

Laramie Project aims to shine light on humanity, say student actors



By Brock Weir

Convincing someone to set aside their personal biases for a moment and take a new approach in how they look at the world has become an increasingly tall order in this increasingly polarized world, but students at King's Country Day School are aiming to do just that later this month when they perform *The Laramie Project*.

A 2000 play by Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project* looks at the aftermath of one of the most infamous hate crimes in living memory, the killing of openly gay university student Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming.

Matthew, whose ashes were finally laid to rest last fall at Washington's National Cathedral on the twentieth anniversary of his murder, the only location where his parents could rest assured his grave would not be vandalized or desecrated, was beaten, tortured and left to die just over 20 years ago.

His murder shone a light on homophobia and hate crimes and, drawn upon countless interviews with Laramie residents and others connected to the case, the play has become a potent medium to combat prejudice and promote tolerance wherever it is performed.

"It is a powerful piece of theatre," says director Scott Garbe. "In the current atmosphere in the world, we need to facilitate open discussion around tolerance and acceptance, and really be frank about what the endgame of hatred is; what happened with Matthew is that endgame and I think it is really important to have a realistic and open conversation around where small comments can lead and try to encourage all of us to allow each other to become ourselves, become fully who we hope to be, and who we are authentically as ourselves."

Over the course of this production, *The Laramie Project* has become quite personal to Scott, as well as his son, Jeremy, who portrays, among other roles, Matt Galloway, the bartender at the last place Matthew Shepard was seen alive.

Last spring, the duo set off to Laramie to speak with members of the close-knit community who were directly impacted by Matthew's death. As they met with individuals who were directly impacted by the murder, they received a phone call from Matthew's parents, Dennis and Judy, and they formed an immediate bond, the couple welcoming Scott and Jeremy into their home, introducing them to people who knew their son, and accompanying them to a Pride event in Matthew's honour.

Now, with each performance at CDS between February 28 and March 2, Dennis and Judy will be at the theatre offering talk-backs after the play.

"I feel a lot of responsibility bringing this play to life because these are real people, especially with Matthew's parents coming," says student Maeve Tebbutt, who plays Reggie Fluty, the police officer who was first on the scene when Matthew was found, as well as the infamous Fred Phelps, who picketed Matthew's funeral and the subsequent trial of those responsible along with members of his Westboro Baptist Church.

Maeve says she was first introduced to *The Laramie Project* through her sister, a member of the LGBTQ community, who attended a school that also tackled the play.

"This story is something everybody should know about, not just because it resonates with the individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, but it can resonate with anyone who has ever been targeted for something they cannot control," says Maeve. "It also brings with it this amazing message of empathy and maybe if you aren't a supporter of the community, you can see this play, see the struggles of individuals just like yourself, and you might come to change your views on that."

Jeremy agrees that the fact Matthew's parents will be there underscores the importance for them to get this right.

‘To me, this will be a success if we are able to enable others to rethink their values and just kind of take a new approach to how they're looking at the world; if they had any previous views, to question them a little bit and try to reconsider why they think certain things, or whether or not it is reasonable to do so, and just see things with an open mind.’

Adds Maeve: ‘But also, if we're able to make any member of the audience, just for a moment, understand what it would have been like for Dennis to lose his son, or for Aaron Kreifels to find Matthew's body, and to just think about the gravity of that event and, like Jeremy said, call into question what they believe. Maybe it is worth putting aside any personal bias for the sake of a human being who deserves to be alive today.’

This is music to the ears of Scott, who says he hopes audience members will leave having had a glimpse of humanity, not just Matthew's, but of all those people in Laramie who struggle with what happened in their community.

‘There were no winners,’ says Scott. ‘The whole town was labelled as a centre of hate crime, when it is really just like any other town. If we can help people see the humanity of the people the students are portraying on stage, I think it will be a success. If we can make Dennis and Judy feel a part of our community, that will be a success as well.’

The Laramie Project runs at Country Day School February 28 – March 2. For more information, including tickets, visit www.cds.on.ca/events.