

**Performing the “Really” Real:  
Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in  
*The Laramie Project***

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“In our town we like to know the facts about everybody.”  
Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder’s  
*Our Town*  
“I have no interest in prying into a town’s unravelings.”  
Steven Belber in the Tectonic Theatre Project’s  
*The Laramie Project*

This essay presents a detailed examination of our experiences as audience members of a documentary theatre performance and, following Craig Gingrich-Philbrook’s discussion of autoperformance, an interrogation of how and why it engaged us.<sup>1</sup> As performance studies scholars writing in a discipline (communication) that is often removed from mainstream theatre as a focus of analysis, we are excited to explore *The Laramie Project*, a successful New York play and HBO special.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, we are also responding to Richard Schechner’s call to “show exactly how performance studies can be useful to theatre-as-practiced in/by the mainstream.”<sup>3</sup>

The genre that has come to be known as documentary theatre encompasses a variety of styles and terms, including natural performance, ethnodrama, conversational dramatism, presentational theatre, staged oral history, and could even encompass what sociologist Laurel Richardson has called collective storytelling.<sup>4</sup> As we examine three distinct productions of *The Laramie Project*, we grapple with the claim—both implicit and explicit—that this play is all the more powerful because it is based not on fiction but on the “really real.” In short, we challenge what we perceive to be an over-reliance on the “real” as a basis for claiming theatrical and political significance. Our goal is not to forefront or to promote fiction as a superior genre for performance, but rather to temper the inherent claims of objective truth

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that emerge when ethnographic methods and the aesthetic codes of documentary media are employed in theatrical productions. Further, we critique what seems to be a dangerous trend in neo-leftist politics in which it is somehow more acceptable to forego an explicit political agenda in favor of an “ethos of neutrality.”<sup>5</sup>

This essay also endeavors to trouble what performance studies scholar Kristin Langellier calls the “proliferation of personal narrative in contemporary culture and performance studies” by asking questions about ethnographic performance as process and product.<sup>6</sup> Our hope is to challenge those engaged in the practice of ethnographic production and performance to keep pushing in search of the most ethical methods of recording and representing research participants and ethnographic fieldwork. As we examine our reading and response to *The Laramie Project*, our analysis consistently returns to questions currently raised by those involved in performance studies, personal narrative, ethnography, and documentary theatre.

The first part of this essay describes the success of *The Laramie Project*. Using critical reviews, interviews, and our experiences as audience members at two different theatrical performances, we hope to capture the spirit of this play. Next, we investigate purpose by questioning the particular methods of research and representation that were employed in this production. We explore how this production stimulated our interest as audience members, as ethnographers, and as performer-directors. In a project such as this, which blends ethnography and theatre, we find that these various personas can end up speaking at cross-purposes. Then, we argue that the methods and aesthetics of documentary theatre as they are employed in this play inherently establish claims about truth, reality, and objectivity.<sup>7</sup> Finally, by looking at the HBO version of *The Laramie Project*, we raise difficult questions about these claims and about the motivations that drive aesthetic choices based on the “really real,” suggesting that other, perhaps more important, goals are avoided when we put so much stock in reproducing “reality.”

### **Witnessing *The Laramie Project***

We attended the performance at the La Jolla Playhouse on the campus of San Diego State University on Thursday, August 9, 2001. Previous productions with the original cast of the Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP) included Denver, Laramie, New York City, and Berkeley. As we anticipated the performance, we recalled the news of Matthew Shepard’s murder when it happened in 1998; our memories were a horrifying, if fragmented, collection of words and images: a fence, a rope, a beating, two killers, Wyoming. In fact, we remembered vividly a colleague summoning Shepard’s murder as a frame for her dissertation defense; Shepard was in a coma even as she prepared her oral defense presentation about gay-straight friendships.<sup>8</sup>

We attended the play with Greg—a professional actor from New York. Greg had just concluded a production at the American Theatre Festival in Shepardstown, West Virginia, where he met Stephen Belber, a member of the TTP. Not only was Stephen an original cast member, as were the seven other members of the La Jolla production, he had also been on the writing team along with a head writer and two other actors/ethnographers. Greg hoped to have us all meet up with Stephen after the performance. As we settled into our seats and read *The Laramie Project* program notes, we became increasingly interested in talking to someone who had been a part of the writing process. Here's why.

Historical facts: In October 1998, gay college student Matthew Shepard was discovered brutally beaten and left for dead. The ensuing investigation revealed that two perpetrators—Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson—had left a college bar with Shepard in a pick-up truck. They then robbed him, beat him, and left him for dead, tied to a fence on the Wyoming prairie. Beginning in November of 1998, the TTP visited the town of Laramie, Wyoming, in order to talk to the people of Laramie about the incidents surrounding Shepard's murder. *The Laramie Project* is a play that emerged from interviews conducted by the New York City-based TTP. In all, they recorded 400 hours of taped interviews with dozens of citizens.<sup>9</sup> The group returned a total of six times to gather information about the murder, the investigation, the trial, and the cumulative effects of these events on the town.<sup>10</sup> The resulting play is not about Shepard so much as it is about how a community identifies itself in the wake of the national media coverage of a hate crime. The members of the TTP, like the national media, interviewed people who did and did not know Shepard, gay and straight, law enforcement officers, bar patrons, university staff and students, and healthcare personnel. The play script incorporates the interviewers/actors as characters, so in addition to the actors playing multiple roles, they play themselves.

