

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/10/14/DDMG1A4KSM.DTL>

Review: 'The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later'

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic <mailto:rhurwitt@sfnchronicle.com>

Wednesday, October 14, 2009

The crowd that packed Berkeley Rep's Roda Theatre on Monday probably didn't expect to be moved to tears - and erupt in cheers - for a conservative Republican Wyoming state legislator. Few probably expected Glenn Close either, but there she was, albeit via Internet Webcast from Lincoln Center, to introduce the main show.

Theater is full of surprises. Monday's staged reading of "The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later" at the Rep combined unexpected rewards in the script and of actors creating fully formed characters almost on the spot with the partisan passion of a gay rights rally and the sensation of being part of a historic international event. All of which it was.

Monday was the 11th anniversary of the death of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student whose brutally beaten body had been found tied to a fence. A few weeks later, members of the Tectonic Theatre Project - led by director Moisés Kaufman and head writer Leigh Fondakowski - descended on Laramie to begin months of interviews that became "The Laramie Project," a dynamic portrait of a small town coping with a horrible incident, homophobia and a tsunami of media attention.

With that play having long become a staple of college and high school productions around the world, Tectonic returned to Laramie last year to explore how the town has changed - and hasn't. Monday the troupe revealed its findings with "10 Years After," in staged readings at Lincoln Center and simultaneous (give or take a few time zones) ones at 150 theaters across the country and 14 foreign lands, from London and Madrid to Tel Aviv and Hong Kong - not to mention Berkeley, San Francisco (the Magic Theatre), San Mateo, San Jose and Santa Cruz.

The crowd that gathered at the Rep seemed primed to participate in history. The digital feed from New York, oddly framed by the many glowing TV screens of the "American Idiot" set, was grainy and marred by the medium's usual out-of-sync sound. But the appearance of Close - to cheers and shouts of "You go, girl!" - and of Judy Shepard, Matthew's instantaneously sympathetic mother, solidified the sense of a noble cause. (All the readings were benefits for the Matthew Shepard Foundation and its work, including support of the expanded hate crimes legislation making its way through Congress.)

The new script is still a work in progress. Revisions were arriving at the Rep on Monday and some sections are less than artfully crafted. But director Mina Morita and 10 well-chosen actors, arrayed at music stands, turning pages with orchestral precision, brought the words and many characters each plays to life so well, it was hard to believe they'd had

only one rehearsal, just a few hours earlier.

People in denial, undergoing change or frustrated and impatient for legal equality emerged with sharp clarity. An interview with Shepard's unrepentant murderer Aaron McKinney had a chilling effect. And when actor James Carpenter, as that conservative Republican legislator, spoke out to help defeat a Proposition 8-like amendment to Wyoming's constitution, the return to Laramie glowed with promise of a rosy future.

E-mail Robert Hurwitt at rhurwitt@sfchronicle.com.

Read more: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/10/14/DDMG1A4KSM.DTL#ixzz0TvpjRdID>