speak his mind. The next few people interviewed continue the description of Shepard. They talk about how friendly he was despite his initial shyness.

Doc reappears and provides more background information about the people of Laramie, stating that Shepard was by far not the only gay person in town. Doc believes that the gay townspeople would not make this information public, but that does not mean that they do not exist. Doc also feels that the general belief underlying the community is that of "live and let live."

The next interviews reflect a variety of religious opinions. A Baptist minister appears; his message from the pulpit is that the Bible does not condone homosexuality. A representative of the Mormon Church reinforces this statement. A member of the Unitarian Church speaks next; this person is open-minded about homosexuality. Then a young Muslim woman is interviewed. She talks about how difficult it was to wear a scarf, a symbol of her religion's prescribed modesty. She believes that people in the community challenged her right to wear it.

The scene changes to the Fireside Bar, the last place that Shepard was seen alive. The owner and bartender are interviewed. Matt Galloway, the bartender, relates what happened in the bar on the night that Shepard was killed. It was there that the accused murderers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, go over to Shepard, talk to him, and later leave with him.

In the next section there is a discussion about McKinney and Henderson. Residents give their opinions about the young men, most of them talking about how nice the two boys are. Henderson, they say, was an Eagle Scout, and McKinney was a "good kid."

The last section of the first act provides the description of how Aaron Kreifels finds Shepard after he was beaten and left for dead. There is also a statement from Reggie Fluty, the first police officer on the scene, and from Dr. Cantway, the emergency-room doctor who treats Shepard upon his arrival at the hospital.

Act 2

Act 2 begins with an account of the media's arrival in Laramie after the news story about Shepard was released. There are also comments from the people of Laramie about how they responded to the news and to the reporters. There is disbelief, anger, and fear. At the arraignment, most of the people who witnessed it broke down in tears. There are discussions questioning how such a thing could have happened in Laramie.

Interspersed between various interviews are medical updates on the physical condition of Shepard, who had fallen into a coma. Meanwhile, both McKinney and Henderson plead not guilty to the charges. Citizens reflect on how they might have prevented this from happening. The bartender, Matt Galloway, believes he should have stepped in and

stopped Shepard from driving away with McKinney and Henderson, sensing that the two young men were looking for trouble.

Reggie Fluty tells her story about finding Shepard. She also relates her fear that she contracted AIDS while handling Shepard's bloody body without gloves. She must go through a series of tests to see if she is infected.

Jedadiah reflects on Shepard's beating and questions his minister's belief that it is wrong to be a homosexual. Several other residents keep hammering home their opinions that homosexuality is against God's wishes. There is a vigil, organized by the Catholic priest, but none of the other ministers will attend. During the homecoming parade, a large group of Laramie residents come together, marching behind a banner for Shepard. As the parade winds around town, the group keeps growing in size.

There is another medical update. Shepard has died.

Act 3

A funeral is arranged for Shepard. It is held in the Catholic Church. Not attending is Reverend Fred Phelps, who makes a statement that even God has hate. And the Reverend believes it is his job to preach God's hate. "WE [sic] love that attribute of God, and we're going to preach it. Because God's hatred is pure." The Reverend adds: "If God doesn't hate fags, why does he put 'em in hell?"

This prompts a reaction from Romaine Patterson; she organizes a group of friends who decide to dress up as angels after they hear that the Reverend is coming to Laramie for Henderson's trial. "There'll be ten to twenty of us that are angels□and what we're gonna do is we're gonna encircle Phelps . . . and because of our big wings□we are gonna com-plete-ly block him."

There is the jury-selection scene and then a scene in which Henderson changes his plea from not guilty to guilty. Henderson makes a statement that he is sorry. The judge, however, does not believe Henderson is truly remorseful and sentences him to life in prison. A year later, McKinney is put on trial. During the trial, a tape of his confession is heard in which he details of the beating are related. The jury finds him guilty of felony murder, which means he could have been given the death sentence. Shepard's father, however, asks that he be given life in prison instead.

I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew.

Characters

Sherry Aanenson

Sherry is the landlord of Russell Henderson, one of the men convicted of Matt Shepard's death. She found Russell to be "so sweet."

Baptist Minister

The Baptist Minister (who does not want his name used) believes that the Bible states that homosexuality is wrong.

Stephen Belber

Stephen is one of the members of Tectonic Theater Project who traveled to Laramie, conducted interviews, helped write the play, and portrayed himself, as well as several other characters in the play.

Dr. Cantway

Dr. Cantway is an emergency-room doctor at Ivinson Memorial Hospital in Laramie. He helps try to save Matt Shepard's life. He describes Matt's injuries as looking as if he had been in an accident in a car going "eighty miles an hour."