The production was mesmerizing—a testament to what live theatre does best in its conflation of words and images; it brings immediacy to the sharing of “what it means to be human.”<sup>11</sup> Eight actors shifted seamlessly between dozens of characters, including themselves. With a spare stage setting of simple tables, chairs, and the occasional technological magic (a bank of television sets, live-feed cameras, and the illusion of rainfall), the town of Laramie appeared before us. As audience members, we identified with the characters and fell under the spell of the people of Laramie. As performers, we were constantly amazed by the “virtuosity” of the actors—no weak links in sight. As ethnographers, we wondered: How did they approach their participants? What kind of consent forms did they sign? Did anyone in Laramie disagree with the way they were being portrayed?<sup>12</sup> From the four hundred hours of transcribed interviews, how did they decide to select these sound bites and reject others? How did they put this story together—and is it truthful? We were buzzing with questions.

When we had a chance to talk at the first intermission, we admitted feeling a slight uneasiness regarding how certain citizens of Laramie had been represented, and, more importantly, how they might be represented in future productions. Of course the theatre project had procured releases from those interviewed, and wherever they went in Laramie, they were clear that the goal of the project was to write, produce, and perform a play based on the interviews. Some of this information is established early in the script through self-conscious references to the research process. For example, the character of Zubaida Ula, a University of Wyoming student, says to a member of the company, "You're gonna be onstage in New York and you're gonna be acting like you're us. That's so weird."<sup>13</sup> In the third act, the character of Matthew Galloway asks if there will be open auditions for the New York production.<sup>14</sup>

Why were we uncomfortable with the idea of "real" people being played by performers? When we mentioned our concerns to Greg at intermission, his response was clear—once the interviews became a script, it was the actor's job to tell the story, not to answer to the people who were interviewed. As an actor, he would not be interested in performing a character that was pre-determined for him, because his own creativity and artistry would be rendered meaningless. Still, we felt a sense of protection toward some of the people depicted here. Perhaps this feeling stemmed from a pretentious academic desire to protect the "innocent" people of Laramie. Perhaps it came from a pretentious theatrical sensibility that these characters will someday be portrayed indelicately by amateurs(!) at the local community theatre.<sup>15</sup> We recognized that these were two rather different concerns.

After the standing ovation that concluded the performance, Greg headed backstage and returned to the lobby a few minutes later with Stephen, who joined us for dessert at a local TGI Friday's restaurant. We were delighted to have an opportunity to discuss our particular academic interests with a critically acclaimed playwright.<sup>16</sup> We talked about performance studies and how it relates to bodies and communication, discursive practices, and materiality. Before long, our discussion over coffee turned to representation. How would subsequent productions of *The Laramie Project* look and feel to Stephen when someone else would be playing him? After all, the character "Stephen Belber" had already been performed by someone other than Stephen Belber for the entire month of July while he was in an American Theatre Festival production. Next, we had fun fantasizing about which Hollywood star would play him in the HBO production. Then the conversation revealed that the actors had studied the taped interviews and had fashioned their depictions after the vocal cues the tapes provided. When we asked Stephen if future performers would have access to those tapes he replied honestly, "Probably not." Our concerns for the people of Laramie portrayed in the play converged and focused on this point.<sup>17</sup>

### Playing with Method

Robert Brustein states, “When you make politics into art, then politics must be prepared to meet an aesthetic standard.”<sup>18</sup> In this section, we suggest that documentary should be prepared to meet a methodological standard, even when the primary concerns of the project are aesthetic.

Of the various styles of documentary theatre mentioned in our introduction, the method that Tectonic Theatre Project’s *The Laramie Project* employs seems to fall somewhere between Nathan Stucky’s “natural performance” and Jim Mieczakowski’s “ethnodrama.” Although it may include a range of characteristics, Stucky states that “the domain of natural performance essentially includes re/performances of first-order performance events.”<sup>19</sup> First-order performance events can include oral histories, interviews, telephone conversations, and personal narratives, all of which come into play in the script of *The Laramie Project*. Stucky’s definition of natural performance dictates that the rehearsal period includes “repeated listenings and careful attention to the transcript.”<sup>20</sup> In Stucky’s determination, this transcript includes precise textual notations including pauses, overlapped and/or garbled speech, and even symbols representing paralinguistic cues. Similarly, Mieczakowski’s “ethnodrama” aspires to bring materials—interviews, participant observation—culled from field notes into a dramatic form for public consumption. In both natural performances and ethnodrama, conscientious attempts are made to reproduce experiences from human interaction, ordinary or otherwise. The difference between these forms, however, lies in the treatment of the text, with natural performance placing more emphasis on precise notation and replication of the voice.

