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21L.703 Studies in Drama: Too Hot to Handle: Forbidden Plays in Modern America
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I will do this, I will trust you people that if you write a play of this, that you say it right, say it correct. I think you have a responsibility to do that.

—Father Roger Schmit, *The Laramie Project*

The Laramie Project, by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project, is a play unique in both the way it was created in response to an event of national significance and in the way it has since been received. The play's form and purpose act specifically to instigate dialogue in a way that allows actors and audiences to examine the issues at hand, not as if they are in another world, but through their own identities, feelings, and immediate context. Because of this force for dialogue, *The Laramie Project* has become both an entity used to teach tolerance and a play censored and feared for its effects. The play has, in particular, encountered frequent censorship within American high schools thus begging the question: What about the form and content of *The Laramie Project* makes it relevant, particularly in relation to young adults and performance by and for students?

The play itself is a collection of theatrical “moments” presenting the community of Laramie, Wyoming where Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, was severely beaten and left to die in October of 1998. The Tectonic Theatre Project visited Laramie six times, beginning one month after the event, to conduct interviews. In the original production, the actors played both themselves, as they interview residents and react to their experience in Laramie, and the members of the community with whom they spoke. Kaufman's stated purpose for the project is to investigate how theatre can contribute to national dialogue on current events. He and the members of the theatre group believe that if you listen, reactions to an event such as the murder of Matthew Shepherd will reveal ideologies and beliefs of the general culture, illuminating how these ideas influence lives and society as a whole. Theatre is an appropriate form with which to examine what is being said, how, and where it comes from. The theatre group approached the project with

the question, what is the same and what is different about Laramie, compared to the rest of the country (Kaufman 11)?

Kaufman cites an essay by Bertolt Brecht as the theoretical model of *The Laramie Project*. In “The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre,” Brecht presents a new way of acting in which the actors must “detach himself from the character portrayed; he forced the spectator to look at the play’s situations from such an angle that they necessarily became subject to his criticism.” Brecht insists, “the theatre will stop pretending not to be theatre” and the “actor must remain a demonstrator.” *The Laramie Project* achieves this self-conscious performance by using simple costumes, often comprising only one object such as a pair of glasses in order to “suggest, not recreate” each character (Kaufman 19). The actors are transformed on stage from themselves into the people of Laramie with introductions from cast members, thus achieving the “A-effect (alienation effect)” described by Brecht. This detachment converts events presented in the play into matter that may be judged by the audience. Brecht makes a point that all epic theatre must have some sort of “social function.” The purpose is not just to entertain. What then is the purpose adopted by the Tectonic Theatre Project in their representation of the people of Laramie, Wyoming? For this, we turn to an examination of the text itself.

The Laramie Project creates a dialogue surrounding the murder of Matthew Shepard. It does not focus exclusively on Matthew, in fact he is never on stage, but rather on the town community in the aftermath of the event. The beginning of the play portrays how Laramie was branded by the murder. All conversation or reflection ceased as soon as the media arrived, making the death of Matthew Shepard the center of a national debate. Jedediah Schults says, “Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime” (Kaufman 24). Rebecca Hilliker, head of the theatre department at the University of Wyoming, welcomed the Tectonic Project because of the play’s potential to end a repression of dialogue. Hilliker says, “the students really need to talk. When this happened they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all

dialogue stopped.” Making a point relevant to educational approaches to controversy, she goes on to say, “I’d rather have opinions that I don’t like—and have that dynamic in education” (Kaufman 25).

The Laramie Project’s social function is, it seems, to create dialogue. By virtue of its Brechtian approach, however, it creates a complicated sort of dialogue. Through conscious presentation of the play as a form of representation, *Laramie* avoids satisfying conclusions. It presents a multitude of perspectives on Matthew’s murder, including many shades of homophobia, without making sweeping moral judgments. The play portrays a media that assumes causality and seeks to categorize the situation (“The difference is that in Wyoming there are fewer places to blend in...Aaron McKinney and his friend Russell Henderson came from the poor side of town...it was an extreme version of what happens in our schools on a daily basis...It’s a tough business...to be gay in cowboy country...”), but conscientiously refrains from such judgments itself (Kaufman 51-52). If anything, the play, as presented by Jill Dolan in her book *Utopia in Performance*, systematically balances righteous anger with sympathy for the perpetrators (121). For example, immediately following a graphic description of Shepard’s mangled body, the play turns to a presentation of sympathy for both Matthew *and* Aaron, one of the murderers. Dr. Cantway, who cared for both boys without knowing their connection (Aaron was brought in with wounds from a bar fight), muses, “They were two kids!!!! They were both my patients and they were two kids...And I felt a great deal of compassion...for both of them...” (Kaufman 47)