Catherine Connolly

Catherine is a professor at the University of Wyoming in Laramie and she considers herself to be the "first 'out' lesbian or gay faculty member on campus." She feels fear grip her after the death of Matt Shepard and is afraid to walk down the street.

Rob DeBree

Rob is a detective sergeant for the Albany County Sheriff's Department in Laramie. He is the chief investigator of Matt Shepard's murder.

Philip Dubois

Philip is the president of the University of Wyoming. He is a relative newcomer to Wyoming but prefers it to big-city life. He used to feel that Laramie was a safe place to raise children.

Tiffany Edwards

Tiffany is a local Laramie reporter. She describes the outside media that descend on Laramie after the news of Matt Shepard's death is broadcast as "predators."

Reggie Fluty

Reggie is the policewoman who responds to the 911 call and has to be tested for HIV after attempting to save Matt Shepard's life. She is the first police officer on the scene.

Leigh Fondakowski

Leigh is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who traveled to Laramie to conduct interviews. She is present in the play but does not play herself or any other characters.

Matt Galloway

Matt was the bartender at the Fireside bar. He was also a student at the University of Wyoming. He witnessed Matt Shepard leaving with Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney on the night of the murder. He later regretted not having done something to prevent the events that occurred later that night. He does not believe, as some others do, that Shepard would have approached the two men.

Jim Geringer

Jim is the governor of Wyoming. He makes a statement against the "heinous crime," but falls short of calling it a hate crime. He is challenged by a reporter who asks him why he has not pushed for hate crime legislation.

Amanda Gronich

Amanda is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie and conducted interviews. She plays herself and several other characters in the play.

Russell Henderson

Russell is twenty-one years old when he offers Matt Shepard a ride home, then beats and robs him and leaves him to die. He later changes his plea from not guilt to guilty of the crime and is sentenced to life in prison.

Rebecca Hilliker

Rebecca is the head of the theater department at the University of Wyoming. She has recently moved to Wyoming and found the people there to be generally nice to one another. She states that she likes the fact that her students are such "free thinkers," unlike other students she has had. "You may not like their opinions," she says, "but they are honest."

Sergeant Hing

Hing is a detective at the Laramie Police Department and third-generation resident. He offers a history of Laramie in the beginning of the play.

Sherry Johnson

Sherry is an administrative assistant at the University of Wyoming. She is a bit disheartened by the news coverage that Matt Shepard's death has received, while the death of a Laramie policeman receives no attention at all.

Aaron Kreifels

Aaron is a student at the University of Wyoming. He was riding his bike the night Matt Shepard was murdered. He found Matt tied to the fence and called an ambulance. He felt that God wanted him to find Matt and that is why he took a different route on his bike.

Doug Laws

Doug is the leader of the Mormon Church in Laramie. He believes that the word of God proclaims that "a family is defined as one woman and one man and children."

Aaron McKinney

Aaron is one of the young men who offered to drive Matt Shepard home on the night he was murdered. He is put on trial and found guilty.

Bill McKinney

Bill is the father of Aaron McKinney. He makes the statement that if this had been a murder of a heterosexual man, "this never would have made the national news." He is concerned that his son will be proven guilty before he even gets a trial.

Matt Mickelson

Matt is the owner of the Fireside Bar, the place where Matt Shepard was last seen. He offers some history of the place.

Marge Murray

Marge is mother to Reggie Fluty. She was very worried about the possibility of Reggie contacting AIDS from Matt Shepard after Reggie administered medical services to him. Marge has lived in Laramie all her life and knows just about everyone. She offers a cultural history of the place, but when she finds out that all this information might be used in a play, she decides not to tell her interviewers all that she knows.

Doc O'Connor

Doc was a limousine driver and had driven Matt Shepard to Colorado on occasion. He is originally from the East Coast but has lived in Wyoming for quite some time. He offers his reflections on the type of people who live in Laramie. He says he liked Matt Shepard "'cause he was straightforward."

Andy Paris

Andy was a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to conduct interviews and to help write the play. Andy plays himself as well as several other characters in the play.

Romaine Patterson

Romaine is a close friend of Matt Shepard's. She says she used to call him "Choo-choo." What she remembers most about him is his "beaming smile." He was friendly with everyone, she says. At his funeral, she and a group of her friends dress up in angel costumes in order to block Fred Phelps's group of protestors.

Jon Peacock

Jon, a professor of political science, was Matt Shepard's academic advisor at the University of Wyoming. He helped Matt open up when he first came to Laramie. Jon says Matt was excited when he decided he wanted to work in human rights.

Reverend Fred Phelps

Fred is a minister in Laramie. He is extremely anti-gay and comes to the funeral with a group of protesters. He is concerned that everyone is making "Matthew Shepard into a poster boy for the gay lifestyle."

Greg Pierotti

Greg is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to collect interviews and help write the play. Greg plays himself as well as several other characters in the play.

