

*The Laramie Project*  
Audience Dramaturgy Packet  
Brandeis Theater Department

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## **Dramaturg's Note**

While anxiously watching the election results in the past week, one line from *The Laramie Project* that kept coming back to me was “We are like this.” It is spoken by Zubaida Ula in Act 2, responding to the statements at the candle vigil saying that Matthew Shepard’s murder was not representative of Laramie’s values. Given recent events, I understand Ula’s sentiment of wanting to confront the ugly, hateful parts of our society, rather than trying to push them aside. As the United States attempts to move onto a presidency that does not include the harmful, disgusting rhetoric and policies of our current leaders, we need to acknowledge that the presence homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, and ableism are just as much a part of our society as the fight against these forms of hate. “We ARE like this.” Part of *The Laramie Project*’s continued significance today is in showing us the worst, most ugly and hateful parts of our society, right next to some of the most beautiful and refusing to disregard either part.

In this dramaturgy packet, we have attempted to show how *The Laramie Project* has left a permanent impact on the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights in the past 20 years. It is important to note that some of the biggest strides forward were only achieved after some of the largest tragedies. We have also assembled resources for people who would like further help in dealing with the issues the play confronts.

**“Biden won the presidency, and yet 70 million people voted for Trump. We’re in a very divided country and the play speaks of that division.”**

**-Moisés Kaufman**

## **Moment Work**

How do we tell stories onstage in a way that makes the most of the particular strengths of theater as a medium? How can we utilize the many ways the elements of the stage communicate, in order to tell stories that move us emotionally, viscerally, and sensorially as well as intellectually?

Moment Work™ is the process we've used at Tectonic to address these questions. Used to create classic works such as *The Laramie Project*, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and *33 Variations*, Moment Work™ explores the theatrical potential of all the elements of the stage (props, sound, architecture, lights, costume, etc.) in order to create strong theatrical and dramatic narratives. The technique is our attempt to create theatrical narratives from the ground up—in other words, to “write performance” as opposed to “writing text.” When we start work on a new play, we start with an idea, or a “hunch,” and then we go into the rehearsal room to explore it through Moment Work™. In this way, company members are encouraged to dream about the material they find compelling in a theatrical setting. Moment Work™ gives us the freedom to create individual, self-contained theatrical units (Moments) and then sequence these units together into theatrical phrases or sentences that will eventually become a play.

Source: [tectonictheaterproject.org](http://tectonictheaterproject.org)

*The Laramie Project: A 20+ Year Legacy*

“What’s come out of this that’s concrete or lasting?” -Jonas Slonaker

**February 27, 1997-** Tectonic Theater Project premieres *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, a play about Oscar Wilde’s trials around being gay. The financial success of this play went on to help fund *The Laramie Project*.

**October 6-7, 1998** - Matthew Shepard is tied to a fence and beaten near Laramie, Wyoming. He is eventually found by a cyclist, who initially mistakes him for a scarecrow. He later dies due to his injuries sustained in the beating.

**October 9, 1998** - Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney from Laramie, Wyoming, make their first court appearance after being arrested for the attempted murder of Shepard. Eventually, they each receive two life sentences for killing Shepard.

**November 14, 1998-** Members of the Tectonic Theater Project travelled to Laramie, Wyoming to begin conducting interviews that would ultimately lead to the creation of *The Laramie Project*.

**February 26, 2000-** *The Laramie Project* premieres at the Denver Center Theatre Company. It then transfers to the Union Square Theatre in New York City.

**April 26, 2000-** Vermont becomes the first state in the U.S. to legalize civil unions and registered partnerships between same-sex couples.

**June 26, 2003-** In *Lawrence v. Texas* the U.S. Supreme Court rules that sodomy laws in the U.S. are unconstitutional.

**May 18, 2004-** Massachusetts becomes the first state to legalize gay marriage. The court finds the prohibition of gay marriage unconstitutional because it denies dignity and equality of all individuals.

In the following six years, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Iowa and Washington D.C. will follow suit.

**August 9, 2007-** Sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign, the Logo cable channel hosts the first American presidential forum focusing specifically on LGBT issues, inviting each presidential candidate. Six Democrats participate in the forum, including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, while all Republican candidates decline.

**November 4, 2008-** California voters approve Proposition 8, making same-sex marriage in California illegal. The passing of the ballot garners national attention from gay-rights supporters across the U.S. Prop 8 inspires the NOH8 campaign, a photo project that uses celebrities to promote marriage equality.

**June 17, 2009-** President Obama signs a Presidential Memorandum allowing same-sex partners of federal employees to receive certain benefits. The memorandum does not cover full health coverage.

**October 12, 2009-** *The Laramie Project: 10 Year Later* premieres simultaneously in 150 theaters around the world. It was created from interviews with many of the same people from the original *Laramie Project*

**October 28, 2009-** The Matthew Shepard Act is passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama on October 28th. The measure expands the 1969 U.S. Federal Hate Crime Law to include crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

**August 4, 2010-** A federal judge in San Francisco decides that gays and lesbians have the constitutional right to marry and that Prop 8 is unconstitutional. Lawyers will challenge the finding.

