



Interview with Leigh Fondakowski

By ShowBizQ

Now over a decade since Matthew Shepard was tragically murdered in the town of Laramie, Wyoming, the company at the Tectonic Theatre Project will present and publish an epilogue to its poignant theatrical retelling, *The Laramie Project*. Leigh Fondakowski, head writer of *The Laramie Project*, *The People's Temple*, and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, sits down with Michael J. Roberts & Alissa Norby to discuss the process of revisiting one of the most heinous hate crimes in our nation's history.

Q: (ShowBizQ) So what was the experience of revisiting Laramie?

LF: Well the experience going back was very emotional because it was a time for all of us to reflect again on what happened to Matthew [Shepard]. Some of our ties there are very deep; we've stayed in touch with many of the people in Laramie over the course of the ten years so there's a certain nostalgia for us in going back. But there were some surprising things too. Laramie has changed significantly in terms of development. It's changing from the smaller town feel to a more bustling place.

Q: Have attitudes changed amongst its citizens?

LF: I think that people are very aware. The way people think and the things that they might have said in the past- comments about gay people, derogatory things- people are more mindful. But in measuring change, do we measure that on an individual case-by-case basis or do you look to a more general marker, such as hate crime legislation or domestic partner benefits at the university? In that respect it was difficult for us to really see much concrete change. It was more on the personal, individual, nuanced level. A fair share of people said that they had moved on, didn't want to talk about it anymore. A surprising number said it was a robbery gone bad, and that it wasn't a hate crime. So we're grappling with a re-writing of history, and the ways that people choose to re-write history, and how history ultimately gets told.

Q: In a recent interview, Sally Palmer stated that if you go into a Walmart in Laramie and ask individuals who Matthew Shepard was, most will respond "Who's that?"

LF: Right, one of our interviewees said that a certain segment of the population will not say who Matthew Shepard is. There is a certain amount of forgetting absolutely. We did confront that, but we also confronted people in Laramie who were equally as devastated that people were forgetting Matthew Shepard. [These] people wanted to stand up and say, "We have not forgotten this. We still remember."

Q: What inspired you initially to co-create an epilogue to the piece?

LF: When we came back from Laramie and put *The Laramie Project* together in New York, it was a company-driven event. There wasn't a thought that the play would be performed beyond the original company and the original group that traveled there. So in the subsequent years when *The Laramie Project* exploded and became one of the most produced plays in the country, we felt that there was this incredible community. Millions of people have been touched by Laramie in some way. Moises [Kaufman] gathered us all together and [inquired] about checking in ten years later to share with all the people who have been touched [in this respect]. I don't think any of us expected people to be changing the version of the story or to be trying to erase what nationally was very clearly a watershed moment in our history. But there is this distancing that is going on in Laramie.

Q: How do you gain the continued trust of the community and your interviewees, especially with such a devastating crime in its history?

LF: There's always been a trust with us that was earned in many respects in our first trip. The media subsequently came and portrayed Laramie in a certain light that they were very stunned by. But we came after and spent more time trying to understand Laramie in a more complete or nuanced way. People felt they were represented more broadly in The Laramie Project. So there was a respect there for our work.

Q: What is the writing process like with so many collaborators? How do you amass the interviews together?

LF: It's a very dynamic process. We have a long history. So the way we write together as a group has also been developing for ten years. We share material with each other, we do individual writing and editing, and there are moments when the group mind takes over. We talk about structure, form, content. We challenge and fight one another when we feel there is something to fight over. It's unlike any other process I've been in with regard to collaboration. Moises [Kaufman] holds the position of "uber-mind", so he'll continuously pose the big questions and keep us thinking structurally. But I think because we have such a history with this model, we are constantly figuring out how to improve it. There's a strong sense of community, and an even stronger sense of trust. It's really quite an extraordinary process.

Q: Let's talk about The People's Temple. You humanized the occurrence and progression of this event in our nation's history.

LF: One of the things we try to do in our work is the re-examining of history and trying to find a role for theatre in dialogue concerning history and current events. When I came to that story all I knew was the bodies lying face down in the jungle. But when I started to investigate I learned so much about the movement, and I thought to myself, why didn't I know this? Why isn't this part of history that is common knowledge? So that was the impetus to go in there and make that play. It was a much more challenging piece to create than Laramie because of the scope of the story. But I felt it was an important story to tell.

Q: In both The Laramie Project and The People's Temple, the writing never once questions or beckons the audience to make judgment.

LF: People are vulnerable and have made choices in their lives that we may or may not agree with, and the fact that they've been silenced in history is significant. They don't have a voice; they're thought of as the blind followers of Jim Jones. The more we got to know them, the more they wanted us to know that it was about him but also about all this other history. There was a need to give a voice to the voiceless.

Q: Why do you believe communities have the need to view hate crimes as isolated incidents?

LF: That's an interesting question. One of the things that people keep saying in Laramie that we're trying to understand is "Well, this could happen anywhere. So why point the finger at Laramie?" Instead of saying let's make Laramie a model to fix things so that they don't happen, why does it become a mechanism by which we distance ourselves from the event? I don't have an answer. But it's one of the questions that the epilogue poses. A lot of people say "A hate crime is a hate crime, you murder someone you hate them. What's the difference between this hate crime and other hate crimes?" Sexuality and gender are [not protected] under hate crime law. So we still can't technically call Matthew Shepard's murder a hate crime to this day. That legislation has been going around the Houses for a decade, but nothing has been signed into law.

Q: There are so many youth, specifically LGBT youth, who do not know about Matthew Shepard or

are unfamiliar with his story. How do you hope the epilogue will reinitiate dialogue among this demographic?

LF: One of the things we're grappling with dramaturgically is whether or not the epilogue will be a stand alone play. We've been testing it with young people in the audience who do not know anything about Matthew Shepard or the original play. These kids were not born when he was murdered, and they are shocked when they find out about it. But they feel much more empowered than I do, or a lot of the gay people in my generation do. They really feel like this is so wrong, and it's so obvious to them that things need to change. My experience is that the young people really feel that change is possible, and they feel that they are making change by making the play.

Q: Tell us about your new project.

LF: I'm working on a new play about the 19th century actress Charlotte Cushman. She was a famous actress in her day, the most famous in the world. Little is known about her, but she was a lesbian. She had many lovers in her life but she directed them to burn her love letters. All of the lovers did this except for one. So we're working with these letters to create a sort of Victorian-era lesbian love story. Again, we are addressing theatre's relationship to history.

The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later An Epilogue will be presented by About Face Theatre on October 12, 2009 at the Owen Theatre at the Goodman. For ticket information, including a special pre-performance gala reception, please [CLICK HERE](#)

For performance information in other cities throughout the United States, please visit <http://community.laramieproject.org>