According to Norman Denzin, ethnodrama, unlike natural performance, seeks to trouble the primacy of a single text by including multiple tellings of the same event.<sup>21</sup> Although the telling of *The Laramie Project* is chronological—the play moves from a description of Laramie to the discovery of the body to the investigation to the vigil to the trial—it violates expectations of conventional narrative through its use of multiple narrators. Because its substance is the telling and re-telling of accounts of a story for which the reader or audience already knows the basic facts and, certainly, the outcome, it is not the plot but the juxtaposition of the individual voices that comprise the story. Each part, each sound bite from the participants, is deliberately placed into relationship to the whole by selecting and placing one voice next to the other in what director Moisés Kaufman calls “moments.”<sup>22</sup> This process is familiar to the ethnographer and the documentarian—find the themes, pick the representative quotes, and arrange them within the context of ethnographic “findings.” But narrative ethnographers and theatre scholars have implicitly and explicitly critiqued this practice, which is based in empiricist and positivist assumptions.<sup>23</sup> As drama, *The Laramie Project* felt like a complete account, and we walked away with a sense of closure as audience members; it provided the resolution

we expect from a well-told story. From the standpoint of narrative ethnography, however, we could not help but ask, “How *else* could this story have been told?”

Our discussions about the methods employed by the TTP became more and more slippery as we ourselves shifted between the various points of view represented in our scholarship. In addition to the protests of the ethnographer, we heard the conflicting voices of the audience member who wants to be moved, the performance scholar who struggles with the challenge of representation, and the actor who simply wants to be free to perform. Rather than privilege one of these voices over the others, we present them here in play.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You can’t take “snippets” and present them out of context. You can’t appropriate the voices of your research subjects and make them say what YOU want them to say.

PERFORMANCE SCHOLAR: Is the documentary style an important consideration in the search for realism? Can’t fiction do the same thing?

ACTOR: This is a PLAY. We’re not claiming to tell the truth about what happened. We’re telling you the story of what we did and how we made sense of it later. It had to be compelling. And it was compelling, wasn’t it?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Of course! I’m amazed that I could watch three hours of monologues—no “real” action—and be completely captivated. I was listening to a series of quotes from interviews and I couldn’t have been more swept away in the emotion of it all.

PERFORMANCE SCHOLAR: I guess I object to the combination of “Hey, we just talked to a bunch of people (who turned out to be swell)” and the “This is real” claim that is held out with one hand and pulled back with the other.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Maybe we’re jealous. In our neck of the woods the project undertaken by Moisés Kaufman and TTP would have required approval from our university’s Internal Review Board. We would at least have to provide evidence of our competence in the interview technique and demonstrate care in how the participants are represented—including the required use of pseudonyms.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Don’t I get to form an impression of the characters on my own? I usually try to read a play before I see it for the first time. That way, I get to compare my choices to the choices of the actors and the director. When I see a play before I’ve read it, the staged choices always trump my own.

ACTOR: And isn't that what we want as performers—the independence to exercise interpretations and meanings from the character in her/his scene?

In terms of its methods, the TTP employs a nonrealistic theatrical form but uses “real” content both in its subject matter and in the performance text. By naming the people of Laramie in the script, we believe the TTP appeals to the assumptions of positivism: that there is an objective truth that can be taken from *there* and brought *here*. Although only naïve consumers of theatre (or any media) would mistake the trappings of objectivity for “truth,” we nevertheless agree with Ryan Claycomb who identifies an “ethos of neutrality” among documentary theatre practitioners. Claycomb also suggests that, by definition, staged oral histories that employ multiple voices are oppositional to hegemonic discourse because they eschew a single authorial voice and, therefore, present a “hidden truth.”<sup>24</sup> We are not convinced that multi-vocality alone guarantees an anti-hegemonic political stance or that the reproduction of private voices on a public stage is sufficient as a political response. An ethos of neutrality by the playwright may be synonymous with “objectivity” when invoked in the interests of empowerment. The assumption seems to be that neutrality empowers the voices that are represented in the play and empowers audience members to come to their own conclusions about the implications of the play. In the next section of this essay, we examine whether the voices of Laramie residents are empowered in subsequent productions and ask whether these productions are designed to provoke audience members to confront the social conditions that resulted in the killing of Shepard.

### Witnessing *The Laramie Project 2*

After the La Jolla production, we located a review in *The New Yorker* to see how the production had been described. Two sentences caught our attention:

Unlike Kaufman's 1997 “Gross Indecency,” which offered a fresh perspective on the oft-told tale of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, this play, *by refusing to make a judgement*, simply retells a familiar story. Nonetheless, the heart-wrenching experiences and flashes of insight do open a window on the human tragedy, despite the *overwhelming objectification surrounding it* [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup>

“Overwhelming objectification”—once again, we wondered whether objectivity and neutrality of judgment is or should be a goal of documentary theatre. Given the comparisons to Brecht and Artaud that this production generates, we would expect an overt political statement rather than one grounded in the notion of

objective reality.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, from a reading of the various articles and reviews critiquing the production, it was clear that the “reality” of the play—that is, its truthfulness—was a selling point. On the opening night, we attended a production of *The Laramie Project* in Tampa, Florida, given by local theatre group Stageworks.<sup>27</sup> This performance confirmed our suspicions that even as it appealed to “the real,” there was also undeniable variation in the performance of the text. Before the play began, co-director Anna Brennan addressed the audience and emphasized, “This play was really difficult to get hold of.” Then she explained, “The actors are playing real people who were interviewed by real human beings.” She concluded by stating that the resulting play was more powerful than conventional theatre because it was “really real.”<sup>28</sup>

We knew going in that we would be unable to resist making comparisons—in many ways that was our reason for attending the second performance—but we were unsure what the comparisons would reveal. One immediately obvious difference was the casting. In contrast to the all-white and homogeneously-aged cast of the TTP, the Stageworks production had an almost self-consciously diverse cast that included an African-American actor, a Latino actor, and a disabled actor, as well as a greater range of ages among the performers. In addition, watching the Stageworks actor playing Stephen Belber we, of course, reverted back to our knowledge of Stephen as a basis for judging the quality of the representation. Because we had not met Laramie resident Matt Galloway, we also reverted back to Stephen Belber’s original portrayal of Matt as a basis for judging the quality of the Stageworks actor’s representation. Perhaps even more significantly, we each made judgments about which performances we preferred, forcing us to question the basis upon which we were judging these representations. Reality did not enter the equation at all.

