Proposal for *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project

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*The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project has become as much a theatrical touch point and cultural landmark as the tragic event that inspired it. In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old University of Wyoming student, was abducted by two men and driven to a remote area east of Laramie. They tied him to a split-rail fence, pistol-whipped him, and left him for dead. He was discovered 18 hours later by a bicyclist who initially mistook him for a scarecrow. Matthew died five days later. In his confession, one of the killers admitted freely that his motivation was simple: Matthew was gay. Matthew Shepard’s death changed the national conversation about hate in America, and eventually led to the passage of legislation that designated bias crimes against LGBT individuals as hate crimes under federal law. The conversation has continued, with increased national attention being paid to bullying (particularly cyber-bullying), the handling of hate crimes on college campuses, and the assurance of civil rights for LGBT individuals.

Created from a series of interviews conducted with the townspeople of Laramie, *The Laramie Project* captures the complex, interwoven lives of a community struggling with tragedy. The audience hears not only from Matthew’s friends and family, but from friends of his murderers, from residents shocked by this explosion of hatred in their community, from University of Wyoming faculty and students. Still powerful and revealing after fifteen years, the play speaks of its moment with immediacy. The members of the theater share their journal entries along with verbatim interviews and news coverage of the events. As a piece of literature, it is highly readable and rich with varying viewpoints that can be explored in class discussion, writing assignments and accompanying events.

Should this play be selected, the theatre program is committed to producing it and providing live performances on all three campuses, to ensure students can experience the live performance in addition to the text. The production, however, is only one possible event for contextualizing this text inside a much larger cultural dialogue in which we all participate. *The Laramie Project* provides the opportunity for reflection on the changes in our culture in the fifteen years since Matthew Shepard’s death, as well as an honest assessment of how far we still have to go.

A production of *The Laramie Project* at Ole Miss this past fall highlights the continued importance of this play. One evening’s performance of a student production became an object example of the persistence of homophobia and xenophobia in our culture, as audience members began to hurl homophobic comments at the stage, take pictures of actors, and yell out insults based on actors’ weight and race. The ignorance and hatred that came to a head outside Laramie in 1998 is still very much a part of the experience of many of our students. *The Laramie Project* provides an accessible and powerful catalyst for interrogating that experience and participating in a larger conversation to abolish it.
From School Library Journal:

“This remarkable play takes the form of a series of juxtaposed monologues, culled from hundreds of interviews that the authors conducted with residents of Laramie, WY, after the fatal beating of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Additional speeches are taken from journals the authors kept while they were involved in this project. From these fragments, a powerful whole is created, giving readers and audiences a full and shimmering picture of a quiet town suddenly thrust into the media spotlight and hastily branded as "backward." Shepard's friends are heard from, as are the friends of his convicted killers. Masterfully woven together to breathtaking effect are statements from Laramie's religious leaders-some of whom condemn the murder, others of whom condemn the victim. A thoughtful and moving theatrical tour de force.”

Possible events, explorations and partnerships include:

- Members of Tectonic Theatre Company (based in NYC) could come to campus to teach their “moment” technique—used to create Laramie Project. These techniques could yield fruitful assignments in Theatre, Writing, Communication Studies, and other courses across the disciplines.
- A whole range of on campus (and possibly high school) outreach and education activities on bullying and homophobia.
- A reading of Laramie: Ten Years Later, which was the sequel to the play, again created by Tectonic after visiting Laramie.
- The School of Justice has significant resources for leading college-wide discussions of hate crimes and issues in fighting and preventing them.
- The School of Health Professions may wish to sponsor events exploring the significant research on homophobia as a public health issue and its disproportionate impact on certain communities.
- Rainbow Clubs on all three campuses can lead events.
- Stop the Hate, a national educational initiative to prevent hate and bias crimes on college campuses, provides resources and speakers (in partnership with the Matthew Shepard Foundation).
- Talk-backs and cultural conversations with area community leaders responding to the performances can be arranged with clergy, lawyers, activists, community organizers and others.