

How tolerant are you? Theatre UAF play raises tough questions about hate

By Erica Goff

FAIRBANKS — When 22-year-old Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten and left to die on the night of Oct. 6, 1998, there was no doubt in the small town of Laramie, Wyo., that his difference was the driving force behind the violence.

When Shepard died just six days later, the town together faced the challenge of mourning not only his death but the deep division that existed among its residents, now thrust into a national spotlight because of a hate crime against a young gay man. What those residents did not know is how their story — the tale of a town collectively facing prejudice and violence and the reactions of individuals coping with the reality of what had happened — would be told over and over, reaching as far away as Fairbanks, Alaska.

“This play really looks at the challenges facing our nation in terms of tolerance, whether that be gay or black or whatever. It is a dark subject but it can be very uplifting,” said Carrie Baker, who is directing the local performance of “The Laramie Project,” of the play written about that town’s reaction to Shepard’s death. “It shines a light on the fact that hope can come from tragedy.”

“The Laramie Project” is a play that grew from a project developed by a New York-based theater company, Tectonic Theater Project, that wanted to respond to the tragedy in a meaningful way. The group traveled to the small Wyoming town six times over the course of about two years, conducting over 200 interviews with residents. Some of those interviewed were directly involved in the case, such as judges, police officers and dispatchers, and others were residents who knew the stories and simply had an opinion or reaction one way or the other. Some of the interviews were conducted around the time that Shepard’s assailants, Russell Arthur Henderson and Aaron James McKinney, were tried and convicted. With hours of recorded material, they set to work on an emotionally charged but unbiased play.

Baker, who has wanted to direct the play for some time now, said the play offers objectivity.

“Part of what is really exciting about this play is that it offers a very balanced look at what happened,” she said. “For every amount of hate and homophobia that is expressed, there is an equal amount of emotion and sympathy. It is really diverse and varied, and to me it does not suggest a political agenda.”

University of Alaska Fairbanks theater majors performing in the show agree, despite their individual sympathies toward

the events. Senior Anna Gagne-Hawes said the story looks at “the whole spectrum of beliefs,” and gives both sides of the issue “an equal voice.” She also admitted, however, that she struggled to embrace the feelings of characters who express beliefs completely opposite of her own.

“For me the challenge is stretching myself. I have to give complete respect to these characters and do it in an unbiased way despite my own feelings. That is challenging because I think I am really judgmental, and I have to break these characters down and find something I can relate to,” she said.

Gagne-Hawes and a few of her fellow thespians, Katie Sousa and Jenny Schlotfeldt, said the challenge of embracing characters on both sides of the issue was enhanced by the fact that each actress must portray so many different characters: Gagne-Hawes takes on nine roles, while Sousa has 10 and Schlotfeldt has 11. The reason each cast member must portray so many characters is that the play is designed to present material recorded in the hundreds of interviews conducted in the town. Each of these three actresses, and their fellow cast members, collectively present more than 60 characters.

“It is difficult to make each character different and distinct because you have to be so physically and vocally different for each, but you have to make them real,” Schlotfeldt said, noting she used tricks such as changing the shape of her mouth or the way she stands to vary the characters.

Like Gagne-Hawes, Schlotfeldt acknowledged the difficulty involved in overcoming personal beliefs and presenting a mindset she can’t relate with.

“It is a big struggle to get over the persona differences with the people. There is one character of mine in particular I really don’t appreciate personally the things he says and stands for, but I try to get to a place I can relate to,” she said. “I remind myself he is a person trying to do what he can to survive, and I find that common ground. I try not to judge him.”

Baker noted it is just as challenging for the audience to embrace the many attitudes presented.

“The actors are not only asked to capture so many different roles, but the audience is asked to witness so many different points of view,” she said. “I think that is part of what makes this a beautiful play because it demands the audience to look at their own values and their own limits of tolerance and sense of compassion. It is thought provoking.”

Baker, a UAF theater professor with years of acting and directing experience in New York, California and other areas, said she pursued the idea of directing “The Laramie Project” here partly because of what it says about the world.

“I just became a mother eight months ago and I think about what a responsibility it is to shape a child, a human being, and I thought about my own values, beliefs, and the world I want my son to grow up in,” she said. “I decided it was an appropriate time to do a play that asks that of the audience.”

There are moments in the play, Baker said, that speak to her own hope that her son can grow up in a place where such violence does not occur just because someone is different from someone else. One such moment occurs at the trial, when Shepard’s father addresses the pain he is going through. He tells those in the courtroom, including the men responsible for beating and killing his son, he would like nothing more than to see those men die but that it is not the time; he says it is time for healing to begin.

“He says it is time to give the kind of mercy they didn’t give his son, and in that moment it makes me feel like there is hope and compassion in the world,” Baker said.

Sousa and Schlotfeldt, both Fairbanks natives, said they can see their own hometown mirrored in the story of the sleepy Wyoming town, and they hope Fairbanksans will also see that similarity and react to it.

“This is Any Town, USA, and Fairbanks is Small Town USA, so when I read that play I saw Fairbanks,” Schlotfeldt said. “My hope is that people see this and take another look at the town and think about what choices they make in life.”

Sousa agreed, adding, “If you can’t be completely open to the other side, at least be willing to understand and listen.”

In hopes of furthering discussion and opening the possibility of audience members considering these various points of view regarding hate crimes, a discussion forum is planned for after the 2 p.m. matinee performance of the show Nov. 22. Dubbed “Live and Let Live: The Local Context of the Laramie Project,” the panel discussion will allow Fairbanksans to weigh in on the issue.

“We really wanted there to be some kind of discussion, so the many issues raised in this get further attention and so people can feel really involved,” Baker said. “We wanted a forum for dialogue, if nothing else if people to talk about this and other hate crimes, it is a step in the right

direction.”

The panel discussion will include short presentations by Kayt Sunwood of the UAF Women’s Center, Peter Pinney of Cooperative Extension, and Chris Coffman of the UAF English Department, and open discussion.

Sousa said the play and the panel discussion have the potential to touch everyone because “we all know someone who is gay or who knows someone who is, and we know people on both sides of this issue.” Facing it helps create a heightened awareness of the many views that are out there, she said.



Photos by Johnny Wagner
Cast members of Theatre UAF’s production of “The Laramie Project” pose together in the Salisbury Theatre. Each actor portrays 8 or more characters in the show, depicting the reaction residents of a sleepy Wyoming town had after a brutal hate crime. The play is based on a true story.