We were also aware of a very different audience. The subject matter of this Tampa premiere had attracted a predominantly gay male audience and responses to particular moments in the play were different, but it was not clear whether those different responses were a result of audience differences or different directorial choices. For example, the character of Andrew Gomez appears only once in *The Laramie Project*. In what was one of several “plain folks” revelations, Gomez, a “Latino from Laramie, in his twenties,” sums up his encounter with Aaron McKinney while both were in jail.<sup>29</sup> He asks McKinney, “Why did you kill a faggot if you’re gonna be destined to BE a faggot later?”<sup>30</sup> He describes how the other convicts were “auctioning those boys off” in anticipation of their conviction. In the La Jolla production, the audience responded to this monologue with a collective silence. By contrast, the Stageworks version of this monologue resulted in laughter urged on by the portrayal of Gomez as street tough, snickering along with the audience, looking forward to McKinney’s comeuppance. According to co-director Anna Brennan this character was “created to be funny.”<sup>31</sup> We are not comparing these disparate interpretations to argue that one was right and the other



wrong. Rather, we point out that there was only one utterance of the original lines by Gomez, and it is possible that neither of these interpretations captured exactly what he intended by those words. Such disparities pose no problem for a conventional theatre production or interpretation of fiction; in fact, in performance, we generally applaud creative and multiple interpretations of a text. But when a production bases its significance on the words of real people, perhaps there are ethical boundaries related to the artistic license typically extended to an aesthetic endeavor.

The research and writing processes as depicted in the play seem highly ethical according to many of the standards of contemporary ethnography. Denzin describes a communitarian ethical ideal in which ethnographic research takes place in the context of ongoing relationships with those being studied.<sup>32</sup> In the play, we get the distinct impression that the TTP actors *did* get to know many of the Laramie residents and could be trusted to represent those residents with a sense of compassion and complexity. In the text, the actors describe making multiple trips to Laramie and, through the course of the play, actually represent transformations in consciousness in several characters, including themselves. In the third act of the play, for example, theatre student Jedediah Schultz refers back to comments he made in the first act, saying, "I can't believe I said those things a year ago."<sup>33</sup> In addition, at the beginning of the play, several of the New York-based actors express reticence and, indeed, fear at the prospect of spending time in Laramie, then, by the end of act three, exhibit warm interpersonal relationships with several residents.

In the La Jolla production, the actors' utterances were endowed with the memories of having been in Laramie and having experienced relationships with the residents including first-order explanations of events and feelings. In the hands of the Stageworks actors, the sincerity of the same utterances became diluted as we realized that the actors were working with a script like any other, free to interpret (or misinterpret) the "lines" in any way that fit the vision of the directors. These are thoughts and critiques that would not have occurred to us if the play was "based on" true life events or a fictional allegory of the Shepard case. Feeling ourselves pulled down the rabbit hole of "what is reality?" we stepped back to examine where these expectations of "truth," no matter how unreasonable, originated.

The play borrows heavily from aesthetic codes of documentary reporting. Specifically, narrators introduce characters by name and social role in the following manner: "Rebecca Hilliker, head of the theatre department at the University of Wyoming."<sup>34</sup> We are reminded of the documentary film practice of projecting white captions at the bottom of the screen as each new talking head appears. Similarly, just as the conventions of documentary keep the questioner off-screen, we do not get to hear the questions asked of the Laramie residents. Most of the time, their words appear to be unprompted responses to the presence of the audience, as if they would tell the same story, the same way, to whoever was listening. Thus, by rendering the activities of the actor/researcher invisible, the audience is enticed

to “forget” that this play is constructed as an artistic representation. Audience members are invited to remember this account as based on the “real words” of the “real people” of Laramie and, thus, believe it to be *true*.<sup>35</sup>

Even as we engage this discussion of “truth” and “reality,” we feel ourselves trying to argue both sides of the issue. On the one hand, we critique the genre of documentary theatre for its emphasis on reality, and we also seem to be saying that there is a better way—a more ethical way—of representing the truth of *The Laramie Project*. We could not simultaneously argue that no reality exists and critique *The Laramie Project* for not representing reality better. Here is where we discovered the source of a fatal error in our assumptions (and the beginning of the rabbit hole!). Particularly in the face of a crisis, we sense an ever-increasing tendency to turn to the news for facts, facts, and more facts, to supply us with “equipment for living.”<sup>36</sup> Facts, however, do not supply us with meaning. The claims of the “really real” embedded in the play encouraged us to accept its significance based only on the insider’s view that the TTP provided for us. The characters of Laramie were intended to help the audience to make sense of what happened to Shepard, but what we hoped for in *The Laramie Project* was a truth that had little to do with the facts of what happened to this young gay man in Wyoming. What we wanted was a truth that transformed the meaning of Shepard’s murder from one town’s tragedy into an awakening of the nation’s conscience. Such an awakening might be prompted by widespread access to Shepard’s story—perhaps through the medium of television. Then we found we had yet another chance to see this story represented.