Dolan also examines the role and method of performance in *The Laramie Project*, a concept that becomes particularly relevant when considering censorship cases in which performance, specifically, was banned. Dolan emphasizes the idea that the performance of *The Laramie Project* creates a conversation that may not have existed without the intervention of the Tectonic Theatre Project: “it intends to use performance to practice a conversation about tense current events, a discussion that might not be possible in the reality of history...the conventions of performance permit conversations and, in

Laramie's case, musings about ideas that otherwise might have remained private" (115). The theatre, somehow, creates distance from the actual events. *Laramie* presents opinions, of people who wouldn't normally talk to each other, side by side thus creating a larger imaginary space for dialogue.

Dolan cites another critic, Tessa Carr, who goes so far as to say that *The Laramie Project* presents a community discussion "that *did not happen*" (124). Regardless of whether the discussion did or did not happen, the play creates a dialogue about the death of Matthew Shephard that has become part of the national discourse on hate crimes and intolerance. While Dolan may be skeptical of the original performance by the Tectonic Theatre Project, because the perspective of an outsider brings "danger of condescension" (117) on the part of the actor/interviewers, she admits that once the play is removed one more level (i.e. performed by a group other than the original authors), things become quite different. She describes one such performance: "actors played two levels of character: the people of Laramie and the Tectonic Theatre Project performers who appear as themselves in the script. As a result, the performer-ethnographers were held up for a certain level of scrutiny instead of being played for truth" (Dolan 129). This representation, twice removed from the original, might be regarded as even more Brechtian than the original performance, because the entirety of the play is now open to criticism and judgment, explicitly as a presentation. It is here that the significance of student performance begins to emerge. Taking on a role in *The Laramie Project*, complete with the perspective of an outsider, forces actors to strongly identify with and confront the events, not as if they are in another world or by totally immersing themselves in the character's role, but rather from their own perspective and individual context. Performance of this play thus brings dialogue into a community, in addition to presenting a dialogue from the community of Laramie.

The play's ability to influence the *outside* with its story is reflected appropriately in an apparent consciousness of wider relevance in the text itself. Zubaida Ula, the only Muslim among the Laramie residents interviewed, states, "these are people trying to

distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this” (Kaufman 61). This feeling of self-examination comes into any community that performs the play. Towards the end of the play, the authors make it clear that *The Laramie Project*’s discussion extends beyond the town with Rulon Stacey’s statement ““Cause by this point it was clear to us that it was the world—it was the whole world” (Kaufman 68). Interestingly, the play ends with an explicit focus on the power of performance and the notion of education. Rebecca Hilliker chooses a performance of *Angels in America* for the University of Wyoming because “we have an obligation to find ways to reach our students...And the question is—how do we move—how do we reach a whole state...” (Kaufman 77). Perhaps most important is the theatre group’s decision to include a mandate to teach, to tell the story, in the words of Father Roger Schmit:

I think right now our most important teachers must be Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. They have to be our teachers. How did you learn? What did we as a society do to teach you that. See, I don’t know if many people will let them be their teacher. I think it would be wonderful if the judge said, “In addition to your sentence, you must tell your story, you must tell your story.” (Kaufman 80)

The Laramie Project clearly intended to allow dialogue, not only within the community itself and at the time of the murder, but in its presentation of this dialogue, to extend its social function to instigate dialogue in any community in which is performed.

