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## Laramie Killing Given Epilogue a Decade Later

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

LARAMIE, Wyo. — Near the end of “The Laramie Project,” the widely praised and frequently staged play about how this small city grappled with the notorious murder of the gay college student [Matthew Shepard](#), one of the characters wonders if the convictions in the killing will help Laramie heal.

“Maybe now we can go on and we can quit being stuck, you know?” says Reggie Fluty, a local policewoman. She is one of the real-life characters whose words, collected on tape, make up the actors’ entire script.

Ms. Fluty was among 200 people interviewed in 1998 by the Tectonic Theater Project, a New York City company that created “The Laramie Project” shortly after Mr. Shepard was tied to a fence by two Laramie men, pistol-whipped and left to die in the frigid Wyoming night. And Ms. Fluty is among those whom the theater company is re-interviewing this week to explore whether Mr. Shepard has a legacy here on the high plains, 10 years later.

“Hurt’s hurt and pain’s pain, and I think people in Laramie see that now,” Ms. Fluty, now retired, told [Moisés Kaufman](#), the artistic director of Tectonic, during a conversation in her sun-splashed living room just north of town.

“Sometimes you got to just, as a community, get slugged before you wake up and grow up,” she said. “I don’t think we’re all grown up, but I think people are trying.”

For Mr. Kaufman and his colleagues, returning to Laramie, a town of 25,000 near the Colorado border, is far from a theatrical exercise. They plan to use the new interviews to write an epilogue to the play before the 10th anniversary of Mr. Shepard’s death, on Oct. 12; it will be added to the published version of the script and will be included in future performances of “The Laramie Project,” which has had about 2,000 productions since it opened off Broadway in 2000.

On a personal level, too, the artists arrived here with a palpable yearning to find change in Laramie, its people and its attitudes toward gay people. (The troupe allowed a reporter to sit in on the interviews.)

“We’ve had some degree of apprehension about coming back to Laramie,” said Mr. Kaufman, who is also the author of the 1997 Off Broadway hit “Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of [Oscar Wilde](#).” “There had been such fervor about how Matthew Shepard’s death would make a difference. There are hundreds of hate crimes each year, but Matthew is the one that resonated nationally. But what if nothing has really changed?”

Mr. Kaufman does not hide his feelings easily. After an interview this weekend with Laramie's mayor, Klaus Hanson, Mr. Kaufman shook with anger that Mr. Hanson was not doing anything to commemorate the anniversary. ("Now that you have touched upon it," the mayor said, "I will need to rethink it.") Mr. Kaufman's expressed dismay that there is no hate-crimes law in Wyoming, as he thinks there should be. He and others also said that some in Laramie were no longer speaking of Mr. Shepard's death as a hate crime but rather as a drug-fueled robbery gone wrong.

"A lot of people in the community went through a sense of grief, in a very poignant, heartfelt, painful way, and I think eventually the pain became so great that they don't want to think about it or hear about it," Rebecca Hilliker, a professor of theater at the [University of Wyoming](#) here, told Mr. Kaufman over the weekend. "After I got over the emotional trauma, the nightmares, I myself had to say, 'O.K., step back, think about this — what you can and can't do — and stop placing the burden of changing the state on yourself.' "

Mr. Kaufman conceded, "People get exhausted."

"You get exhausted," Ms. Hilliker nodded, sitting by windows in her home on a breathtaking open plain. "And then you can't plan anymore how to fix things."

Laramie has changed in some ways. The city council passed a bias crimes ordinance that tracks such crimes, though it does not include penalties for them. There is an AIDS Walk now. Several residents say they came out publicly as gay, in their churches or on campus, in part to honor Mr. Shepard's memory. The university hosts a four-day Shepard Symposium for Social Justice each spring, and there is talk of creating a degree minor in gay and lesbian studies.

And yet, to the bewilderment of some people here, there is no memorial to Mr. Shepard in Laramie. The log fence has been torn down where he lay dying for 18 hours on Oct. 7, 1998. There is no marker. Wild grass blows in the wind.

The Fireside bar — where Mr. Shepard was lured away by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, who are serving life terms for murder — is also gone, sold and renamed years ago. Without the Fireside, there is no longer a bar in town where gays, jocks, foreign students and cowboys mix together.

"I put it up for sale two weeks later — it was a ghost town," said Matt Mickelson, the former owner of the Fireside, told Andy Paris, a member of the Tectonic company.

Mr. Mickelson, wearing a weathered white cowboy hat and a university sweater sporting a large W, said he lost almost everything because of the infamy of the Shepard murder. He ended up moving from the place he loved to look for work elsewhere.

"I got it from both sides: 'the Fireside was a gay bar,' 'the Fireside had gay slayers,' " Mr. Mickelson said over beers at a dance hall here, the Saloon. "The media gave our whole town a black eye. They gave our whole state a black eye. They gave the university a black eye. It was hate

crime, hate crime, hate crime.”

If Laramie has struggled with this onus, young gay men here have also reckoned with the fact that Mr. Shepard’s death did not change much for them. Nor, they say, did the success of the 2005 movie “Brokeback Mountain,” about two gay ranch hands in Wyoming.

“If you walk around campus holding hands with another guy, you have to know that people are going to holler and yell at you,” Iain-Peter Duggan, a junior at the University of Wyoming, and who is gay, said in an interview. “You just have to be smart.”

Another gay undergraduate, Christopher, who did not want his last name published because he is not out to his family or many friends and former teammates, said he was torn about the legacy of Mr. Shepard: He loves Laramie and Wyoming very much, but he also said he was “disappointed” that he cannot openly date another man here without facing hassles.

“Online chatting is a big deal for gay guys in Wyoming — that’s pretty much the only place to be safe,” Christopher said.

Even some of the most politically active gay people in Laramie told the Tectonic actors that, however sad they were with the pace of change, they were also philosophical about it.

After Sunday dinner at the home of Catherine Connolly, a lesbian professor at the university who is a memorable character in “The Laramie Project,” she and Mr. Kaufman affectionately sparred in the kitchen about his frustration that this town had not become a place transformed.

“You know, Moisés, how much has really changed in Manhattan in the last 10 years?” Ms. Connolly said, referring to ongoing hate crimes and the lack of a gay marriage law in New York. “It’s unfair to hold Laramie to a standard that you don’t hold yourself to.”

Mr. Kaufman answered: “Maybe that’s fair. I guess what disappoints me isn’t so much Laramie, it’s the fact that more social progress hasn’t happened everywhere.”

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