### Witnessing *The Laramie Project* 3

Imagine our surprise. Even as we anticipated the HBO version of *The Laramie Project* due to be aired in early March, we found that the University of South Florida (USF) had been chosen as one of four universities where HBO would be previewing *The Laramie Project* along with a panel discussion.<sup>37</sup> We attended the screening expecting to see a film of the play, but cast with the famous actors we had seen on the promotional posters that dotted our campus. We noted that these HBO posters contained a catch phrase, “Everyone carries a piece of the truth.” We also guessed the three-hour play would be shortened for a prime time viewing audience and were interested to see what had been cut. We were not anticipating a radical revisioning of the entire project.

The HBO film—also directed by Moisés Kaufman—relied heavily on scenic shots that located the action constantly in and around Laramie. There was also a self-referential quality that made the story more like a “making of” special rather than a film of the play. Despite the fact that this film did reveal more of the created, constructed aspects of *The Laramie Project*, we felt even further removed from the genealogy of the story. HBO’s casting of recognizable Hollywood actors (Steve Buscemi, Janeane Garofalo, Laura Linney, Amy Madigan, Christina Ricci, etc.)

eclipsed the mundane qualities of the story that suggest this event could happen anywhere. To its credit, the HBO version gave a more detailed picture of the internal struggles of the TTP members as they came to terms with their own fears and their complicity, while trying to remain objective in the face of glaring bigotry and homophobia. Clearly, they had trouble maintaining their self-imposed charge to simply gather the facts. But the narrative had lost its anchor—was this film about Laramie, Matthew Shepard, TTP, hate crime legislation, or perhaps how liberal and socially conscious HBO is?

As the film started to roll in the lecture hall at USF, we noted with interest that Kaufman had decided to shoot the film in black and white, only to be told after the screening that this was not an artistic choice but a fault of the projector. The film had, in fact, been made in color. Amidst his apology for the technical difficulties, the HBO representative noted appreciatively, “It was so realistic this time in black and white”—a clear indication of how our culture has conflated news media images and reality. One of the things we found interesting in the promotion of this play and within the script itself were the ongoing references to “the media.” On the one hand, the play distances itself from the media who descended on the town at the time of Shepard’s murder and the trials of McKinney and Henderson. In fact, the project itself inherently claims to offer the town a chance to redefine itself after the ravages of the mass media representation. And yet, the arrival of an HBO film crew in the company of recognizable Hollywood stars is itself a media invasion to a town the size of Laramie. As the question and answer period came to a close, an audience member asked, “Why did you choose the University of South Florida for this preview?” The HBO representative shrugged and replied, “We’re interested in this market.” The panel discussion itself was taped by HBO to be aired, we guessed, in order to stimulate interest in *The Laramie Project* and HBO (and, perhaps, premium cable television in general). What occurred to us after we left the lecture hall—and were handed a copy of *The Laramie Project* soundtrack on compact disk—was how far removed this promotional event was from the events of Shepard’s murder. We felt very empty as we mapped the corporate web that now surrounded his story.

It began when we noted that *The Laramie Project* script was published by Vintage Books, a division of Random House and a subsidiary of AOL/Time-Warner Entertainment Company, which also owns HBO. We suspected, but did not research, that the artists on our complimentary soundtrack had contracts with Time-Warner through various recording labels. We know that Time-Warner does not own NBC because NBC originally planned to air its version of *The Matthew Shepard Story: The Official Family Biography* in direct competition with HBO, on the same night and in the same time slot.<sup>38</sup> This version of the story promotes NBC stars Stockard Channing (*The West Wing*) and Sam Waterston (*Law and Order*) as Shepard’s parents. This commodification of Shepard’s murder begs the question,

how different is this from the newsmakers that plagued the town following the murder and at the time of the trials?

### Looking Beyond Laramie

Although we run the risk of committing a cardinal sin of criticism by finding fault with what something is not rather than what it is, we must do so because of what such criticism may yield for our understanding of this genre. As we tried to make sense of our responses to *The Laramie Project*, we kept returning to one article that revealed dimensions of the crime and offered interpretations that we found nowhere else. In her *Harper's* feature article "A Boy's Life: For Matthew Shepard's Killer, What Does It Take to Pass a Man?" JoAnn Wypijewski unveiled many interesting subplots surrounding the Shepard murder.<sup>39</sup> For example, a major theme in the play focuses on whether or not "things like this happen in Laramie." Wypijewski's article answers this question by reporting that not only had a teenaged girl been found stabbed to death a few months *before* Shepard's murder but, a few months *after* his murder, Russell Henderson's mother was found frozen to death in the snow—a victim of rape and murder. Also, the play never really confronts the class issue that differentiates the town of Laramie from the culture of the University of Wyoming, which makes its home there. It is also never mentioned that McKinney and Henderson were heavy methamphetamine users and that Wyoming has the highest per capita use of methamphetamine in the nation. Wypijewski even raises the possibility that Shepard might have died for reasons other than homophobic rage. She writes,

