

'The Laramie Project'

U-Rock presents powerful, timely drama

By Michael Chase

Theater critic

You know you've seen a powerful drama when most of the audience members leave the theater in contemplative silence. Such was the case last Thursday evening, when the University of Wisconsin - Rock County presented "The Laramie Project," a provocative, journalistic form of theater that uses real-life events as its subject and substance.

REVIEW

The event in this case is the brutal beating of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Laramie, Wyo., whose eventual death had a lasting impact of the town of Laramie and the nation. Shepard, who was tortured and tied to a fence on the outskirts of town for 18 hours, lapsed into a coma and died six days later. His death sparked widespread outrage against violence based on sexual discrimination and prompted legislators to augment current hate crime laws.

Although the University Theatre's production of "The Laramie Project" ultimately succeeds in the end, it doesn't always live up to its potential. The sometimes slow-moving, three-hour



play unfolds in its and starts, hampered by a cast of mostly inexperienced actors who sometimes garble their speeches and fumble for lines. The 11-member ensemble constantly switches roles, playing nearly 100 characters in the unfolding of the tragedy. Their dialogue consists of actual words from interviews with people in and around Laramie, as well as court testimony from the trials of the offenders. The challenging script is, at times, disjointed and confusing. On more than one occasion, I lost track of who was who.

Fortunately, for director Carolyn Haycraft, her actors' naivete and rawness are assets, rather than liabilities in "The Laramie Project." The play, written as a documentary, requires a sense of reality from its actors, who continually change roles as they portray authentic people before our eyes. Consequently, Haycraft has orchestrated her actors, warts and all, into real people. The end result was seeing genuine inhabitants of a town, rather than actorly portrayals of improbable characters.

The production's minimal but effective scenery and evocative lighting add much to the impact of the story, as do slide projections and live action video

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feeds. The re-enactment of a candle light vigil and a final tableau of Matthew's crucifixion fence silhouetted in the sunset were both breathtaking.

"The Laramie Project" intentionally holds a mirror up to its audience, as it raises issues that are both uncomfortable and universal in their scope. The play reminds us that the events that took place in Laramie could happen anywhere – even in Janesville or Beloit.

Hats off to Haycraft and her ensemble of actors for tackling such a controversial and challenging piece of theater. Even with its flaws, the University Theatre's production of "The Laramie Project" is both moving and devastating in its rawness.

The well-crafted play was written by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, who traveled from New York to Laramie over a two-year period to conduct over 200 interviews with inhabitants of the town. The resulting "docudrama" is a unique form of storytelling where the charac-

ters in the play consist of New York actors who transform themselves into characters responding to the Matthew Shepard case and its aftermath.

The audience sees actors playing actors who will play characters who are based on real people. The play's use of narration and its presentation of the voices of a small community are both innovative and moving.

Consequently, "The Laramie Project" is a brilliant piece of theater because its unique telling of a real story forces audiences to think, to debate, and to re-examine their own beliefs and prejudices.

It doesn't preach to its audience but portrays the facts of the event in an objective, straightforward manner.

Although we never see the character of Matthew Shepard, we feel we know him intimately by the end of the play.

"The Laramie Project" offers hope that tragedies such as this one never need be the subject of documentary drama again.