Barbara Pitts

Barbara is a member of Tectonic Theater Project who went to Laramie to collect interviews and help write the play. She plays herself as well as several other characters in the play. She records the words on a sign she sees upon entering Laramie. It reads: "Hate is not a Laramie value."

Father Roger Schmit

Roger is a very outspoken Catholic priest in Laramie. He sets up a vigil as Matt lies dying in the hospital. He is disappointed when other ministers in the town will not become involved.

Jedadiah Schultz

Jedadiah is a student at the University of Wyoming. He used to love Laramie, but after Matt Shepard's death, he's afraid that everyone in the world will look at Laramie as another Waco□a place of a violent crime. Jedadiah won a scholarship to the University based on his performance of a scene from the play *Angels in America*, which deals with homosexuality. His parents refused to come to see the play. Later, despite his minister's statements that homosexuality is wrong, Jedadiah comes to his own conclusions.

Dennis Shepard

Dennis is the father of Matt Shepard. He makes a very emotional statement at the trial of Henderson, stating that he would not seek the death penalty.

Lucy Thompson

Lucy is Russell Henderson's grandmother. She makes a plea for his life at his trial.

Harry Woods

Harry is an older man who lives in the heart of Laramie. He offers the information that he is a homosexual and he secretly celebrates the hundreds of people who join the homecoming parade in honor of Matt Shepard.

Themes

Prejudice

The theme of prejudice is an undercurrent in *The Laramie Project*. Prejudice can be related to class, education, economics, religion, or sexual preference. When one person rigidly believes in one side of a concept and cannot perceive the other side and, more importantly, will not tolerate others' acceptance of the other side, prejudice rears its head. In this play, the town deals with varying levels of prejudice. Some of the characters represent the extremes, such as the Reverend Fred Phelps, who believes so deeply that homosexuality is wrong that he preaches that God Himself has hate. Other characters are less stridently prejudiced, such as the parents of Jedadiah Schultz, who refused to go to Jedadiah's scholarship audition because their son was acting out a scene that involves homosexuality. They missed the opportunity to share in their son's important moment, but their prejudice, at least in this one act, caused no physical harm to their son. Whether Matthew Shepard's accused murderers were prejudiced against homosexuals or just used that as an attempt to excuse their actions is not clear. In other words, the question remains, did they beat Matthew so severely because they did not like homosexuals or would they have done the same to any other student they might have robbed that night?

Marge Murray talks briefly about a prejudice that is possibly based on a combination of class, education, and economics. There are those without an education who work minimum-wage jobs and those who work at the university, she says, splitting the town into two different groups. She insinuates that one part of the population looks down on the other, which is where prejudice begins.

After the murder of Matthew Shepard, some members of the gay community in Laramie fear for their lives because they are concerned that other straight people in town might want to do the same to them. Their fears are based not only on the prejudice people might hold against the gay members of town but also on the prejudice that some of the gay community might hold against the townspeople. The fear that someone in the straight community might commit a similar crime is in some ways another form of prejudice. Stereotyping a macho cowboy is as prejudicial as stereotyping a gay person.

Hate Crimes

There is a discussion in one part of the play about why the murder of Matthew Shepard received so much media attention. After all, there was a policeman who was killed during the same period, and no one paid much attention to it. Aaron McKinney's father also makes the statement that if Matthew Shepard had been a heterosexual, not as much would have been made of the crime. So what is the difference? Why was Shepard's murder so heinous? For some reason, a random murder, such as one that might occur during a robbery, seems less sensational, whereas a crime committed out

of hate seems more pointed. Is it the attitude behind the crime that arouses so much attention? In the past, legislative attempts to define hate crimes have sparked national debate. Should the definitions include crimes committed against disabled people or people of different nationalites? What about crimes against people of a different sexual orientation? And how does one prove that the crime was a hate crime? There are no conclusions made in this play. The facts are presented, and the interpretation is left to the audience. Was Shepard's death the result of a hate crime? Or was it a random crime with no premeditation or specific hate? The answer is open to debate.

Conflict

Conflict drives a dramatic work, and this play has a lot of it. There is the obvious conflict between those who live a gay lifestyle and those who live a straight lifestyle. There is also the conflict between the various religions and their interpretations of the Bible or their spiritual value systems. There is also the conflict between parents and children, especially in the case of Jedadiah Schultz and his parents, who do not want him associating with anything that has to do with homosexuality. But there are also internal conflicts, such as those expressed by Jedadiah. He wants to believe that his parents and his minister are right. But he senses that something is wrong with their beliefs against homosexuality. So Jedadiah struggles within himself, trying to come to terms with the conflict between the basic values of the adults in his life and his own experiences.