The Laramie Project was intended to start conversations, but what sort of conversations? What in the stimulated exchange of ideas is threatening enough to merit banning in high schools? A play like *The Laramie Project* will always encounter extreme opposition from certain fringes of society. The Westboro Baptist Church, a group with strong anti-gay sentiments and classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Tully [Play brings protests](#)), for example, frequents high school performances from California to Massachusetts, picketing with signs that say “God hates The Laramie Project” (Lefferts). Slightly less dramatic but still a minority response is that of parents who fear the influence of the homosexual content of the play on their children. In

response to preparation research for a performance at Acton Boxborough Regional High School, Amy Contrada, a member of the gay opposition group MassResistance, revealed her fears: “They are taking kids who are vulnerable and sending them to bizarre websites...They are clearly directing the students toward the homosexual/transgender movement” (qtd. in Lefferts). While both of these responses are, of course, disturbing, I am interested in the “moderate” urge to ban this play. The non-extremist view is more representative of societal fears at large and deals more directly with the actual content and structure of *The Laramie Project*. Before examining one specific recent censorship case, a banned high school performance in Burbank, California, we first turn to an investigation of the controversial content and potential difficulties within the text of the play itself.

I can imagine reading *The Laramie Project* as a high school teacher and filling out a mental checklist of difficult ideas. It would look something like this:

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS OF WHICH HIGH SCHOOLS SHOULD BE WARY

Check all that apply:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Homosexuality	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drugs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hate Crimes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Church of Latter Day Saints
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Class Privilege	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brutal Violence
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Death Penalty	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Anal Rape and Prison
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Religion	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Media Bias
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AIDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Humanity of Criminals
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Live and Let Live Philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Double Standards
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Creationism	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Schools

It is not, however, the mere presence of this content that makes this play legitimately difficult to present in a high school setting, but rather the way in which some of these issues are portrayed. As already discussed, *The Laramie Project* is concerned primarily with presentation in such a way as to allow the audience and actors to form their own opinions. Although it may be clear where the members of The Tectonic Theatre Project

stand on various issues—significant attention is given to the transformation stories of people like Jedediah Shultz who changed their opinion about gay people as a result of the aftermath of Matthew’s death—there is still extensive time devoted to hearing people on the other side. The play refuses to censor difficult opinions and this open portrayal succeeds in making simple judgment impossible. Additionally, the basic fact that the play comprises real words from real people adds another degree of depth to its analysis. The answer to the question “why?” no longer can have the simple answer, “because the author wrote it that way to communicate this message.” Yes, Tectonic Theater Project clearly has a message and purpose in constructing the play as it did, but that does not remove the validity of questions about the actions and opinions of the people of Laramie. Searching for reasons for Matthews death, the desire that Kaufman cites as his initial motivation in tackling this project (Kaufman 11), necessarily involves a reader or actor at a very personal level. In order to address difficult questions and in seeking explanation of the actions of *real* people, our strongest tool as humans is to look to our own opinion and experience, to identify with the situation and examine our response. Active participation in the play’s content makes the dialogue created by *The Laramie Project* difficult and complex.

The most striking (and perhaps unexpected) aspect of *The Laramie Project* is the strong presence of religion. Views on homosexuality are closely linked to religious belief in the town of Laramie. Tectonic presents the words of ministers of various sects of Christianity, making them the most prominently vocal group of characters portrayed. In a moment entitled “The Word,” we are first introduced to a question that they play will continue to grapple with throughout: What are the implications of someone religiously believing that homosexuality is wrong? Is it possible to believe this and at the same time to refrain from hate, persecution, and judgment of people who are homosexual? According to the Baptist Minister, “The word (of God) is either sufficient or it is not.” (Kaufman 34). Later in the play, he says of the murderers “I think they deserve the death penalty” but then goes on to say, “Now, as for the victim, I know that that lifestyle is

legal, but I will tell you one thing. I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence that he had time to reflect on a moment when someone had spoken the word of the Lord to him—and that before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle.” (Kaufman 68) Material more difficult than this to present in a school would be hard to find. Religion is off-limits as a general rule; this sort of presentation of religion is red-hot. At Matthew’s funeral, the Reverend Fred Phelps speaks to the crowd: “What do you mean it’s not for you to judge? If God doesn’t hate fags, why does he put ‘em in hell...Your silly arguments” (Kaufman 73). This speech is appalling, painful, offensive, yes, but as is the case with much of this play, it is not simple. How do you reconcile religious belief and common human interactions based on decency without making “silly arguments”?