Those unreported facts—to the extent that anything can be factually determined in Laramie these days, with everyone involved in the case under a gag order—may tell more about the crime, more about the life of hate and hurt and heterosexual culture, than all the quasi-religious characterizations of Matthew's passion, death, and resurrection as patron-saint of hate-crime legislation.<sup>40</sup>

Wypijewski puts forth the hypothesis that Shepard was killed as much for the fact that he was a small, well-educated, middle-class man as for the fact that he was gay. She suggests that he was killed because McKinney and Henderson were rural, working-class, heterosexual men of late- twentieth-century America. McKinney and Henderson may have spotted someone they considered to be an easy target as they came down from a five-day methamphetamine binge. The reason we found this hypothesis so compelling is not because it denies the profound tragedy of hate crimes or the cultural significance of Shepard's killing, but because it shifts our focus from the victim to the context in which this kind of victimization occurs daily—to

gay men, to women, to people of color, people with disabilities, the elderly, and children. The same context, by the way, in which McKinney and Henderson's attorneys believed that a "gay panic" defense was a viable if not laudable way to justify their clients' brutality. This "context" is not the town of Laramie, or even rural America, but a heteronormative, masculinist hegemony that equates power with aggression.

Whether before a thousand of Southern California's most philanthropic seasoned citizens late in a three-month run, or before two hundred gay and gay-friendly movers and shakers on a rare opening night in a Southern city, we suspect *The Laramie Project* confirms for liberal audiences what they already believe—that violence and hatred are wrong. But ethnography and art—particularly when based on what Moisés Kaufman calls "watershed moments"—are supposed to be revelatory and not a simple confirmation of what we already believe to be true. Because we are emotionally moved by its tragedy and because all we are called to do is to face up to the "facts" of what happened, it is too easy for us as audience members to walk away from *The Laramie Project* feeling absolved and secure in the knowledge that we are not implicated in any call for change. Surely, if we attend a performance like this and feel moved by its tragedy, we are not part of the problem. Right?

Certainly, by eschewing the traditional use of protagonist, scene, plot, and dialogue, Kaufman and the TTP are employing techniques associated with experimental or political theatre. Brechtian alienation emerged in resistance to the illusions of realism, and, as a technique, it is intended to constantly remind the audience of the constructed nature of what they are seeing. An audience watching a contemporary production of *Mother Courage*, for example, is unlikely to forget that they are watching a created and creative act.<sup>41</sup> But when told that the performers' words are verbatim quotes from real people and when the story line comes straight from the newspaper headlines, the same audience could perhaps be forgiven for mistaking the performance for "the truth." Brecht's intention was to engage the audience's critical thinking in order to keep them questioning the agenda of what they were being shown.<sup>42</sup> Even as it characterizes itself as more humane and trustworthy than the television news media, *The Laramie Project* employs the aesthetics of documentary. In doing so, it tacitly stifles the reflex to look for "something that is both essential to the crisis and that lasts beyond it."<sup>43</sup> Again, we must question why *The Laramie Project* and other plays in this genre seem to put so much stock in the methods of their production? The message and cultural meaning of Shepard's murder go beyond that specific event, that place, that time, and these people; so why limit the truth to the facts alone? Real events can inspire theatre; yet theatre can ignite the collective imagination to reveal a different kind of reality.

In a crucible, impurities are burned away and elements are combined and synthesized with fire and heat to create something new. Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, exposed, synthesized, and forever fused the complex forces that climaxed with the McCarthy trials—public hysteria, fear, oppression, and will to power. When we invoke the metaphor of a “witch hunt,” Miller's play is there in our cultural consciousness amidst a powerful amalgam of meanings that tell us that we never want to go there again, and we must be vigilant. What *The Crucible* offers us that *The Laramie Project* does not is a metaphor that penetrates the heart of a particular event in American history without limiting its interpretation to that single event. Miller did this by distinguishing a dramatic approach from a narrative one. “Narrative art . . . is the more literal; art that simply tells a story, like a film or book (or a newspaper article). Dramatic art involves ‘working the material until it’s squeezed as far as it could be squeezed and still tell a story.’”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the dramatic/narrative distinction is not as dichotomous as Miller is suggesting. What we suggest, in contrast, is for documentary theatre to loosen its claim of truth, its grasp on objectivity, and its implied political neutrality, and instead provide its audiences with an enduring and insightful vision that extends beyond the facts. Such visions are political precisely because they brazenly challenge the way we view the world and, ideally, transform our most entrenched cultural beliefs and values—and need not apologize for doing so.

### Epilogue: Bearing Witness

In one of the more bizarre aspects of Aaron McKinney's trial, Matthew Shepard's parents were permitted to decide sentencing for their son's killer. Besides granting him life and not pursuing a death sentence, they also arranged a gag order; McKinney and Henderson, lawyers and jurors would not be permitted to discuss the case, ever. The gag order in the Shepard case is merely a reflection of the limits we always face when we seek access to “the facts” of an event. We can never know the whole story, and so what we must do is be conscious of the limitations of how the story is told and interpret the claims of the story accordingly. One thing that can be made clear is *why* the story is being told (or re-told) in the first place. For Barbara Tedlock, ethnography aims “to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context.”<sup>45</sup> In our conclusion, we ask, “What are or should be the reasons for engaging this particular performance praxis of documentary theatre?”

