

Latest 'Laramie' project blazes new path in theater

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It's rare that a theatrical performance becomes a global event. The unprecedented trick was pulled off Monday night by New York's Tectonic Theater Project with "The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later." The new production premiered simultaneously in 150 theaters in 14 countries, on the 11th anniversary of the murder of Matthew Shepard.

Like its predecessor, the original "Laramie Project," "10 Years Later" is a documentary-style play chronicling the aftermath of the 1998 Shepard murder in Laramie, Wyo. It isn't so much about the homophobia-fueled crime but about how it affected the people of Laramie.

The 2000 play captured a town reeling from shock. When artistic director Moises Kaufman and other Tectonic members returned to Laramie in 2008, they found a citizenry grappling with its own history.

"10 Years Later" features many of the interview subjects from the first play, such as Shepard's mother Judy, friend Romaine Patterson, now ex-policewoman Reggie Fluty, and bartender Matt Galloway. For some, the murder was a call to action; for others, it's something to forget. One of the most unpleasant but fascinating insights is that there's a nasty thread of revisionism running through Laramie. Fueled by a "20/20" report, many townspeople refuse to believe that the Shepard murder was a hate crime, but merely a robbery or drug deal gone sour.

“10 Years Later” also has two startling new subjects - Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, the two men who beat the 21-year-old Shepard, tied him to a fence and left him to die. McKinney’s interview is bone-chilling, capturing the mindset of a nearly remorseless killer speaking across the prison bars.

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The production at the Cutler Majestic Theatre was performed by 13 Emerson theater students and three special guests - Jarrett Barrios, president of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; the Rev. Irene Monroe, a gay rights activist; and Derrek L. Shulman, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. Though the acting ability varied, overall the cast and director Debra Acquavella presented an effective and moving production.

A screened simulcast from the main “10 Years Later” production in New York City bookended the show. In it, the likes of Kaufman, Judy Shepard and actress Glenn Close reminded us - and 149 other audiences in cities across the world - that we were participating in theatrical history.

And it’s true. “Ten Years Later” is remarkable for the microcosm of America it presents, and the activism it promotes. But from an artistic perspective, it has upped the ante on just how broad theater’s reach can be, and the part it can play in our national dialogue.

“THE LARAMIE PROJECT: 10 YEARS LATER” presented by Emerson College and Celebrity Series at the Cutler Majestic Theatre, Monday night.