

# Advocating for ***THE LARAMIE PROJECT*** at your school



Matthew  
Shepard  
Foundation  
embracing diversity

[www.MatthewShepard.org](http://www.MatthewShepard.org)

Several times each school year the Matthew Shepard Foundation receives a request for help from a drama teacher who wants to put on one of the **Laramie Project** plays but is facing pushback from administrators, the school board, or community members. Surely there are others who never reach out to us for help. This document collects the various arguments in favor of including the **Laramie Project Cycle** in a high school theater program.

When the Tectonic Theater was going about their interviews for the first **Laramie Project** play, Judy and Dennis Shepard were intent on protecting their family from the media frenzy surrounding Matt's death and his murderers' trials. Judy told me that at the time she had little awareness of the project, and her attitude was, "Well, do what you have to do." However, as the play was finished for the stage and its power became apparent, Judy, Dennis and the Foundation gave it their support; ever since, it has been a key element of Matt's legacy.

Of the many artistic works inspired by Matt's life and death, we support only a handful—because of their potential to start meaningful conversation and inspire audiences and readers to take action to Erase Hate and replace it with understanding, compassion and acceptance. You will see that these words from our Mission Statement are the underpinning of the advice in the following pages.

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## Resources Cited

*When read in its electronic form, this document is hyperlinked to the online resources mentioned or quoted. For those reading a print copy, here are all those resources, in order of mention:*

p3 Time magazine: <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,91443,00.html?iid=sr-link3>  
Tectonic FAQ document: <http://tectonictheaterproject.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/The-Laramie-Project-Cycle-FAQs.pdf>

p4 Tectonic FAQ popup: <http://tectonictheaterproject.org/Tectonic.html>  
Dramatists Play Service: <http://www.dramatists.com/>

p5 Anti-Defamation League "No Place for Hate": <https://www.adl.org/who-we-are/our-organization/signature-programs/no-place-for-hate>  
Teaching Tolerance publications: <http://www.tolerance.org/lets-talk> & <http://www.tolerance.org/publication/speak-school>

Facing History and Ourselves: "Transforming Schools": <https://www.facinghistory.org/transforming-schools>

p8 Arts Integrity Initiative: <http://www.artsintegrity.org/>  
Educational Theatre Association: <https://www.schooltheatre.org/home>  
International Thespian Society: <https://www.schooltheatre.org/internationalthespiansociety/home>  
Tectonic education department: <http://tectonictheaterproject.org/education/the-laramie-project-insights/>  
Matthew Shepard Foundation: <http://www.matthewshepard.org/laramie-project-support/>

# Why *this* play?

*The Laramie Project* has been one of the most-performed plays on American stages since shortly after it premiered in Denver in 2000. This is true of high school productions, as well: in school year 2016/17, MSF is aware of 56 high schools that produced the play—including four Washington High Schools, in Indiana, California, West Virginia and Colorado!

Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theater's play is meant to be "different" from more traditional stage performances. In 2000 [Time magazine](#) described what made the play a new kind of theater: "Kaufman is pioneering a new genre of theatrical reportage.... [He] is aiming for a more radical redefinition of what theater is capable of. The project, he says, 'taught me something about theater that I had never really felt. And that is the origin of theater is a community talking to itself.'" An [FAQ](#) on Tectonic Theater's website describes the

company's intent: "From a theatrical perspective, Tectonic was curious about what role theater artists can have in a national dialogue about current events."

*Laramie Project* is considered a contemporary exemplar of devised theater and documentary/verbatim theater. At such, the play represents the strong impulse in modern theater to engage audiences in dialogue and urge them to action based on their response to the performance. As Tectonic's FAQ puts it: "It is okay for theater to be controversial. The goal of The Laramie Project Cycle is to promote thoughtful discussion and give audiences the opportunity to hear many different points-of-view from those most associated with the murder of Matthew Shepard. Yes, there have been protests, but they only demonstrate the need for more education and conversation about the issues that are explored in the plays."

## The Laramie Project is award-winning

Humanitas Prize

The Obie

Lucille Lortel Award

Outer Critics Circle Award

GLAAD Media Award

Artistic Integrity Award  
from HRC

Making a Difference  
Award from the Matthew  
Shepard Foundation



## ***The Laramie Project* offers a challenge...**

### **...to the designers and stage crew**

The sparse physical sets challenge designers to imagine other ways to create a stage, and may encourage them to try new lighting, sound and projected media techniques. The openness of this challenge accommodates simple theaters with small budgets as well as state-of-the-art facilities with all the gadgetry.