Interviewing *all* of the residents of Laramie, of course, would not have created the truth. In the process of selecting and arranging the words of the characters, the TTP grants life to some of the citizens of Laramie and silences others. Flat snippets of life are granted to many characters while other characters, who are perhaps more interesting to the actors/ethnographers, are developed into more complex personalities. We left the theatres and the HBO screening wanting to know more

about McKinney and Henderson. We were introduced to a cartoon version of the homophobic and bigoted Reverend Fred Phelps, and, as audience members, we wanted the TTP to talk to Fred Phelps, not just lampoon him. The variations in characterization that we outlined earlier in this essay presented us with interesting questions about representation. The characterizations of Henderson, McKinney, and Phelps point to deeper questions that the play never addresses. Why do people like Henderson and McKinney commit the crimes they do? And why does the Reverend Fred Phelps think the way he does? Perhaps within the answers to those questions, we might find reasons to revise previously unexamined values in our culture, regarding masculinity, aggression, difference, or something else that we have not yet considered.

In the end, we believe the play was a sense-making outlet for Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project. The trips to Laramie confronted them with their questions, but the final script does not answer them. They, perhaps a bit ambitiously, hoped to capture an emotional response of a town in crisis. Instead, they captured, through writing and acting brilliance, their interpretations of sixty individuals in crisis, perhaps providing a catharsis for themselves as actors, and for those of us in the audience who vicariously went along for the ride. It is a beautiful play, and in the end faith must be left with the audience. We know what they are trying to do; however, by rearranging, selecting, editing, sensationalizing, and broadcasting, *The Laramie Project* duplicates the structural mechanism of the place and time-bound reality that created the very situation its subject matter hopes to alleviate. Despite the widespread consumption of Shepard's fate—through multiple productions of the play as well as the HBO and NBC productions—the widespread rejection of gay rights, evidenced by the voters in the 2004 election, indicates that there has not been any awakening of the national conscience. Such an awakening must originate with the recognition that our current social structures support a culture of intolerance, hate, and violence. By elevating its status as “really real,” the play does not sufficiently critique the status quo and its privileged representations. The play did not move the nation to action; but it did make us—real audience members—feel better by showing us that other real people feel bad, too.

## Notes

1. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, “Revenge of the Dead Subject,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (2000): 382. The authors would like to thank Stacy Holman Jones, Mark Neumann, and Elizabeth Bell for their helpful advice and feedback.

2. HBO's *The Laramie Project* debuted on March 9, 2002.

3. Richard Schechner, “Mainstream Theatre and Performance Studies,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 44 (2000): 6.

4. For a comprehensive survey of performance styles see Norman Denzin, *Interpretive*

*Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997) and *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage 2003). For a discussion of natural performance, see Nathan Stucky, "Towards an Aesthetics of Natural Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 168-80.<sup>5</sup> For ethnodrama, see Jim Mienczakowski, "The Theatre of Ethnography: The Reconstruction of Ethnography into Theatre with Emancipatory Potential," *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (1995): 360-75. For conversational dramatism, see Robert Hopper, "Conversational Dramatism and Everyday Life Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 13 (1993): 181-83. For presentational theatre, Robert Donmoyer and Judith Yennie-Donmoyer, "Data as Drama: Reflections on the Use of Reader's Theatre as an Artistic Mode of Data Display," *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (1995): 402-408. For staged oral history, Ryan Claycomb, "(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17 (2003): 95-122. For collective storytelling, Laurel Richardson, "Narrative and Sociology," *Representation in Ethnography*, ed. John Van Maanen (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1990).

5. We are borrowing this term from Ryan Claycomb, who uses it to describe the work of Anna Devere Smith. See Claycomb 98.

6. Kristen Langellier, "Personal Narrative, Performance, and Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19 (1999): 125.

7. Claycomb reviews many contemporary examples of documentary theatre and the practice of staged oral histories, including the work of Anna Devere Smith and Emily Mann, and problematizes the issues of authority, voice, and notions of "truth."

8. See Lisa Tillmann-Healy, *Between Gay and Straight* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2001).

9. William Tynan and Richard Woodbury, "Voices from Laramie: A Troupe of Actors Became Reporters to Create a Unique Play about the Killing of Matthew Shepard," *Time* 8 May 2000: 86.

10. Information culled from Des McNuff, "From the Artistic Director," and Moisés Kaufman (director), "Sadness, Beauty and Revelations: A Note on the Development of *The Laramie Project*," *Stagebill* (La Jolla Playhouse, August 2001).

11. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (1939; New York: Perennial, 1998) 121.

12. See especially Amy Tigner, "The Laramie Project: Western Pastoral," *Modern Drama* 45 (2002): 150-3. In a section of her essay titled "Identity and Character," Tigner explains how "identity problems associated with the production of narrative" were evident in the responses to the production and subsequent publicity by "characters" and Laramie residents "Doc" O'Connor and Harry Woods.

13. We [Foster and Baglia] wince at the trap of terminology here—that we are designating the participants in this project as "characters." Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theatre Project, *The Laramie Project* (New York: Vintage, 2001) 26.

14. In an intriguing twist on the question of representation, Laramie citizen and "character," Jedediah Schultz actually played himself and several other characters (including Aaron McKinney) in a production of *The Laramie Project* in Denver, Colorado. See Barbara Bannon, "Humanizing the Headlines: Plan B's The Laramie Project," *The Event* 2 (August 2001), online 9 October 2001, <<http://www.planbtheatrecompany.org/laramiereview.html>>.