These two opinions are, of course, radical but they are not so far off from an issue many in Laramie grapple with. Stephen Mead Johnson, a Unitarian minister, expresses this difficulty, asking “most Americans believe, and they do, that the Bible is the word of God, and how you gonna fight that?” (Kaufman 36) Jedadiah Shultz examines his own changes in opinion, saying, “right now, I would say that I don’t agree with it—yeah, that I don’t agree with it...speaking in religious terms—I don’t think that’s how God intended it to happen. But I don’t hate homosexuals and I mean—I’m not going to persecute them or anything like that. At all.” (Kaufman 59)

Taking things in a different direction, others attach considerable religious significance to Matthew Shepard’s death in a supportive manner. One of the strangest outcomes of Shepard’s death was his conversion into a martyr, a saint, by the media and the rest of the world. This reaction was no simpler for the people of Laramie than the anti-gay sentiment on the other side of the spectrum. Johnson, the Unitarian minister, describes how he found his own personal religious mission in the death of Matthew Shepard. “I arrived in Laramie on September fifteenth...and said ‘What in the hell am I doing in Wyoming.’ Three weeks later, I found out what the hell I’m doing In Wyoming” (Kaufman 36). The fence where Matthew was beaten became a site of pilgrimage. Vigils

were held for Matthew all over the country. The intentional outsiders, the members of the Tectonic Theater group, describe their own strong connection to Matthew. “I broke down the minute I touched it. I felt such a strong kinship with this young man” (Kaufman 42) says Greg Pierotti, describing his first visit to the fence. Aaron Kreifels, the 19 year old university student who found Matthew, sees the will of God in the role he played: “God wanted me to find him because there’s no way that I was going to go that way” (Kaufman 43). One particularly strong image brings the religious view of Shepard’s death into sharp focus: Romaine Patterson, friend of Matthew’s, student, and lesbian, explains how she organized a group to dress up like angels and use their huge wings to block the speeches of Reverend Phelps at Russell Henderson’s (one of the accused) trial. During this scene “Amazing Grace” plays onstage.

The words of Father Schmit, a Catholic Priest, are used by members of the Tectonic Theater Project to represent their own viewpoint or some semblance of the middle ground (albeit an outspoken one). He hosted a vigil for Matthew and tried to get other religious leaders involved. According to him, the general response was equivocation, “We are gonna stand back and wait and see which way the wind is blowing” (Kaufman 35). As already discussed, in the aftermath of the crime, much of Laramie was preoccupied with how to present things and the implications of any given action. Father Schmit goes the other way. He tells of how he considered asking the bishop’s permission to hold the vigil but he then explains why he didn’t: “His permission doesn’t make it correct, you realize that? And I’m not knocking bishops, but what is correct is correct” (Kaufman 65). Father Schmit is making a clear distinction between a given religious position on homosexuality and the unquestionable evil of violence and murder. Matthew, according to Schmit, should neither be “condemned...to perfection” (Kaufman 65) and given special privileges in the treatment of his case because he is gay nor should he be treated as less than human for the same reason. This brings us to the other truly difficult problems raised by *The Laramie Project*: The issue of special

privileges for minorities and the debate over double standards, in concert with the question of what constitutes tolerance and what mere acceptance.

When Governor Geringer of Wyoming first issues a statement about the beating of Matthew Shepard, he includes a word of caution about assigning the label hate crime. “I would like to urge the people of Wyoming against overreacting in a way that gives one group ‘special rights over others.’ We will wait and see if the vicious beating and torture of Matthew Shepard was motivated by hate” (Kaufman 52). At face value Geringer’s caution seems absurd or even outright offensive, but much of this play is taken up with a related question: what influence does the fact that Matthew Shepard was gay have on the magnitude of the crime, both as perceived and in reality? If the crime was not motivated by hate, does that somehow make it better? Is giving a homosexual’s death special treatment a double standard? Does the massive media coverage and national outrage at Matthew’s death stem from legitimate concern about homophobia, “an extreme version of what happens in our schools on a daily basis” (Kaufman 51) or is the urge to attach special significance to Matthew’s case somehow an overreaction or a granting unmerited consideration? On the other hand, isn’t it another double standard to blame Matthew for supposedly “coming on” to his perpetrators, thus partially making it his fault? How can it be fair to consider the act of a homosexual “coming on” to a straight person a crime punishable by death?