Another emotional conflict revolves around the death penalty. Is it justifiable to kill someone who has killed another? Should the accused murderers be given death sentences? The most poignant conflict is the one that occurs in the mind of Dennis Shepard, the father of Matthew. He admits that he would like to see McKinney receive the death penalty for having murdered his son. But he concludes that Matthew would not want that. So Dennis Shepard has an internal conflict, much like Jedadiah, and finally concludes that he will defer to what he believes his son would have called for an end to violence.

Style

Docudrama

The docudrama is a fact-based representation of real events. Unlike other forms of drama, the docudrama tries to represent the truth of an event that really happened. To think of it in another way, you might say that a docudrama is a nonfiction play.

The Laramie Project is a docudrama. It was written as if it were an actual documentary. Moisés Kaufman took his group, Tectonic Theater Project, to Laramie, Wyoming, to gather interviews concerning the murder of Matthew Shepard. This was a real event, and the interviews were given by real citizens of Laramie, where the murder occurred. The point of the play was to present the reactions of the people of Laramie to this horrendous crime. Kaufman believed that a reflection of this event by the people involved would provide a vehicle for discussion about homosexuality and hate crimes around the world. In order to accurately present the information that he and his troupe had gathered, Kaufman created the illusion of reality by formatting his play not as a fictional story, but rather as a reenactment of the interviews. The fictional, or artistic, part of the play was in how Kaufman pulled all this information together and made it tell a story. There were few props in the play, and only a handful of actors to play the multiple roles. The material was grouped according to themes that were used to build up the tension in the play. In a few cases, some of the Laramie residents asked that their names not be used, but overall, real names were used. And much of the dialogue came from the recorded interviews.

Structural Patterns

The format of the play followed a regular pattern, broken down into three different shapes. The first shape was called a "Moment." These were interspersed throughout the play and provided the audience with a more focused look at specific parts of the drama. Often, the Moments were reflections by Tectonic Theater Project members as they thought about their reactions to being in Laramie and having to face the comments and emotions of Laramie residents. At other times, the Moment sections were used to explore the reactions and emotions of specific residents in order to give the audience a deeper appreciation of some of the people's fears or beliefs.

In between the Moments sections, the play used short segments of interviews. Sometimes a person's comments would be interrupted by the comments of someone else who either agreed or disagreed with them, offering the audience a balanced approach to the reactions to the murder. The interview segments were loosely structured to provide a sort of timeline to the events that lead up to the crime, as well as to those that took place afterwards. The interviews were also used to provide background information on Laramie and the culture of the people who lived there.

The third portion of the pattern was the direct announcements or speeches that were longer than the comments offered in interviews. For example, there are announcement made by the medical staff at the hospital where Matthew Shepard fought for his life. There were statements from the press, supposedly taken from actual news accounts. There was also the speech that Matthew's father presented in the courtroom.

Contrast and Juxtaposition

The snippets of conversations that were held between the members of Tectonic Theater Project and the residents of Laramie are arranged in such a way that the audience feels the emotions of the people who felt them. In order to do this, Kaufman placed real statements in positions of contrast or juxtaposition□either against one another or complimenting one another. For example, in one section of the play there are a series of comments offered by various religious leaders of the town. Some of these leaders are very much against homosexuality, while others have more open minds. While one interviewee speaks of biblical passages against homosexuality, another religious person denies this, offering a counter-interpretation. Another example is provided when the interviews focus on the accused murderers. The people of Laramie cannot understand how two of their children could have committed such an awful crime. In order to present the emotions they are feeling, or to further enhance these emotions, Kaufman offers the audience not only a discussion of the crime and its hideous details□the scene in which it is noted that Matthew's face was washed in his tears, the transcript of McKinney's confession of the crime□but also comments by people who remember what a sweet child McKinney was.

Another example of contrast is the various comments by people of the town who claim that the overall attitude was "live and let live." They claim that most people do not mind that one person or another might be a homosexual□it is nobody's business but their own. But in contrast to that opinion are the comments offered by gay members of the community, who express their fear for their own lives.

Historical Context

Gay Rights

The Society for Human Rights, established in Chicago in 1924, was the first organization in the United States that promoted the rights of people who classified themselves as homosexuals. But it would take almost thirty more years before a national gay-rights group would be founded. That came in the establishment of the Mattachine Society, headed by Harry Hay, whom many people consider the father of the gay-rights movement. Five years later, in 1956, a group devoted completely to women, the Daughters of Bilitis, was created to bring together a focused movement specifically for lesbians. But it was during the 1960s, a time when the attention of the nation was focused on civil rights for African Americans and for women, that the movement for gay rights truly gained momentum. One particular incident, called the Stonewall Riots, which occurred at a New York gay bar when customers resisted arrest, ignited the gay-rights movement in the United States. That night in 1969 would go down in history as the first time gay people fought back. As the news of the resisted arrests spread, the movement for gay rights became more determined and people began to demand civil and social rights for homosexuals.