**September 22, 2010-** College student, Tyler Clementi commits suicide after being cyberbullied for being gay. He was outed by his roommate on Twitter and then tormented online.

**December 18, 2010-** The U.S. Senate votes 65-31 to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the U.S. Military.

**February 23, 2011-** President Obama states his administration will no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act, which bans the recognition of same-sex marriage.

**June 24, 2011-** New York State passes the Marriage Equity Act, becoming the largest state thus far to legalize gay marriage.

**June 26, 2015-** With a 5-4 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court declares same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

**June 24, 2016** - Obama announces the designation of the first national monument to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) rights. The Stonewall National Monument will encompass Christopher Park, the Stonewall Inn and the surrounding streets and sidewalks that were the sites of the 1969 Stonewall uprising.

**June 30, 2016** - Secretary of Defense Carter announces that the Pentagon is lifting the ban on transgender people serving openly in the US military.

**February 26, 2018** - The Pentagon confirms that the first transgender person has signed a contract to join the US military.

**March 23, 2018** - The Trump administration announces a new policy that bans most transgender people from serving in military. After several court battles, the Supreme Court allows the ban to go into effect in January 2019.

**June 30, 2019** - New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signs a law banning the use of the so-called gay and trans panic legal defense strategy. The tactic asks a jury to find that a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for a defendant's violent reaction. New York follows California, Rhode Island, Illinois, Nevada and Connecticut as the sixth state to pass such a law.

**June 15, 2020** - The Supreme Court rules that federal law protects LGBTQ workers from discrimination. The landmark ruling extends protections to millions of workers nationwide and is a defeat for the Trump administration, which argued that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act that bars discrimination based on sex did not extend to claims of gender identity and sexual orientation.

**August 26, 2020** - The 4th Circuit Court of Appeals rules in favor of former student, Gavin Grimm. in a more than four-year fight over restroom policies for transgender students. The ruling states that policies segregating transgender students from their peers is unconstitutional and violate federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education. The decision relies in part on the Supreme Court's decision in June 2020, stating that discrimination against people based on their gender identity or sexual orientation violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

**November 3, 2020** - The general election results in three legislative firsts. Sarah McBride wins the Senate race for Delaware District 1, and will become the nation's first person who publicly identifies as transgender to serve as a state senator. Ritchie Torres wins the House race for New York District 15, and will become the first Black member of Congress who identifies as gay.

Mauree Turner wins the race for Oklahoma state House for District 88, and will become the first nonbinary state legislator in US history and first Muslim lawmaker in Oklahoma.

Sources:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/stonewall-milestones-american-gay-rights-movement/>

<https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/lgbt-rights-milestones-fast-facts/index.html>

Tectonictheaterproject.org

<https://tylerclementi.org/tylers-story/>



# People and Places

## Members of the Company:



Stephen Belber



Moises Kaufman



Leigh Fondakowski



Greg Pierotti



Barbara Pitts



Amanda Gronich



Andy Paris

Residents of Laramie and Major Characters:



Dennis and Judy Shepherd



UW President Philip Dubois

Philip Dubois



Rulon Stacy



Romaine Patterson



Matt Galloway



Catherine Connolly



Rebecca Hilliker



Russel Henderson



Aaron McKinney



Zackie Salmon





Detective Rob DeBree (in blue)



Reggie Fluty

Notable Places in Laramie:



The Fireside Bar



Best Western in Laramie



Main Street



The Jaded Lair (Trish Steger's Coffee

Shop)





St. Mark's Episcopal Church



Iverson Memorial Hospital



The Fence

# Brandeis Community Interviews

## Interview with Dr. Brian Horton, Department of Anthropology:

1. What has changed over the last 20 years since Matthew Shephard's death?

“I think the emergence of a much more organized gay rights movement which has secured marriage rights, anti-discrimination rights (in some states), etc among many other personal rights has been a major gain. Additionally there has been much more inclusive representation of LGBT characters in film, television, politics etc. These issues have also become much more global with larger amounts of resources being invested into global LGBTQ movements and much stronger global organizing. There has also been the emergence of transgender organizing as well as the proliferation of categories of gender identities.”

2. What is the significance of this event in LGBTQIA+ history? Why do you think this hate crime had the impact that it did?

“I think it was the brutality of the crime itself. It was also Matthew Sheppard's persona. As a good looking, white, nice small town boy, I think it really gripped people in a way. I would argue that his queerness was part of the issue but also that his whiteness could enable him to be legible as innocent and undeserving of violence. This is not to diminish the tragedy of his murder but to suggest that other aspects of his identity enhanced the story and allowed it to become a kind of lightning rod for political organizing.”

3. Why is now an important time to perform this play and reflect on this event?

“It's a reminder that the battles for LGBTQ+ inclusion have been hardwon and are in fact nowhere near over. These crimes are still happening, particularly to black trans women in the US. I think that his story needs to be updated, retold to interact with this history as well. Matt Shephard still stands as the sort of penultimate narrative of anti LGBTQ violence, when in reality there are multiple marginalized figures whose stories are not told, but often silenced.”