The Laramie Project listens to all of these opinions, giving them equal speaking time. Thus, once again, the play refrains from offering simple positions and instead presents a variety of opinions, leaving us, the audience (and in many cases the actors), to judge for ourselves. Bill McKinney, father of the accused Aaron McKinney, protests the media coverage and resulting bias, stating “Had this been a heterosexual...this never would have made the national news. Now my son is guilty before he’s even had a trial” (Kaufman 53). This is bound to spark discussion; McKinney’s statement is most likely an objective truth, so what does that mean for how we think about the situation? Sherry Johnson, an administrative assistant from the University who was not particularly

involved in the aftermath of Matt's death, expresses her frustration and lack of understanding about a similar unfairness:

Everybody's got problems. But why they exemplified him I don't know. What's the difference if you're gay? A hate crime is a hate crime. If you murder someone you hate 'em. It has nothing to do with if you're gay or a prostitute or whatever. I don't understand. I don't understand. (Kaufman 64)

Admittedly this questioning immediately follows troubling statements from her about how "there's just so many things about him that I found out that I just, it's scary. You know about his character and spreading AIDS..." (Kaufman 64). Such homophobia and misinformation is perhaps even more threatening when taught in a high school, where the potential to incorrectly inform the uninformed exists. Johnson's misinformation, however, makes the question she raises no less valid. Why should Matthew Shepard get special treatment? Then again, is the use of the phrase "nothing to do with" a bit of an overstatement? In Aaron McKinney's confession he admits without reservation that he beat Matthew Shepard to death because he was gay.

I was like, "Look I'm not a fuckin' faggot." If you touch me again, you gonna get it." I don't know what the hell he was trying to do, but I beat him up pretty bad. Think I killed him. (Kaufman 81)

McKinney's legal team used "gay panic" as his defense. Regardless of whether this is a horrible pretense at justice or a legitimate presentation of McKinney's reaction, it is certainly something on the minds of the people of Laramie.

In another particularly troubling statement because of its double standards, Murdock Cooper, a rancher from the area, states that gays and lesbians don't bother anyone unless they "step out of line." He partially justifies (or at least exonerates) the perpetrators, saying, "You don't pick up regular people. I'm not excusing their actions, but it made me feel better because it was partially Matthew Shepard's fault and partially the guys who did it...you know maybe it's fifty-fifty" (Kaufman 59). Zackie Salmon, a University of Wyoming administrator and lesbian, responds to this mentality "live and let live. That is such crap...If I don't tell you I'm a fag, you won't beat the crap out of me. I

mean, what's so great about that? That's a great philosophy?" (Kaufman 60). Salmon's words bring up a whole host of issues about the difference between tolerance and acceptance that American society as a whole has yet to come to terms with. For example, the military's don't-ask-don't-tell policy: where does that fall? Once again, this would be difficult to deal with in a public school setting; by virtue of being public, public schools are answerable to the concerns and opinions of the entire public. Accountability and justification for teaching methods become of prime importance, particularly in relation to issues on which the public itself has no clear stance.

As if all that weren't enough controversy there is, of course, the issue of the death penalty and the character of the perpetrators themselves. The play focuses quite strongly on the humanity of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, refusing to alienate or vilify them. In fact, one might argue that they get more consideration, of their character, internal struggles, and background, than does Matthew Shepard himself. Additionally, there is a complicated discussion of extenuating circumstances and the concept of justice. Even while expressing her anger, Marge Murray, mother of Reggie Fluty who was nearly infected with HIV while caring for Matthew Shepard, still keeps the humanity of Aaron and Russell in perspective. "And you know, two absolutely human beings cause so much grief for so many people..." (Kaufman 56). The role of drugs in the crime further complicates the assignment of full guilt. Shannon, a friend of Aaron's, tries to evaluate the situation through her own experience: "And I don't know. I won't lie to you, there was times that I was all messed up on meth and I thought about going out and robbing..." Jen, another friend, expresses frustration and also a strong sense of sympathy. " 'Man, why'd you fuck up like that?' But, I'd want to make sure he's doing good in there...I'd probably just want to hang out with him." (Kaufman 62). By refusing to demonize the perpetrators, *The Laramie Project* sparks intense self-examination for any community in which the play is presented. The moment with Jen and Shannon ends with a particularly haunting exchange in relation to performance in high schools. A tectonic member asks,

“You guys both went to Laramie High?” and Shannon responds with, “Yeah. Can’t you tell? We’re a product of our society” (Kaufman 62).