Homosexual acts were illegal in the United States until 1962, when Illinois became the first state to decriminalize homosexual acts in the privacy of one's own home. By the end of the twentieth century most states had repealed these laws that prohibited homosexual acts. Those states that continued to enforce laws against homosexual acts were made invalid by a Supreme Court ruling in 2003 in the case *Lawrence* v. *Texas*, which invalidated the criminal prohibition of homosexual acts.

In the twenty-first century, the fight for gay rights is focused on civil unions and same-sex marriage. Although this is a contentious issue in the United States, several European countries and several provinces in Canada do recognize same-sex marriage.

Matthew Shepard

Matthew Shepard was born in Casper, Wyoming, in 1976. He attended Catawba and Casper Colleges before transferring to the University of Wyoming in Laramie, where he was majoring in political science. On the night of October 6, 1998, Matthew left the Fireside Bar in Laramie with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Eighteen hours later, Matthew was found alive but unconscious, tied to a cattle fence outside of Laramie. After being taken to the Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, it was determined that he had suffered from a skull fracture that extended from the back of his head to the front of his right ear. He also had several deep lacerations on his face, neck, and head. The medical team decided that his injuries were too severe to operate. Matthew never regained consciousness and died on October 12 at 12:53 a.m.

McKinney and Henderson were apprehended shortly after the beating. The bloody gun that had been used to pistol-whip Matthew was found, as well as Matthew's shoes and credit card. McKinney's and Henderson's girlfriends supplied false alibis for the two suspected murderers.

Henderson pleaded guilty of the crime on April 5, 1999, and agreed to testify against McKinney in a plea bargain. In exchange for his testimony, Henderson received two consecutive life sentences with no chance for parole. McKinney was tried and found guilty. After Matthew Shepard's father made a statement against the death penalty, McKinney was given two consecutive life sentences without chance of parole.

Wyoming

Ancient tribes lived in Wyoming at least 12,000 years ago. Remnants of this culture can still be seen at places like Medicine Wheel, outside of Lovell. More modern tribes like the Sioux, Shoshone, and Cheyenne were cultivating the land when the first white explorer, John Colter, arrived in 1807. Fur trappers soon followed, including such legends as Kit Carson and Jedediah Smith. When gold was discovered in California, more and more settlers drove their wagon trains through Wyoming, creating a need for re-stocking stations and military forts. Fort Laramie was one of the most important military installations in Wyoming. More people streamed through the state, and many of them decided to settle there, creating some of the first cattle ranches, where huge herds of buffalo once roamed.

Wyoming is known as the Equity State, being one of the first states in the Union to recognize the rights of women. In 1869, Wyoming was the first government in the world to give women the right to vote. One year later, Ester Hobart Morris became the first female justice of the peace. In 1924, Nellie Tayloe Ross was elected the first female governor in the United States.

Laramie, named for the trapper Jacques LaRamee, was first established by the confluence of a small military settlement and a later need by the newly developing railroad for a place to maintain trains. Two things that made Laramie a good location for a settlement were the abundance of fresh water in the Laramie River and a nearby forest in the Medicine Bow Mountains. By the end of the nineteenth century, two more additions to the town□the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming Territorial Prison□provided economic stability. The discovery of gold and silver in the mountains at the turn of the century was also a welcome boost.

Today, Laramie is a small town of less than 30,000 residents that enjoys relatively mild weather, a low cost of living, and below-national-average unemployment. The town sits in the southeastern corner of the state on Interstate 80, about forty miles northwest of Cheyenne. It is more than a mile high, surrounded by national forests, and intersected by the Laramie River. Many websites related to the town make reference to Matthew Shepard.

Critical Overview

The Laramie Project is often praised, as in *American Theatre* by Don Shewey, as "a powerful and evocative work of art." The emotions that were exposed after Matthew Shepard's murder may have focused the world's attention on the town of Laramie, but Kaufman's play, as Shewey pointed out, provides not only Laramie but the entire world "an opportunity . . . to talk about things that are on its mind." As M. S. Mason, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* explained: "The arts can shed light on social problems, but rarely does a region like this one have so much need for clarity and thoughtful response to its recent history." *The Laramie Project*, according to Mason, helps people "put hate crimes in perspective." Mason concluded that Kaufman's play offers "a genuine optimism about human goodness" and a "recognition that evil is not beyond remedy, if we as a society are ready to renounce hate."

Writing for *Time Magazine*, which named *The Laramie Project* one of the top ten plays of the year, Richard Zoglin stated that Kaufman and his troupe were more than capable in expressing "the work's passion and power." Adding to the praise was Victor Gluck, writing for *Back Stage*, who referred to the play as "the most ambitious and powerful new American play of the past year." At the end of his review, Gluck described the play as a "disturbing, haunting theatre experience."

