

FORT MYERS — There are some devastating moments in the Lab Theater's production of "The Laramie Project." The audience quiets. Every squeak is a cannon. I can feel tears on my face. Yet, the two and a half hour show never consistently sustains that level. The night is good. I wanted it to be great.

"The Laramie Project" chronicles the reaction of the titular Wyoming town to the 1998 murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. The play was created by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project. Eight actors play more than 60 different characters. The play is broken into three acts made up of dozens of short scenes and monologues taken from hundreds of interviews conducted with Laramie residents over a period of several months.

Director Louise Wigglesworth has an eye for detail - and a gift for getting the most out of her amateur cast. Stripped of the ability to create major sets for dozens of scenes, her actors handle acres of props and closets of costumes - creating characters with little more than a policeman's badge, a greasy wrench, a cowboy hat or a rugged Western shirt. To a degree, the tactic is highly effective, especially when limited to items the cast can pick up or grab quickly.

In a bid to to keep the evening from being just a rotating series of speeches, Wigglesworth crafts various tableaux. Chairs, boxes and a makeshift stand serve as everything from store counter to bar - and help the actors give depth to scenes.

The director clearly wants her audience to focus on the characters - the people behind the words. All too often though, the frequent ebb and flow of clothes and stage

dressing (not to mention the constant entrances and exits from the cast) simply feels like an distraction from the powerful prose.

One place where Wigglesworth's approach seems the most effective is the degree to which some themes - particularly religion - rise out of the show. I've read the play three times and watched the HBO tele-movie twice; it wasn't until Friday when I saw the number of religious images - preachers, Catholic dog collars, winged angels, Muslim head scarves - that I recognized the deep threads of faith that tie the show together. Other themes that pop include Laramie's deep sense of community and more subtly - a love for the clean spaces of the wide open West.

The night's best scenes - like Jack Philip Weld's monologue as an elderly gay man witnessing a parade, or Wil Harbison's gleeful theater student making a journey toward self-discovery - arrive with little more than a spotlight and a bare stage. Other, quieter conversations, like Patricia Clopton and Lori Siebert Moreau's mother-daughter moment, resonate because they're not fighting for attention with anything else the stage.

The power of "Laramie" lies in its brutal but straightforward honesty. The play serves up the innermost thoughts of Laramie's residents in how they reacted to a horrific crime - and the show doesn't need artifice - like a tricky gimmick with a real TV camera - to illustrate that.

The cast delivers their dialogue with grace, skill and passion. They flow from character to character - sometimes within seconds - with ease. Given the skill of the remarkably solid ensemble and the depth of the script, the show succeeds

best with little more than its cornflower blue backdrop (a nod to the Wyoming sky), a bare minimum of props and the ever-present fence that looms over the action.

Weld is a standout, especially as eloquent parade-watcher Harry Woods and in the part of hospital administrator Rulon Stacey. Lucy Harris excels in several roles, notably as friend-turned-activist Romaine Patterson, who faced down Westboro Baptist Church preacher Fred Phelps, who picketed the funeral and trials. Look for Gabriela Elvir in a brief monologue as the conservative wife of a highway patrolman.

Steve Chase delivers perhaps the play's most emotional gut punch as he reads a statement prepared by Dennis Shepard for the trial of Aaron McKinney. With every window and door closed and the air conditioner running at full blast, you could still hear the wind outside as Chase read the words, in a raspy voice, "I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives."

"The Laramie Project" delivers much of the promise - and power - of Moises Kaufman's work. The show brings the room to an absolute hush more than once - and the biggest moments brim with an emotion that almost makes you afraid to breathe. There's the nagging suspicion that less would have been (much) more in many spots, but the message slices through. If you don't leave moved in some way, check for a pulse.

In memory of Matthew. Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).