Debate about justice of the death penalty itself is also given a place in the play, with representation of a full spectrum of views, ranging from “I believe in the death penalty one hundred percent...I truly believe with all my heart and eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” to “I don’t know about the death penalty. But I don’t ever want to see them walk out of Rawlings Penitentiary” to “I don’t believe in the death penalty...I don’t believe that one person should be killed as redemption for his having killed another.” Ultimately Matthew’s father asks that Aaron McKinney be granted his life in by far the most moving moment of the play. Even this can spark debate about the role of forgiveness in the process of healing. Dennis Shepard makes it clear that he does indeed believe in the death penalty but that “I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However this is the time to begin the healing process” (Kaufman 85).

Finally, there is always a certain danger associated with portraying the language and views of real people in Laramie on stage within a high school context. There is the ever-present worry that students might misunderstand (although the concept of misunderstanding is debatable itself). Father Schmit expresses this concern, explaining to two members of Tectonic “don’t make matters worse...You think violence is what they did to Matthew—they did do violence to Matthew—but, you know, every time that you are called a fag, or you are called a, you know, a lez or whatever...Dyke, yeah dyke. Do you realize that is violence? That is the seed of violence. And I would resent it immensely if you used anything I said, uh, you know, to—to somehow cultivate that kind of violence, even in it’s smallest form.” Father Schmit emphasizes the group’s “responsibility” to “say it correct.” Transferred to performances in high schools, this responsibility not to do further damage places enormous responsibility on educators to present it “correct,” however that is defined.

Armed with an understanding of the potential difficulties associated with the text, we are now ready to look more closely at a specific example of high school censorship.

The details of this case should better inform us on the complexity of censorship in a high school environment. Students proposed a performance of *The Laramie Project* at Burroughs High in the fall of 2007, in collaboration between the drama class and the school GSA (Gay Straight Alliance). Upon return from winter break, they discovered that the high school principal Emilop Urioste Jr. had banned the play. Drama teacher Scott Bailey claimed Urioste's reasoning was that it "would tear this community apart." Urioste denies the quote. The students then sought out permission to perform at the Colony Theatre (where *The Laramie Project* was previously performed in 2002 for the LA premier) (Graff). The theatre agreed to provide space to the students free of charge along with costumes, props, programs, and technical assistance. In May of 2008, two members of the Tectonic Theatre Project flew out to California to help the students with their production. By April of 2008, Urioste reversed his position and allowed students to rehearse on school grounds, although the performance was still not technically sanctioned by the school (Boehm). In an interesting twist, Urioste has decided to host a second production of *The Laramie Project*, this time at the high school ([Tully Play brings protests](#)).

Before getting into the arguments in favor of censorship in this case, it is equally important to consider reasoning of the play's supporters. Why is it such a big deal that *The Laramie Project* be performed at a high school? How do people view the purpose or importance of the dialogue presented and instigated by the play's performance in Burbank? The Burbank GSA won a \$500 grant from the California Teachers Association for their production before it was banned (Boehm). An influential group of educators believes this play can serve as an important teaching tool. Additionally, the money which Leigh Fondakowski, head writer of *The Laramie Project*, and Kelli Simpkins, an actor in the original Tectonic production, use to fly to California to help the Burbank students came from a \$150,000 Arcus Foundation Grant. The Tectonic Theater Project received the grant for the specific purpose of setting up artist residencies in high schools and universities across America where the play was to be produced (Arcus LGBT Program

Grants). The stated mission of the Arcus Foundation “is to achieve social justice that is inclusive of sexual orientation, gender identity and race” (Arcus Foundation Home). The members of the Arcus Foundation view performance of *The Laramie Project*, and specifically performance in schools, as a means to achieve social justice and promote LGBT rights. Similarly, in a letter to supporters, Trent Steelman, managing director of The Colony Theatre, urges members of the community to attend the student production, “I would love to see you there in support of free speech theatre and gay rights” (reddish68 LiVEJOURNAL).