### **...to the actors**

**Casting:** The play was originally performed by a cast of eight actors, each playing 5-11 characters. To replicate this would truly challenge the best

student actors, but the director also has great flexibility to divide the roles among a larger group of students, providing performance opportunities for less-experienced actors at the same time as challenging the more experienced.

**Acting:** The play's flexible casting and starkly simplified staging particularly challenge students to use voice, movement, bodily attitude and other techniques to create their characters and the scenes. The Tectonic Theater Project calls the process of developing those techniques "moment work."





## But what about the language?

In developing the script, members of the Tectonic Theater Project used the actual words of the people they interviewed. The interviewees' use of profanity is part of who they are: sanitizing their language does change how the audience perceives and distinguishes them.

**Accommodations and edits**  
Officially, performance rights do not permit altering or editing the script. That being said, the Tectonic Theater's [Laramie Project](#) FAQ popup offers this:

In the case of school productions, permission can be granted to omit offensive words. Send a request to [admin@tectonic-theaterproject.org](mailto:admin@tectonic-theaterproject.org). Please do not make edits without requesting permission, of course.

### Audience disclaimer

While high school stage productions are often intentionally geared to as wide an audience as possible, there can also be great value in choosing a show that challenges the school community at their own age-appropriate level.

A simple disclaimer on publicity pieces can identify the show as appropriate for older students and adults.

## ***The Laramie Project's* themes are relevant to high school students**

- prejudice, bias, discrimination, stereotyping
- crime, delinquency; violence; punishment, forgiveness
- grief, loss
- faith, religious belief
- class, socioeconomic divisions
- group identity, belonging; exclusion
- compassion, empathy, acceptance

### Making cross-curricular connections:

*The Laramie Project* may inspire students to delve into

- criminal justice
- lawmaking & governance
- comparative religion
- journalism & mass media
- US history
- current events
- oral history

## Show your administrators how many other schools are doing *The Laramie Project* this year

- [Dramatists Play Service](#) lists everyone who has acquired rights to perform the play. Click Current Productions on the menu bar and then change All Productions to Browse by Title. Type in "Laramie Project"; the results will show you all the upcoming licensed shows. This tool does not show past productions.
- At The Matthew Shepard Foundation, we keep track of productions of *The Laramie Project*, too. Our database includes performance dates that have already passed. We would be happy to provide you with a list of the other schools that have performed the play or are planning to perform it this school year.

# "Our school community just isn't ready for *The Laramie Project*"

If the suggestion is made that performance of *Laramie Project* must be preceded by special intervention and instruction to prepare the student audience for the play's challenging subject matter, the Matthew Shepard Foundation strongly suggests reframing the issue: The "problem" is not the *play*, the problem is the community's unreadiness. Conflict surrounding performances of *Laramie Project* is conflict that exists already within the school community.

Consider instead a school-wide approach to anti-bullying, anti-bias instruction. Make *The Laramie Project* part of that: the drama students' performances can be their contribution to the school's learning about issues of diversity and difference, inclusion and acceptance.

Many organizations offer curriculum and other helps for a school-wide approach to developing cultural competency.

**Anti-Defamation League:** "No Place for Hate" program—Schools earn a "No Place for Hate" designation by developing their own multi-faceted program within the ADL's framework, with help and support from the regional ADL office. Student organizations include their own activities as part of the process—including, for example, performances of *Laramie Project*.

**Teaching Tolerance:** *Speak Up at School*—This guide "for the adults in the school" includes professional development and practical classroom strategies for confronting bias. Pair it with *Let's Talk: Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics With Students* to build space for positive conversations. Teaching Tolerance offers many more resources to build your school's capacity to accept and welcome difference.

**Facing History and Ourselves:** "Transforming Schools" program—Education professionals can work with schools to develop programs ranging from an introductory afterschool workshop on Facing History's approach, up to a multi-year school- or district-wide initiative. Their goals include integrating culturally responsive teaching

practices and improving classroom climate to promote student engagement and academic learning.

