

## **Hope and healing in Beckman's The Laramie Project**

written by Cameron Newman, a senior at San Juan Hills High School

Laramie, Wyoming is a small city that minds its business until the unthinkable happens. When the brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard thrusts Laramie into the international spotlight, its residents are forced to confront their values.

Based on journal entries, news reports, and over 200 interviews conducted by members of the Tectonic Theatre Project, "The Laramie Project" is a documentary-style play that reflects on the impact of Matthew's death, both in his community and the world. Poignant and heartfelt, the play promotes a message of tolerance and truth.

Katie Marting portrays Aaron, the cyclist who discovered Matthew. Her shaky, closed-off physicality and timorous voice indicate Aaron's lasting trauma, and her horror is almost palpable as she hysterically recounts how helpless Aaron felt. She shows a different side as Romaine, a lesbian and Matthew's good friend. Initially upbeat and self-possessed, her confident posture begins to crumble when she hears the news. Yet her intensity never wavers; her defiant tone maintains its potency as even as she faces homophobic picketers.

Ryan Puterbaugh navigates the emotional peak of the show with immense poise and control. As Dennis Shepard, he fights back tears while he delivers a gut-wrenching speech on sparing Matthew's killer from the death penalty. With every quiver, pause, and tremulous breath, Puterbaugh drives home the power of choosing healing over hate.

The cast works seamlessly as an ensemble, feeding off each other's emotional energy to keep the show smoothly paced and consistently engaging. Cast members combat long stretches of onstage time with solemn yet sincere active listening, complementing their peers' stories without pulling focus. Also notable was the cast's effective use of pantomime to bring the story to life: in a bar scene, actors convincingly mime playing pool and holding cups, while in other scenes actors handle invisible letters.

Costumes by Ashe Wilkison and the cast aid in distinguishing the multiple characters that actors play. With a neutral black base, actors fluidly swap between statement pieces, including everything from a leather jacket to a hijab to prison garb. Publicity by Julia Ashpes and Axel Evensen gets creative, facilitating a spirit week and hosting an open mic night to promote the show.

With powerhouse acting and effective technical elements, Beckman's "The Laramie Project" is a testament to the importance of fighting for love and acceptance the face of suffering and indifference.