In response to Urioste’s decision Moisés Kaufman wondered, “How doing a play about tolerance can tear a community apart is beyond me” (Boehm) One of the interesting side effects of the censorship debate surrounding *The Laramie Project* is the tendency to reduce the work to catch phrases of purpose or meaning, eliminating an awareness of the subtlety that makes the play difficult in the first place. Amelia Merwin, a former drama student of Scott Bailey’s, wrote a response in the Burbank Leader online in support of the student performance. She makes an excellent point about the play’s relevance, “Shepard was a real person, and his horrible death actually happened, so in my opinion this piece of theater is especially important,” but continues on with what may be an oversimplification: “It is a play about learning to be tolerant, and that does not promote violence or sex, and yet because the main character...was homosexual, some consider ‘The Laramie Project’ inappropriate.” Even some students tended to oversimplify things for the sake of argument. Adrian Butler, a drama club member involved with the production, was quoted in the Burbank Leader saying, “Homophobia is something we deal with on a regular basis, and a show like this educates people how everyone deserves the same rights as everyone else” (Tully Play brings protest). Here again the emphasis on education appears. Describing the play, however, as a work with such a clear message is a reduction of meaning. This tendency to simplify is indicative of the need to justify and defend a work that has been challenged by censorship. Once a literary work makes it into the maelstrom of public debate it becomes necessary not only

to prove that it is not harmful but also to go beyond and justify the benefits associated with allowing the piece into public schools.

When Burbank students found out that Urioste had banned their production and that consequently their beloved drama teacher could no longer be involved they formed *The Don't Tell Bailey Theatre Company*, in tongue-in-cheek honor of Scott Bailey. Their myspace profile includes a statement of purpose.

We have joined together...because we know this inspirational, beautiful story will tighten the bonds of this community. We believe theatre has the power to positively impact society.

This aligns well with the Brechtian definition of epic theatre. The students subscribe to the idea of performance serving a social function within their *own* community context. They “hope their show will drive home the consequences of intolerance- and that Burbank is not immune” (Boehm).

Context and local relevance proved particularly significant for the Burbank performance. The students dedicated their performance to Lawrence King, an openly gay eighth grader who was shot and killed on February 12, 2008 by another student at the nearby E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, CA. Even though this tragedy occurred after the students chose *The Laramie Project*, King's death, less than an hour, became an undeniably relevant context for the play's performance. The King case has eerie similarities to the story of Laramie. Brandon McInerey, 14, the accused, came from a troubled home “with his parents accusing each other of drug addiction and physical assaults” (Pringle and Saillant). Media coverage of the incident focused on debates of causality and preventability of the crime, echoing earlier discussions regarding Matthew Shepard's murder. Further strengthening a connection between the two crimes is apparent motive. According to friends, Larry had been the subject of verbal abuse in school for months. At some point he decided to retaliate by “flirting.” Brandon, who Larry openly called “cute,” resented this intensely, particularly because classmates “ribbed Brandon by saying he must be gay himself” (Pringle and Saillant). Unlike the Laramie case,

McInerey has been charged as an adult with premeditated murder and a hate crime allegation, although the case has not yet come to trial.

The context is relevant, the dialogue important, so why did the students of Burbank High School find themselves performing a play without their school's support? Are the reactions and concerns voiced by the community in line with what one might expect, given a careful reading of the text? The oft-quoted phrase (and just as often denied by Urioste) to justify the ban was that it "would tear the community apart." According to Scott Bailey when he first approached the principal requesting permission to produce *The Laramie Project*, Urioste asked that a musical be performed instead and then agreed to think about Bailey's proposal over winter break. Bailey made the point that a similar performance came off without incident at nearby North Hollywood High. After break, according to Bailey "he somewhat angrily told me that he had read a Boston Globe article about a protest of the play, and that if we did the play here in Burbank it 'would tear the community apart'" (Bailey). Urioste, it seems, was afraid of consequences and repercussions not just within the school but at the level of the entire Burbank community.

