

After Matthew

If You Go

Blood, hate, tears and a message of hope come to UW-Rock stage in 'The Laramie Project'

By Frank Schultz
Gazette Staff

News media from around the world descended on a Wyoming town in 1998 after the bloody death of a gay man.

"The Laramie Project" is play about what happened next. Unlike most stage productions, this one is based on fact, not fiction.

"It's a huge responsibility that we are taking on, because these aren't just characters. They're real, live people," said April Fuhr, a cast member in the play, which opens at UW-Rock County in Janesville on Friday, Oct. 24.

The gruesome death of Matthew Shepard stays off stage. Shepard was 21 and a student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie when two young men beat him to a pulp and left him tied to a fence outside of town. Shepard was discovered 18 hours later so bloodied that a passing cyclist at first thought he was a scarecrow.

Shepard later died in a hospital.

The attacker's motives reportedly included robbery but also the fact that Shepard was gay.

The play focuses on the painful aftermath but also love, hope and what it all means for American society.

The range of American attitudes about homosexuality is played out. At one extreme is the message of Fred Phelps, a Kansas preacher who is a character in the play. Phelps' followers have protested productions of "The



Fuhr

Laramie Project." At UW-Marathon County last spring, one protester carried a sign that read "Matt is in hell," according to the Wausau Daily Herald.

The protesters usually let people know about their plans, but UW-Rock has received no indication that the group would show up here, said campus spokeswoman Sara Jung. Homosexuality can be a

sensitive topic most anywhere, as witnessed by the fact that some of the 11 UW-Rock actors' loved ones expressed reservations about them portraying gays or lesbians on stage.

But the players also said they are excited about "The Laramie Project" and expressed hope that their efforts could change hearts and minds.

"It's going to be wonderful and beautiful, and hopefully it'll open up some dialogue," said Fuhr of Monticello. "A lot of wonderful things come out of tragedy."

The play gets its sparks from the interactions of a group of New York City theater people who visited the city of 27,000 after Shepard's death.

Each cast member plays multiple roles, from hip East-Coasters to down-home Laramie residents.

The play is about Laramie, but it could be any small or medium-sized town, said Carlyne Haycraft, now in her second year of directing UW-Rock's theater program. It could even be Janesville.

The play shows the town's warts, but it also gives a sympathetic look at the townsfolk.

"I think there's a true respect by the New York actors for the Laramie people," Haycraft

What: "The Laramie Project," a documentary-style play based on interviews with the people of Laramie, Wyo., in the wake of the violent death of Matthew Shepard. The University Theatre production lasts about 2 hours, 45 minutes and includes two intermissions.

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Oct. 24 and 25; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 26; 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Oct. 30-Nov. 1; and 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 2. A talk-back session will follow the Oct. 30 performance.

Where: Kirk Denmark Theatre, UW-Rock County, 2909 Kellogg Ave., Janesville.