15. In a postcard received in July 2004 from Dramatists Play Service—the foremost distributor of play scripts and performance rights in the United States—*The Laramie Project* is listed as #12 of the top fifty bestsellers. The TTP website reports that the play “is the second most performed play in America.” See “About Us,” *Tectonic Theatre Project Page* (2001), online 3 December 2004 <<http://tectonictheatreproject.org/About.htm>>.

16. Another of Stephen Belber’s plays, *Tape*, has been produced as a film (starring Robert Sean Leonard, Uma Thurman, and Ethan Hawke) and played at the Sundance Film Festival during the summer of 2001.

17. Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities; Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*) also uses the methods described here. In an interview with Kay Ellen Capo and Kristin Langellier, Deavere Smith describes the process of publishing the text to her performances and anticipates its eventual re-production by other individuals and theatre troupes. Capo suggests, “. . . people who don’t know these individuals as a kind of *body-text*, the way you do, would then possibly be performing them from literary texts.” The interview at this point, described by Capo as a “rather uncomfortable line of questioning,” demonstrates the ethical quagmire between research ethics, subsequent representation, and attempting to advance social awareness/cultural criticism through this kind of aesthetic performance. See Kay Ellen Capo and Kristin Langellier, “Review/Interview: Anna Deavere Smith,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 14 (1994): 57-76.

18. Robert Brustein, “On Theatre: The Staged Documentary,” *The New Republic* 19 June 2000: 29.

19. Stucky 169.

20. 170.

21. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography*, 90-102.

22. Kaufman and Tectonic xiv. This point is also articulated by Amy Tigner who writes, “relationships are created by how they are positioned next to each other in the overall narrative structure . . . what the audience is asked to understand as unmitigated truth is, nevertheless, a highly constructed order of words that creates a dramatic piece of theatre” (Tigner 169).

23. See, for example, narrative ethnographers, such as Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, “Transforming Qualitative Research Methods: Is It a Revolution?” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24 (1995): 349-58; Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, *Composing Ethnography* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1996); and Laurel Richardson, “Writing as a Method of Inquiry,” *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994): 516-29. For theatre scholars’ critiques, see especially Claycomb and Tigner.

24. Claycomb 98 and 99.

25. “Goings on About Town: Theatre,” *The New Yorker* 4 September 2000: 20.

26. Don Shewey, “Town in a Mirror,” *American Theatre* 17 (May/June 2000): 14-18, 67-69.

27. The Stageworks venue was significantly smaller than the La Jolla Playhouse but, interestingly enough, was also on the site of an institution of higher education: the downtown campus of a community college. We bought our tickets from two women working a card table in the foyer of the building. In terms of staging, this production was similarly scaled-down—no live-feed cameras, no rain falling from

the grid, and far less sophisticated lighting.

28. Stageworks production of *The Laramie Project*, Hillsborough Community College Theatre, Tampa, Florida, September 7 to 23, 2001.

29. Kaufman and Tectonic xii.

30. 67.

31. Telephone interview with Anna Brennan, 7 October 2001.

32. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography* 274-5.

33. Kaufman and Tectonic 98.

34. 6.

35. Speaking for the audience is, of course, a problem for any cultural critic. We recognize that interpreting on behalf of an audience has the capacity to silence other audience members. The audiences who witnessed alongside us the performances in La Jolla and Tampa are testament to diversity both across and within audiences. Throughout this essay, we note our own most prevalent lenses—those of performance studies scholar and ethnographer—and acknowledge that while other readings of *The Laramie Project* abound, the act of criticism necessitates the staking of our particular point of view on this play. For an extended treatment of this issue, see Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-1992): 5-32; and Linda Park-Fuller, “Audiencing the Audience: Playback Theatre, Performative Writing, and Social Activism,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23 (July 2003): 288-310.

36. The phrase belongs to Kenneth Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: U of California P, 1974) 293-304. Burke suggests that literature supplies us with equipment for living—scenarios, scripts, occasion, and circumstances that foreshadow events in life. For example, a novel that describes the heartbreak that comes with a failed relationship can help us anticipate such an experience in our own lives.

37. The other three schools chosen for this HBO preview were New York University, UCLA, and the University of Texas at Austin.

38. Christopher Carbone, “Picturing Matthew Shepard,” *New York Press* 15 (2002), online, 20 April 2002 <<http://www.nypress.com/15/10/nyc3.cfm>>.

39. JoAnn Wypijewski, “A Boy’s Life: For Matthew Shepard’s Killer, What Does It Take to Pass a Man?” *Harper’s Magazine* 299 (September 1999): 61-74.

40. 62.

41. *Mother Courage and Her Children*—by Bertold Brecht—is the story of a woman who profits from war. Over the course of the play, each of her three children dies, yet she continues her profiteering, undaunted by her losses. She is called Mother Courage because she remains calm while protecting her wares, even when under enemy fire

42. David Bradby and David Williams, *Directors’ Theatre* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988) 18-19.

43. Anne Midgette, “Responding to Crisis, Art Must Look Beyond It,” *New York Times* 3 March 2002, sec. 2: 1, 8.

44. Arthur Miller, quoted in Midgette 8.

45. Barbara Tedlock, “Ethnography and Ethnographic Representation,” *The Handbook of*

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*Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994): 455.