## Interview with Adrienne Krystansky, Department of Theatre Arts:

1. What has changed over the last 20 years since Matthew Shephard's death?

“I think Moises Kaufman made a great point about a divided nation. We are polarized - and this play is about a group of NY actors who go to Laramie - with all their preconceived notions about who they were and had their minds completely opened. It is

an inspiration for healing and conversation - as we launch into a time of healing a divide in our country. How did that crime happen - what about that town allowed that crime to happen...and how has the town changed...that question also resonates for me in terms of racial violence.”

2. What is the significance of this event in LGBTQIA+ history? Why do you think this hate crime had the impact that it did?

“I am not exactly sure but what comes to my mind is actually the place where American theater is now - and how that play resonates. Our production is being done with a multi-racial cast. Laramie, WY is predominantly white - and the documentary style supposed a certain 'truthfulness'. But in the 20 year aftermath - the format of the play actually becomes a testament to how we gather and create community conversation about perhaps difficult topics. How we talk about difficult topics and how we allow ourselves to see the true humanity of those who harm us or disagree with us - and find a way to co-exist with respect and support. So in some ways, replicating Laramie Wy becomes less important (perhaps?) than the event of how the play came to be - and the kinds of conversations and connections artists and audiences are invited into via the creation and performance.”

3. Why is now an important time to perform this play and reflect on this event?

“I am not a member of the LGBTIA+ community so I have a limited perspective. I was in my 20's and lost many friends to AIDS. I remember when Matthew Shepard was killed. I remember gay friends of mine being assulted on the streets of Chicago. I guess one of the most memorable and 'shaping' parts of the play for me is Matthew Shepard's parents. Their mercy in the face of inconceivable pain. I started to understand what it might take to come out to one's parents and family, what it would mean to not have to live in secret, to know unconditional acceptance - and also the opposite - to be disowned. I started thinking more about that. I also wonder what we think about Matthew Shepard being white and coming from a white community - and how BIPOC folks who are LGBTIA+ see or do not see themselves in this story.”

# Related Organizations

## **The Matthew Shepard Foundation**

On October 7, 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming, was brutally attacked and tied to a fence in a field outside of Laramie, Wyoming and left to die. On October 12, Matt succumbed to his wounds in a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado.

In the aftermath of Matt's death, his parents, Judy and Dennis Shepard, started the Matthew Shepard Foundation to honor his life and aspirations. Inspired by the tragedy they endured, the initial purpose of the Foundation was to teach parents with children who may be questioning their sexuality to love and accept them for who they are, and to not throw them away.

Through their personal appearances across the country and around the world, Judy and Dennis Shepard are changing hearts and minds by sharing Matt's story and highlighting the importance of standing up for the LGBT community.

Since our formation, the Foundation has helped pioneer the country's first federal hate crimes legislation with the passing of Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009; provided hate crimes training to 1,060 law enforcement officers and 76 prosecutors since May 2017; created dialogue about hate and acceptance within communities around the world; and built a robust collection of resources to support the Laramie Project and other legacy works inspired by Matt's story.

**It is our sincerest hope that, one day, the Foundation may be able to close its doors. But the same hate and violence that sparked the Foundation's formation still exists today, both at home and abroad. We will continue to work tirelessly to ensure safety, visibility, and inclusiveness for the entire LGBT community until that ideal becomes reality.**

Source: <https://www.matthewshepard.org/about-us/our-story/>

# Resources at Brandeis University

## **Gender and Sexuality Center**

“The Gender and Sexuality Center provides leadership and expertise on diversity, equity, and inclusion; education and training on LGBTQ+ identities; and community and resources for LGBTQ+ people and allies.”

<https://www.brandeis.edu/gender-sexuality-center/index.html>

## **Brandeis Counseling Center**

The Brandeis Counseling Center offers community therapy, counseling, referrals, resource recommendations, and other mental health services.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/counseling/>

## **Compiled Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer Resources**

A list of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer resources compiled by Thomas A. King, associate professor in the Brandeis University English Department.

[http://people.brandeis.edu/~tking/lgbtiq\\_resources.html](http://people.brandeis.edu/~tking/lgbtiq_resources.html)

## **Office of Equal Opportunity**

“The Office of Equal Opportunity is responsible for addressing all issues of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence within the Brandeis community.”

At the Office of Equal Opportunity, you can be connected with resources and/or file a report relating to discrimination, harrassment, or sexual violence.

<https://www.brandeis.edu/equal-opportunity/>

## **Prevention, Advocacy, and Resource Center**

“Providing education, empowerment and support related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating/domestic violence and stalking. The Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center is a confidential, student-centered resource serving members of the Brandeis community who have been impacted by violence and those who want to contribute to the anti-violence movement.”

<https://www.brandeis.edu/parc/index.html#Prevention,%20Advocacy,%20and%20Resource%20Center>