

The Salt Lake Tribune

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Back to Laramie: Writers gauge long-term impact of Matthew Shepard's murder

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 10/09/2009 03:27:44 PM MDT

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Eight years ago, Plan-B Theatre Company brought Utah audiences the first regional production of "The Laramie Project."

This month, Kingsbury Hall is producing a preview performance of a new play, "The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later, An Epilogue," by the same creators.

Audiences in Salt Lake City again will be among the first to see the show on Oct. 9, just before more than 100 other theater companies in the United States and abroad mount staged readings of it on Oct. 12.

"The power of the first play was that the point of view was not specific. It was not trying to say one thing or another. It was about examining what was really happening in this community," said Plan-B's producing director, Jerry Rapier, who directed the first show and was hired to do the epilogue. "This time around, there is a much clearer focus. What is the long-term effect?"

The story of "The Laramie Project" began on Oct. 6, 1998, when Matthew Shepard was beaten and left to die tied to a fence on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyo.

A month after the murder, the members of Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie to do interviews with locals. From those interviews, they wrote "The Laramie Project." Since then, more than 2,000 productions have been staged, and it was made into a movie for HBO (which was the opening-night film of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival).

For the new show, the epilogue, writers Moisés Kaufman, Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris and Stephen Belber returned to Laramie to interview some of the same locals -- as well as conduct new interviews.

"When Matthew Shepard was murdered, that event had such an impact in the town of Laramie, such an emotional and vivid effect," Kaufman said. "But how does that emotional impact translate itself into change 10 years later? How does the effect of that murder translate itself into something concrete and measurable?"

New characters include Shepard's mother, Judy Shepard, who was in Utah last month on a book tour. Since the murder of her son, Shepard has become a national activist for diversity and gay rights. Other additions are Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, the two men convicted of Shepard's murder.

The preview at Kingsbury Hall will be a fully produced stage reading, with blocking and costumes but with script on hand because the material is so new.

"We are still very much in the trenches. It's hard to sort of celebrate when you're still writing," Paris said. "It's very exciting. The play is asking some really important questions. We're very thankful with the sort of response we've gotten."

Tectonic allowed Kingsbury to stage the reading early because of the upcoming scheduled fall break at the University of Utah. The event is also the culmination of the U's Pride Week events.

Kingsbury has been involved in the project since the beginning of the year. Greg Geilmann, executive director at Kingsbury, said hiring Rapier was a good collaboration because of his ties with the first show.

The local production will be performed by six of the eight actors who appeared in Plan-B's 2001 production of "The Laramie Project."

They are Kirt Bateman, Colleen Baum, Anita Booher, Joyce Cohen, Carl Nelson and Jedediah Shultz.

Looking back, Rapier said the first "Laramie Project" changed Plan-B in every possible way.

"We really found our voice as a company that socially conscious theater really was what we do well. ... It was a unique, moving experience for everyone involved. It wasn't just another show," Rapier said. "I'm really grateful that they

decided to invite us and be part of this."

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Moisés Kaufman -- "The Arts as a Catalyst for Change"

The Tony Award-winning playwright and civil-rights activist will discuss the power of the arts, specifically theater, to create powerful change in our communities, local and worldwide.

When » Oct. 8, 2 p.m.

Where » Utah Museum of Fine Arts Auditorium, 410 Campus Center Drive, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City.

Admission » Free to the public

Information » www.laramieproject.org

"The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later, An Epilogue"

When » Oct. 9, 7:30 p.m.

Where » Kingsbury Hall on the University of Utah campus

Tickets » \$24.50-\$29.50, with a \$10 student ticket; 801-581-7100 or www.kingtix.com.

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