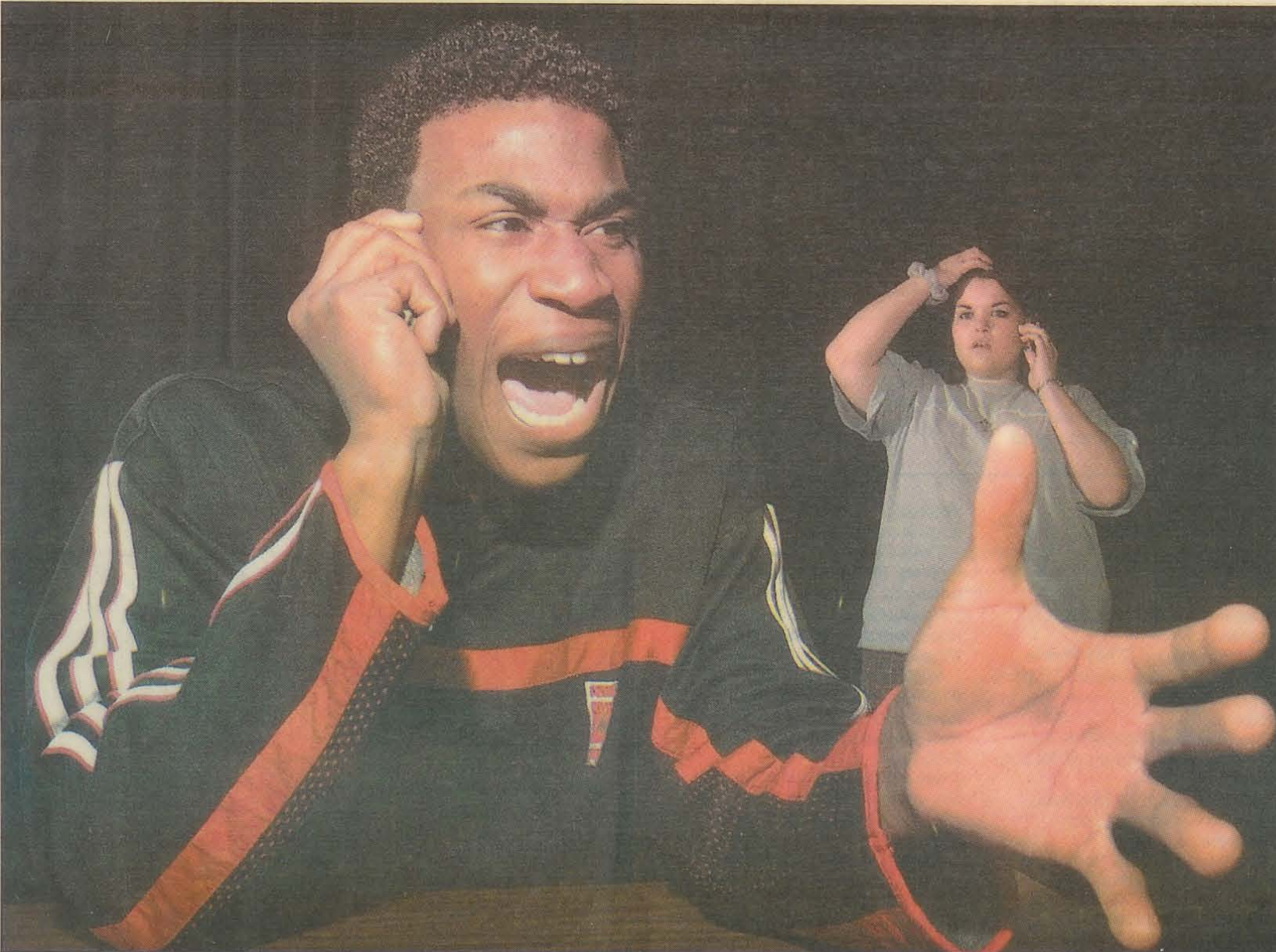
Tickets: \$4 students, \$6 general public. Advance tickets may be bought at the UW-Rock business office in Hyatt Smith Hall with cash or money order. To buy with a credit card, call (608) 758-6515 or stop by the UW-Rock bookstore, lower level of Hyatt Smith Hall. Tickets at the door are first come, first served.

Cast: Nichole Alex, Daniel Bennett, Nnanna Egbujiobi, Keith Emroll, April Fuhr, Mark Fuller, Amanda Guy, Janet LaBrie, Stephanie Melton, Jesse Salcido, Chuck Tresidder.

Turn to LARAMIE/18

theater

"Tragedy happens, but that doesn't mean we all have to stay in our separate corners. We have to come to the center."



Nnanna Egbujiobi, left, portrays a frantic cell phone conversation with Nichole Alex while rehearsing a scene from UW-Rock County's production of 'The Laramie Project,' which shows the aftermath of the violent death of a 21-year-old gay man five years ago in Laramie, Wyo.