If you opt for a do-it-yourself approach, look to local civic organizations for help—especially groups whose missions include dropout prevention, interfaith alliance, youth crime intervention, minority populations advocacy, community coalition-building, arts in the community, and so on.

A thought: Some of these programs do cost money to implement. The insurance company that indemnifies your schools against charges of bias and civil rights violations might be interested in supporting this work, because it reduces the likelihood of an incident for which the school might be held liable. MSF has had success with such a school/community/insurer partnership, and is looking to expand this work. Contact us about working with you on this.

## Isn't it that "gay play"?

Yes, *The Laramie Project* is about a town's response to the brutal death of a young gay man, and the characters discuss the issue frankly. In fact, some of the characters identify themselves as gay. At the foundation named for that young gay man, we have no interest in downplaying this or sweeping it under the boards.

Nevertheless, the play is not a polemic. Moisés Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Group took care to reflect the diverse points of view they found in hundreds of hours spent interviewing residents of Laramie. In the play that resulted, those differing voices are masterfully juxtaposed, and it is left to the audience members to find meaning in the interplay.

In a sense, a play like *The Laramie Project* could have been born out of any singular and upheaving event in a community's life. Kaufman and his colleagues personally felt drawn to Laramie after Matt's death, to that place at that time, but there they encountered the larger questions that face any community dealing with shock, uncertainty and controversy.

Discussion—asking, listening, responding—book-ended the Tectonic Theater’s original development of *The Laramie Project*. From the start, members of Tectonic Theater shared the planning, interviewing, writing and production tasks, in the mode of **devised, or collaborative, theater**. Their web page describes the process:

“The play ... was created collaboratively by the members of the company over a long workshop process in which participants were encouraged to operate outside their area of specialization. Thus, actors and designers became writers and dramatists, directors became designers and actors, and the company uncovered a new way of creating a theatrical event.”

# Discussion shapes devised theater

**The metadramatic quality of *The Laramie Project* has the cast portraying the members of Tectonic Theater Group as they work through the process of developing the script itself.**

As the original actors spent years gathering and shaping their material, they were attentive to their own responses to the tragic events, to the people they interviewed, and to their own uncertainties about the project. These responses may be spoken by the actor-characters on stage—reading from journal entries—but for the most part they underlie and inform the script more subtly.

Although they are not writing their own play, a student cast and crew will have their own responses to the material. As they research and rehearse, they may need support to understand their reactions and to incorporate their experiences into their own *Laramie Project*. To that end, best practice would encourage you to **build support into the preparation and rehearsal process**.

Naturally, you may draw on exercises from within the theatrical tradition—perhaps incorporating techniques of Augusto Boal’s newspaper theater for example. You may have your actors imitate the Tectonic Theater Group by journaling their own research, rehearsal, reflection and performance experiences.

Consider also calling on the experts in your school and community to help your students parse the complex legal, religious, socio-economic and psychological questions raised by the play. Invite guidance counselors or school social workers to a rehearsal to help your students examine their own emotional responses, and to understand the emotional and social dynamics portrayed through their characters. If you are including a panel discussion or guided talkback, bring the panelists or moderator to a rehearsal first.

The Matthew Shepard Foundation can assist with your actors’ preparation and with post-performance talk-backs or panel discussions.

- A discussion guide is available for download from our *Laramie Project* Support page. We have others created by our partners, Tectonic Theater Project, HBO and Time Magazine. Just ask: we will send them.
- It is often possible for one of our staff to participate remotely via Skype or a pre-recorded interview. This can be complicated by tech issues and time zone differences, so give us some lead time to arrange it.
- Sometimes, Judy Shepard or someone from our staff can participate in person. Unfortunately, we cannot offer this for free, but if you are interested, talk to us about your options.

Once they had their finished script, Tectonic Theater intended the final product—performances of the play itself—to continue the conversation with the audience members, as well as out among the larger, national community. This is an essential element of **documentary theater**.

*The Laramie Project* will challenge your stu-

dents on many levels. To help them, adapt Tectonic Theater's approach: your students won't create their own script, but they will be creating a "theatrical event." Bookend your run with discussion: collaborative work with cast and crew up front, followed by guided audience response.