Not all reviews were positive. For instance, the *New Republic*'s Robert Brustein concluded that *The Laramie Project* had "its moments, but the piece lacks a powerful protagonist." The play focused too much on the reaction of the townspeople, Brustein found, and too little on who Matthew Shepard and his killers were. "We leave the theater knowing as little about them as when we first arrived," Brustein wrote, adding that "instead of penetrating character, the play prefers to argue for legislation, as if special laws could somehow change the way people behave." The *Nation*'s Elizabeth Pochoda had similar comments. "Laramie," she wrote, "is a town with a terrible crime, but no terrible truths come to light here." Then she added: "This beautifully staged canvassing of its citizens is well paced and absorbing but not ultimately affecting." Pochoda continued that the play does not go deep enough. She believed it should have provided more details about what was not already known. She found herself wondering what the members of the troupe "didn't find."

On the other side of the issue, Ed Kaufman, writing for the *Hollywood Reporter*, found the play to be "a stunning and thought-provoking piece of theater." This reviewer then suggested that the writer and director of this play had asked the question: "'Is theater a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?'" And that the answer to this question "is yes, especially when art and life come together so wonderfully well."

When the play was published in book form, three publications offered reviews. Jack Helbig, writing for the *Booklist*, found that the play "has moments of astonishing power." Meanwhile, Emily Lloyd, writing in *School Library Journal*, referred to *The Laramie Project* as a "remarkable play" and "a thoughtful and moving theatrical tour de force."

And finally, Howard Miller, for the *Library Journal* stated: "This true story of hate, fear, hope, and courage touched and changed many lives and will do so for everyone who reads or watches a performance of this theatrical masterpiece."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart examines Kaufman's docudrama to discover how the playwright created theatrical drama in a work that is almost nonfiction.

Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* is most often referred to as a docudrama, a play that is largely based on real facts. To this point, the play is all but a work of nonfiction. But despite the fact that the basic elements of the play are based on actual events with their own inherent drama, Kaufman's talents as a playwright were used to enhance the emotional impact of the events and thus create an atmosphere that ultimately stirred his audience more than just the reading of the actual events might have caused. The question is then, how did he do this? How did he formulate the play in such a way that he made the events come alive not with just the details but with all the complexities that surrounded the crime? How did he piece together not only the central events of Matthew Shepard's murder, but also the information that he and the members of Tectonic Theater Project gathered? How did Kaufman arrange his material so that people who came to see the play were stirred to the point of wanting to ask more questions of themselves, of their community, and of their society as a whole? In other words, how did Kaufman turn real events into a work of creative theatrical drama?

Most of these questions can be answered in a very simple way. The overall tool that Kaufman uses to create drama is contrast. But what is less obvious is how he uses this tool. To begin this exploration, one needs to go no further than the beginning of the first act. It is here that readers can witness how the playwright pits one thought against another, as he dives into the interviews and arranges the sentences of each interviewee so that one stands either in partial or complete contradiction with the other. For example, several townspeople offer background information about what life, under normal circumstances, is like in Wyoming. "You have an opportunity to be happy in your life here," states Rebecca Hilliker, a professor at the University of Wyoming, where Matthew Shepard attended classes. The setting that Hilliker describes is in stark contrast to the circumstances that are about to be discussed, of course.

But it is through contradictions such as this that Kaufman plays with the emotions of his audience. Another example occurs when Kaufman offers the statement of Philip Dubois, president of the same university. Dubois describes how safe he feels living in Wyoming. In contrast to what he would do if he lived in a large city, in Laramie Dubois allows his children to play unsupervised outside at night. "My kids play out at night till eleven and I don't think twice about it," Dubois says. This statement resonates with the audience, which is already aware that Shepard was killed at night, possibly in a similar location in which Dubois's children might have played. It is in this way that Kaufman sprays a mist of emotional colors throughout his play, teasing his audience first in one direction, than jerking them abruptly to the other edge of the spectrum.

Even though the general consensus of the interviewees at the beginning of the play is that of peace and the belief that Wyoming is a nice place to live, Kaufman weaves

through these positive comments statements that hint otherwise. Another example is the comment of Doc O'Connor, a relatively new arrival to Wyoming. Although O'Connor agrees that Wyoming is a great place to live, he adds a sinister touch to his statement. "They say the Wyoming wind'll drive a man insane," he says. By including O'Connor's statement, Kaufman throws out yet another hint of the macabre acts that are later recorded□the brutal and irrational beating of Shepard. O'Connor's comment thus becomes a type of foreshadowing of the murder or at least a warning that crazy things have previously occurred in Wyoming. It is in this way that the audience□which at first was being lulled into believing in an idyllic environment and is shown a virtual-Wyoming, where everyone is happy and where the "live and let live" attitude of the state's residents allows a seemingly unusual sense of freedom□is suddenly (and quite subtly) reminded that something dreadful is lurking in the background. Let the audience beware, Kaufman is suggesting. All is not perpetual goodness in this so-called paradise.

