

Friday, November 21, 2008

UAF production engages, provokes

By Ademola Bello

The production of "Laramie Project," a play by award winning director and writer Moisés Kaufman and presented locally by the Theatre Department of University of Alaska-Fairbanks at Salisbury Theatre, was filled with energy and brilliant acting.

This play was written a decade ago by Moisés Kaufman with collaboration from members of his Tectonic Theater Project. Following the brutal murder of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, an openly gay college student who was beaten because of his homosexuality, the Tectonic Theater Project traveled to the sleepy Wyoming town of Laramie to discover for themselves the town's true identity, arriving amidst nationwide protests and outrage that resulted from the incident.

Performances by UAF Theater students were impressive, especially considering the challenge they faced in portraying a wide variety of characters: Each young thespian played the roles of 8 to 10 characters in the play. One such actor, Ramiro Rivera, did not just immerse himself in the role of Stephen Belber. He was also fascinating to watch as the character Matt Gallo-

way, the bartender with his driver's hat and a toothpick in his mouth. His cool acting demeanor elevates his characters above others. He spoke with an impeccable accent that transformed Matt Galloway from a mere character to an avuncular or a real guy next door. It was a good example of the creativity used by director Carrie Baker in creating many characters from few actors: Simple props like a toothpick or a hat were used to distinguish from one character to the next.

Those creative choices were necessary because "The Laramie Project" can be difficult to follow because of its documentary style narrative technique, and for its multiple characters appearing in different roles. However, Baker is innovative and has vision. She and her crew deserves credit for sharp stage designing, minimal scenery, melancholy music, good props, and costumes that depict some of these misunderstood characters blue-collar white working class roots.

The instructive direction not only enhanced the audience's learning experience of the arc of the story but also helped in understanding the scenes and twisted plot in a chronological order.

Hadassah Nelson's and Anna Gagne-Hawes' innate grasp of their characters' roles was really remarkable. In one of the scenes, Nelson's character was an empathetic nurse working in the emergency room with just two patients: Shepard and one of the accused persons responsible for his murder.

In addition, Gagne-Hawes' acting ability resonates. She captured the reality of ordinary lives on stage through her different character roles. First as a remorseful person who discovered the beaten corpse of Shepard. Second as an insecure dreamer who initially wanted to become a rockstar. She also played an angels who turned her back against the hateful preacher who lambasts the murdered Mathew Shepard and the gay community in general.

The talented Andrew Casel was everywhere in the show as different characters. He choked up and conveyed real emotions when his character read the family statement announcing Shepard's death. He was also strong and resilient as a detective who investigates Shepard's death. He also played a fundamentalist Christian preacher from Kansas who protested at the funeral and used expletive language against gays.

Jesse Kubla Khan Hoff and Jenny Schlotfeldt used their rigorous acting skills to convey the messages of their different characters. For example, in one of the scenes, Kubla Khan Hoff plays one of the accused killers, Aaron McKinney, who was defiant as he confessed his crime slowly before a detective who interrogates him.

The truth teller of the play was a character named Zubaida Ula, a Muslim Bangladesh immigrant in Wyoming played by the amazing Katie Sousa. When the embarrassed natives of Laramie expressed their disbelief that their small town was caricatured by the national media reporting, she expressed her own misgivings this way: "We have to mourn this! We have to own this crime."

Unfortunately, we didn't see much of Jonathan Roberts' characters as either Andy Paris or as Wyoming governor. His acting was only saturated with emotional excess. Nonetheless, the Laramie Project production by UAF theatre department was enjoyable to watch. The play provoked thought and asked questions. The play uses Shepard's story as a symbol of culture wars in American society to convey an underlying message: To live and let live.