Who can help with your talk-back? Draw on the expertise in your community:

- law enforcement officer—perhaps your School Resource Officer
- criminal defense attorney, prosecutor or judge
- clergyperson
- newspaper or TV reporter, journalism instructor
- youth program director from the LGBTQ center
- mental health professional
- state legislator
- school district administrator charged with diversity and inclusion policy
- representative of Anti-Defamation League, other anti-bias organizations
- parent of an LGBTQ youth

## Documentary theater invites discussion

**Depicting real people in the throes of their laden responses to devastatingly real events, *The Laramie Project* invites audience response beyond applause and congratulations.**

Nobody ever suggests offering a panel discussion on themes of loss and grieving, alcohol dependency, child abuse and gross socioeconomic inequality after performances of the musical *Annie*. The conventions of theater-as-entertainment tell us, even to the extent that the performance may be realistic, it was never meant to be "for real."

The *Laramie Project* is not that kind of entertainment, and it doesn't want to be. The Mission page of the Tectonic Theater website declares their intent to develop "innovative works that explore theatrical language and form, fostering an artistic dialogue with audiences on the social, political, and human issues that affect us all," and notes that their plays have "sparked national discourse."

It is hardly surprising that school and community theater productions of *The Laramie Project* often include after-show moderated talk-backs or panel discussions, to **help the audience process the implications of the play they just witnessed**. In the sidebar, we list some of the people and groups you may wish to invite to participate in such a discussion.

Don't overlook the importance of a well-prepared moderator. Give that task to someone who isn't responsible for running the show! A good moderator will know who's on stage and why they were invited; will keep the discussion orderly and ensure that speakers can be heard; and will anticipate the kinds of questions the audience may ask—and will also have some good starter questions at the ready if no one is raising their hand out in the house.



# Who's got your back?

## National theatrical organizations and their local affiliates

Arts Integrity Initiative and its founder Howard Sherman are at the forefront of advocating “for the arts to be the best they can be at the educational, community and professional levels.” This includes supporting student performances of controversial but high-quality works like *The Laramie Project*.

Educational Theatre Association and its affiliate, International Thespian Society are the most well-known advocates for school theater programs. At the national level, that primarily means promoting the maintenance and quality of school programs.

At the local level, however, your Thespian membership gives you access to direct support from your colleagues nearby, beginning with your state Chapter Director. Use the EdTA online forums to seek practical advice, and call on your state and regional leaders when you need backup for meetings or documentation as you advocate for your production of *The Laramie Project*.

If you have membership in other organizations, such as The American Alliance for Theatre & Education or ISTA, take advantage of their peer support opportunities, too.

## Local theatrical and arts organizations

Here in Denver, where the Matthew Shepard Foundation office is located, we would reach out to the education departments of, for example, the Denver Center for the Performing Arts and the Arvada Center for Arts and Humanities. Their theater educators understand and support the relevance of plays like *The Laramie Project* for youth theater. There are many other regional theater and arts centers around Colorado with education and youth performance departments.

Likewise, arts educators in the schools of education at the University of Colorado–Denver or Denver University could support our advocacy with their expert judgement of the play's developmen-

tal appropriateness and its fit with Colorado's arts instruction standards.

Wherever you are, seek out the equivalent of these educational/theatrical experts.

The Tectonic Theater Project has an education department too, by the way. They are unlikely to fly out and write a play about your valiant crusade, but do let them know of your difficulty and ask for advice and help.

Smaller, local performing arts groups—the sort that may teach youth acting classes but do not have much professional educational clout—are still excellent allies. They may have a symbiotic relationship with your school program, with a vested interest in your students' growth as actors. Also, they may know your colleagues and administrators as friends and neighbors. Their patrons are your allies as well.

## Your own “theater geek” community

Obviously, your students are probably strong advocates—we often find that students initiate the push to put on *The Laramie Project* in the first place. Harness the energy of their parents, too. In the play, one character recounts a lack of parental support when he took on a controversial role, but many parents who believe in their childrens' talent want them to grow with challenging parts.

Call on your local heroes, too—the student actors who have graduated and gone on to great things. Ask them to write or speak in favor of the play they wish they could have done when they were in school!

## The Matthew Shepard Foundation

We can offer more help than this brochure. Let us know if it would be useful for us to join a conference call, send a letter, take part in a social media campaign, or make an official statement.

**Important disclaimer:** Nearly all the organizations named on this page also support playwrights' interest in protecting the integrity of their plays: these groups will not have your back if your performance is unlicensed or if you violate copyright by altering the script without permission.