

Cast reunites to tell continuing story of Laramie

By Brock Weir

When Theatre Aurora mounted its first production of *The Laramie Project*, the story of a town coming to grips with the murder of a gay teen, director Sergio Calderon had a word of caution for his actors.

‘You should feel proud if people walk out of our show – not because of the quality, but because of the content,’ he recalls telling the cast. ‘If they are angry, let them be angry. That is a great way to examine why somebody is angry at the subject matter that is presented.’

The Laramie Project is a no-holds-barred play penned by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project. It is a gripping account of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay student, whose murder was deemed a hate crime. It follows the people of Laramie, Wyoming, as the crime sinks in, examining their own tolerance, intolerance, strengths and faults.

The Theatre Aurora cast is once again visiting Laramie this week, bringing to life ‘*The Laramie Project: 10 years Later?*’, revising the characters a decade on which, for better or worse, left such a lasting impression the first time around.

When the opportunity came up for Mr. Calderon to slip one more production into Theatre Aurora’s current season, he was so moved by the play he did everything he could to put it all together. Reuniting all his original cast members bar one (he has since moved to The Netherlands), they were eager to take on the challenge again.

‘This is 10 years later and people originally had time to process and think about what it meant to them and how it affected their lives,’ says Mr. Calderon of the characters being brought to life. ‘When we revisited them, they had undergone a lot of changes. Police officers that were involved in the investigations had changed in terms of their outlook on life, there were a lot of admissions of how homophobic they were or scared of the notion of homosexuals, and now they advocate with the Shepard family as they go to Washington to fight for legislative changes [for hate crimes].’

During the original production, the emotions of the actors were very ‘raw’ to the story, he said, whether they had already read *The Laramie Project* or simply tackling it for the first time. They too had grown since the first production, having time to better understand their own feelings towards the work.

‘It’s a gift to have a cast who already knows the first story so well and are intimately able to continue the story, mindful of the style and period the characterizations they had already worked on several months ago,’ he said. ‘It is incredibly rare that a cast will get together to not only remount a show but to get together a year later with everyone’s availability and enthusiasm for a project to be maintained, to put on a sequel.’

Since rehearsals began, he has had a positive reception from the cast and crew and hopes Theatre Aurora’s trip back to Laramie will be just as successful this time. Last year, he says he was ‘completely shocked’ by the theatre community’s positive reaction.

‘Not one person walked out of our first production and our cast was disappointed because they thought they were putting on this work that would be very challenging to our audiences,’ he says. ‘What was surprising was how the Aurora audiences embraced the telling of the story and the willingness to do that self-reflection about the subject matter and the way they thought about these topics.’

‘With that in mind, we can’t offend them with this topic anymore, so I think it is now a time to celebrate the fact that we do live in such a diverse and accepting society, at least in Canada, that we are free to express these kinds of artistic works without the fear of backlash or the fear of condemnation.’