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Footlights Theatre Brings The Laramie Project To Green Bay

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Cast hopes to bring people to the table and start conversations

By Janelle Fisher

City Pages Editor

Actors with Footlights Theatre took to the stage at Green Bay's Tarlton Theatre this week in a play certain to tug at the heartstrings of all who attend.

The Laramie Project is a production put together by the Tectonic Theater Project and its founder Moisés Kaufman detailing what went on in the town of Laramie, Wyoming, leading up to and following the murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old college student who was beaten and left for dead, later succumbing to his injuries, for being gay.

Kaufman and his group traveled to Laramie after the murder and conducted interviews with more than 200 individuals, both directly related to the case and just regular citizens of Laramie, to create a play highlighting the extremes of both hatred and compassion that can coexist in any seemingly average community.

Adam Elmergreen, who is both a member of the cast and production coordinator for the show, said the show really puts a microscope on the town of Laramie and the variety of perspectives that came out as a result of Matthew Shepard's murder.

“It follows the town of Laramie, Wyoming, leading up to and after the murder of Matthew Shepard, who was a young gay man, a college student,” he said. “It really just follows the town, specifically, and how they handled the situation leading up to the murder and after the murder itself — focusing more on after the murder. It also follows in regards to the trial that occurred and basically how the town really went because they had such national focus on them... With Wyoming being a very conservative area, the play itself really reflects a wide view of perspectives in regards to the situation itself. So it will cover people that were absolutely devastated by it, all the way to people who had very strong religious beliefs.”



That wide range of perspectives to consider, Elmergreen said, is something that Footlights Theatre was looking for when selecting a show.

“One thing Footlights Theatre really focuses on specifically is doing plays that kind of challenge the area and challenge the mindset,” he said. “Really, what they’re looking for is inviting conversation into the community so people just have a complete understanding. This play really delivers that in the sense that you’re witnessing all the viewpoints in regards to a very unfortunate, ugly situation.”

Although Footlights Theatre is a relatively young theater group, Elmergreen said intentionally taking on challenging topics and starting conversations has been a priority from the beginning.

“[Footlights Theatre] is a newer theater group — they’ve been around for a little over maybe a year at this point. This is actually only their third show,” he said. “They look for specific scripts that, like I said, are a little bit more challenging — not the staples that you see. They invoke thought. They invoke emotion... Their role is really to get a community talking about different issues and events and hopefully lead to positive conversation about that.”

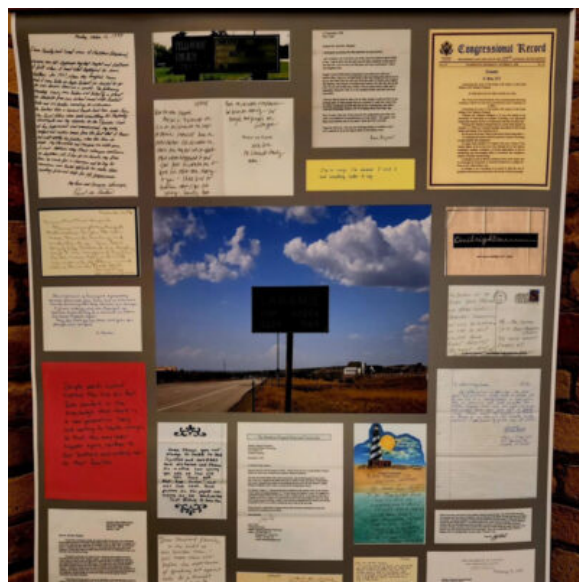
The Laramie Project, Elmergreen said, hits a current source of significant discourse head-on.

“I think Footlights really was looking at the state of the country right now, the United States,” he said. “What so many students are going through, over 400 anti-LGBTQI+ laws that are on the books right now in a variety of different states... They really wanted to bring a focus back to the heart of the LGBTQI+ community, you know, you’re dealing with people. You’re dealing with human beings. You’re dealing with people that are just looking for love and acceptance and that’s really what The Laramie Project is about — love and acceptance and hope. And when you walk away from it, you really are thinking of that exactly — that the LGBTQI+ [community] just really needs acceptance. Nobody’s looking for anything special. No one’s looking for anything other than just acceptance and love, and that’s really what The Laramie Project comes down to.”

After Matthew Shepard's death in 1998, his parents, Dennis and Judy Shepard, started the Matthew Shepard foundation with the goal of honoring Matthew's life and aspirations by inspiring individuals, organizations and communities to embrace the dignity and equality of all people.

After Saturday's performance, The Laramie Project's audience will have the opportunity to speak with Dennis Shepard.

"He'll be doing a talkback at our Saturday, June 24, show," Elmergreen said, "He'll be doing a talkback and leading the audience in regards to questions, anything they have talked about in the play itself, the origin of the play, how it came about. It really is a time for the community to really show up and be open to that type of conversation, no matter what your religious or political belief is, just to come and sit and talk and really learn from each other."



During the rehearsal process, which Elmergreen said has been quite emotional due to the content of the show and the backgrounds of the cast, the Footlights Theatre group had the opportunity to speak with Dennis without an audience — an experience which Elmergreen said stirred up emotions with many in the troupe.

"I would say 50% of the cast represents the LGBTQI+ community, and the other 50% are just obviously allies of the LGBTQI+ community, so there's good representation from straight, gay, trans, all within this production. There are very vetted and talented actors in this show," he said. "I cry every day after. It's just unbelievable — a very powerful play... A lot of times during rehearsals, cast members will walk out in tears. After Matthew Shepard's father had a talkback with just the cast last week, that was hard to sit through. It really was. People were crying on the spot when it was over. We had people walk out from tears. He really did an amazing job bringing a lot of facts and will continue doing that on Saturday. He brings a lot of facts and statistics with him, and they're heartbreaking. One of the things that really caught me was just the fact that how the country is right now in regards to LGBTQI+ riots, it's actually in worse shape than it was when the murder happened with Matthew Shepard. There were just so many things he brought to the table that even I was unaware of about the state of the country right now. I think it's amazing that his foundation really works to lead the conversation and to be able to get everybody at the table to talk and try to understand each other."

The venue for the show, Elmergreen said, is set up in a way to literally get everybody at the table and create a space for open conversation.

"The nice part about the theater where it's at, which is the Tarlton Theatre, is it's a place where people sit together at tables and you have the opportunity to dialogue and talk and speak with one another," he said. "I'm really hoping they play engages people to come and experience something they may not

understand and walk away maybe not changing their mind — that’s not necessarily the goal — but just having a deeper understanding of where LGBTQI+ people are coming from and the stories they go through and the hardships they go through in this day and age.”

Elmergreen said that if he were to give one reason people should come to see the show, it would be just that — to try to deepen their understanding of what people around them may be facing.



“From my side of things, it’s really to try to be educated on something they may not quite understand,” he said. “I know from my perspective, I always want to learn things. It’s so easy in this day and age to jump online or whatever the situation maybe and criticize something without having really any foundation or fact for it. I think people of a

religious or maybe a conservative nature would feel really comfortable coming to the Laramie Project, because the production itself gives a perspective from all angles and it wraps it all together in just a simple message of acceptance and love and you walk away with a lot of hope — and I think anybody from any political or religious perspective will walk away with a little bit more hope.”

There are still opportunities to catch a showing of The Laramie Project June 23 and 24 at 7:30 p.m. and June 25 at 1 p.m.

Find more information and tickets at footlightstheatregb.org.

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