So although Kaufman appears to be delivering just the facts of the case, he is cleverly manipulating the information. He could easily claim that he is only re-iterating the statements of the people he interviewed. And this is partially true. But by craftily layering one person's sentence upon another person's, Kaufman orchestrates the overall effect just as inventively as a composer who connects one note to another to build a musical work that creates a symphony that stirs the emotions. Yes, Kaufman raises a lot of questions that he leaves for his audience to answer for themselves. However, the questions that arise are the questions that Kaufman wants the audience to take home with them.

Another example of how Kaufman uses contrast to provide drama is shown with the presentation of the crime scene, which he does in several different ways. Each time the audience is taken there, the emotional reaction is purposefully deepened. The first mention of the field where Shepard was killed takes place in the beginning of the play. Sergeant Hing is talking about the Wyoming landscape and about how he took some reporters to the murder scene. Hing speaks about the area where Shepard was beaten as being a beautiful place. On the day he took the reporters there, Hing recounts that the sky was blue and the mountains had a dusting of snow on them. The area, Hing states, is a popular place with bikers and joggers. Upon hearing this, one reporter asks: "Who in the hell would want to run out here?" To which Hing confides that he thought this woman was "missing the point." Hing felt that the media was stupid because they could not turn around and see the beauty of the land. "They were just□nothing but the story," Hing explains.

In other words, Hing has all but erased the memory of the murder that occurred at that place. He was in love with the land and, no matter what had happened there on that specific spot of land, all he saw was the beauty of the surrounding landscape. The reporters, however, were living in a completely different world. They had, of course, come to cover the story, but more than that, they felt the ghost of the murder around them when they stood on that spot. They could not be there and not have their minds cluttered by the thoughts of despair and death as Shepard lay dying there after the beating. These reporters, most of whom had come from outside of Wyoming, looked at the crime scene with eyes focused on only one thing□the brutal murder of a young

student. For Hing, Shepard's murder might be one of many he has had to investigate, and he might be questioning why the Shepard case had gained such national attention. And Kaufman, through Hing, might want his audience to ask the same question. Why was Shepard's death more relevant than hundreds of other murders that had taken place that year? Why had the crime become so momentous it had caused a media frenzy? Whatever the reason for Kaufman's use of these contrasting visions, the results pull the audience into the play. And Kaufman knows that the more an audience invests, the more emotionally involved the audience will become in his play.

As act 1 closes, Kaufman takes the audience back to the crime scene. It begins with one of Kaufman's "moments," which has the subtitle "The Fence." Stephen Mead Johnson introduces this section by telling the audience how this area has become a place of pilgrimage. Johnson's depiction of the area drastically differs from the previous one given by Hing. "It is so stark and so empty and you can't help but think of Matthew out there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing temperatures," Johnson says. Then he relates Shepard's experience to the suffering of Christ on the cross by quoting from the Bible "God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This is the first real reference to Shepard's pain. Previously, the accounts of his death are mentioned merely in an unemotional way. A few details are provided but there is nothing mentioned of the pain. A young man was killed, is all the audience is really told up until this scene. After Johnson's reference to the suffering that Shepard must have experienced, a member of Tectonic Theater Projects intensifies this moment by offering his own personal reactions to having visited the crime scene. "I broke down the minute I touched it [the fence]." Now the audience not only has a visual image of the fence, they also have a sense of having touched it. And in doing so, the audience is touched in return.

The first act closes with commentary from people who were there on the night of the crime. First there is Aaron Kreifels, the young man who found Shepard. Next is a report from Officer Reggie Fluty, the first police officer on the scene. And the third person interjected into this part of the play is Dr. Cantway, the physician on duty at the emergency room where Shepard was taken. All the bloody details are provided by these three people. And through them, Kaufman provides the audience with an in-your-face reproduction of that night. From three different points of view, the audience sees Shepard's bloody body through the experience of the young boy who found him and called for help. Then Fluty describes the scene in a very clinical manner, noting such things as the position of his body and the way Shepard was tied to the fence. And the doctor, despite all the wounds he has seen in the past, describes the horror of discovering the unimaginable destruction caused by one human upon another.

This is not going to be an easy play to sit through, the audience must be thinking at this point. Kaufman is not going to allow anyone in the audience to passively watch and listen as the story encapsulated in the play unfolds. Kaufman has masterfully crafted this work of art, slowly wrapping his fingers around each person's heart and squeezing it. Pay attention to this, the playwright seems to be yelling. This is important, and I am not going to let you go without feeling the incredible and unforgettable drama of it all.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *The Laramie Project*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Laramie Project was adapted as a film by HBO in 2001. It stared Christina Ricci, Steve Buscemi, Peter Fonda, Janeane Garofalo, Dylan Baker, Amy Madigan, and many others.

Topics for Further Study

Find an organization that supports gay rights in your community. Gather information about this group and prepare a paper that covers such issues as current legislation, the challenges that face homosexuals in your community, the history of homosexuals as a group, and common political goals of homosexuals.

Matthew Shepard was majoring in political science at the University of Wyoming at the time of his death. He was interested in the issue of human rights. Choose a specific country and research that country's human rights' issues. What legislation has been passed? What is the history of the fight for human rights in that country? What are some of that country's major organizations that focus on human rights?

Research hate crimes in the world. First, what is the definition of a hate crime? How do hate crimes differ from other types of crimes? What are the statistics on the prevalence of hate crimes in each country? Which countries have laws that specifically address hate crimes? Since the passing of legislation in each country, have the incidents of hate crimes decreased?

Read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Try to figure out which scene in that play might have been used by Jedadiah Schultz for his scholarship audition for the University of Wyoming. Memorize the scene and perform it in front of your class.

Pretend to be the defense attorney for Aaron McKinney. Prepare the closing remarks that you would present to the jury in an attempt to save his life. Find some reason that McKinney should live, and build an emotional plea that might sway some of the jurors.

What Do I Read Next?

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, first produced in 1993, is a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award—winning play written by Tony Kushner and mentioned in *The Laramie Project*. Described as profoundly moving, yet also funny, it deals with the lives of people who must confront their own homosexuality or that of someone close to them. The work mixes tragedy with comedy and magic realism with stark reality. Both political and private, it is a criticism of the Reagan years and its denial of the AIDS epidemic, as well as a meditation of what it means to know that one is dying.

The Obie Award—winning play *I Am My Own Wife* was written by Doug Wright, directed by Moisés Kaufman, and produced in 2003. It is a one-man show about the German transvestite, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, an antique collector living in Nazi Germany. The play's major theme is that of survivor living in a very oppressive society.

Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde (1997) is Kaufman's other outstanding play. It recounts the trials of Oscar Wilde, a playwright who was sentenced to ten years of hard labor for having made love to another man. In this play, Kaufman explores how Victorian homophobia in politics, culture, and law severely punished the brilliant and witty author.

The works of Oscar Wilde, one of the most famous playwrights and authors of the nineteenth century, have been collected in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (1989). Some of his most important pieces include *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Salome* (1893), and *An Ideal Husband* (1899). His writing is often compared to that of Shakespeare for its cleverness and wit.

Further Study

Clum, John M., *Acting Gay*, Columbia University Press, 1992.

Clum examines twentieth-century American and British plays that involve gay men, including those by Noel Coward, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, and Peter Shaffer.

Helminiak, Daniel A., *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, Alamo Square Press, 1994.

Helminiak is a Catholic priest who has carefully studied the Bible in search of passages that relate to homosexuality. This book is based on his interpretations of his studies as well as other scholarly research, which conclude that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality.

Loffreda, Beth, *Losing Matt Shepard*, Columbia University Press, 2000.

Loffreda arrived at the University of Wyoming after the murder of Matt Shepard. But as advisor of the campus Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Association, she has both an insider's and an outsider's view on how Shepard's death affected, and still affects, the Laramie community.

O'Connor, Sean, *Straight Acting: Popular Gay Drama from Wilde to Rattigan*, Cassell, 1998.

O'Connor examines the role and influence of Oscar Wilde's plays and lifestyle on playwrights that were to follow him, taking the reader from the late nineteenth-century drama productions to those of the 1960s.

Perry, Barbara, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes*, Routledge, 2001.

Perry not only provides an historical account of hate crimes but offers her evaluation that hate crimes are symptomatic not just of hate, but also of inequalities within a culture and fear of differences.

Swigonski, Mary E., *From Hate Crimes to Human Rights: A Tribute to Matthew Shepard*, Haworth Social Work Practice Press, 2001.

Swigonski and other academics illuminate the road from hate crimes to legislation that may one day provide some sense of justice to the victims.

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Miller, Howard, Review of *The Laramie Project: A Play*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 126, No. 14, September 1, 2001, p. 179.

Pochoda, Elizabeth, "The Talk in Laramie," in the *Nation*, Vol. 270, No. 24, June 19, 2000, pp. 33—34.

Shewey, Don, "Town in a Mirror," in *American Theatre*, Vol. 17, No. 5, May—June 2000, pp. 14—22.

Zoglin, Richard, "Voices from Laramie," in *Time*, Vol. 155, No. 19, May 8, 2000, p. 86.