The case to which Urioste was referring involved a production at Acton Boxborough Regional High School that opened Nov 2, 2008. MassResistance, a gay opposition group, and a set of parents protested the play. The parents organized a forum with speakers including a doctor to discuss STDs and a former gay man who became a Christian Pastor, married with children. Common Ground, the school's GSA, organized a rally in support of the production. The infamous Westboro Baptist Church also protested the play. Parents ultimately decided not to picket at the performance, explaining that the forum served their purpose of providing open discussion. Acton police were nevertheless on site to keep protests peaceful at opening night, with state police on call. Parents expressed concern about the homosexual content, the language in the play, and the violence (Lefferts). In an e-mail, Cynthia Pierce presents her more "moderate" grounds for objection:

Can't the lessons taught in this play be taught in a better more age-appropriate manner?...Does the value of the lessons taught in the play justify stooping to crude exposure? While I don't think we should shy away from controversy, I do think we all have an obligation to stand up for decency in our communities. (qtd. in Lefferts)

Concern with age-appropriateness is a recurring theme in the public debate over censorship in schools. Michael Alley, a Burbank parent with children who recently graduated from Burroughs High, wrote in a letter to the Burbank Leader about *The Laramie Project* "A wonderful play, I understand, but again very questionable material for high school." He makes a distinction between good theater and appropriate theater, based on age. Vic Cabrera, a self-proclaimed "writer, producer, director and parent," after wondering aloud if *Laramie* is appropriate for high school production, asks "What happened to 'Oklahoma'?" This hints at not only an objection based on age-appropriateness but an inclination to shelter and protect children, to avoid controversy altogether.

In an interesting response to this sentiment, students at the school in Boston try to explain why the play's content is all the more significant for high school audiences. "Homophobia is alive and well in our culture and bleeds into our schools despite age. Silencing discussions of homophobia is violence in itself" (Rohwer). Madison DiNapoli, Burroughs High student, explains how proper education makes it possible to tackle difficult material in a high school, "Bailey has always chosen theater for mature audiences, but he has taught us how to deal with the subject matter in an adult manner." She continues on, "A lot of administrators think that you shouldn't talk about certain things [until] after high school, but the truth is that all you need to do is teach them in a productive way" (Tully Teacher files grievance) The idea that controversy needs to be taught correctly begs the question, what is "productive?" Responsibility associated with teaching *The Laramie Project* echoes Father Schmit's injunction in the play itself to "say it correct." Additionally, to whom must the material be taught or presented? Only the

actors themselves, the entire student body, or the school administration and the community at large? Principal Urioste, as we will see later, is very much concerned with this question of creating educational context for *The Laramie Project*.

The conflict over *The Laramie Project* performance at Burroughs High School was to a large extent just one piece of a continuing debate over Scott Bailey's teaching philosophy and play choice for the drama department. Bailey chose *Romeo and Juliet* to produce in place of *The Laramie Project*. It was not, however, a typical production. Romeo was cross-cast so that two girls ended up kissing on stage. Servants wore French maid costumes. At one point characters took off "plastic long-nose masks" they were wearing and pretended to masturbate on them. Parents complained to Urioste about the "overly sexualized nature of the play" (Sanchez). The principal subsequently removed Bailey from his drama position and transferred him to the English department (Teacher files grievance). Bailey filed a grievance before leaving Burroughs High to teach at a charter school. According to Bailey, Urioste informed him that he was going to end his "activist theater" and that from then on all the plays produced at Burroughs High would have to be appropriate for seven year olds in the audience (Bailey). It is curious that Urioste supposedly required appropriateness for an age level far below that of high school students. The concern with avoiding "activist" projects in schools came out in community discussion as well. Vic Cabrera wrote in a letter "Perhaps Bailey should write his own play to promote his agenda, and not distort a classic like 'Romeo and Juliet.'" Public schools are answerable to the entire community; dealing with controversial material becomes difficult for fear of being perceived to promote one particular position.

Much of the media coverage and community discussion focuses on either condemning or condoning Principal Urioste's choice to ban a student production of *The Laramie Project*. Urioste, however, declined to comment or explain what he was afraid of, at least to the media. He saw the film version before the students' proposal and had no objections to the play itself, describing it as "a compelling, thought-provoking, very deep piece." He then dodged questions about his choice to ban with "There's more to this than

I can get into” (Boehm). Why he initially banned the play becomes even an more compelling query in light of Urioste’s reversal. In April of 2008 he decided to allow rehearsals at the high school and by the time the show opened in May he decided to support another production of *The Laramie Project*, this time at Burroughs High School. Looking for answers I decided to go right to the source. Surprisingly, Urioste proved eager to talk about both his original reservations and his plans for the upcoming production. Urioste provided the following information in response to my e-mailed questions.

Burroughs High School’s upcoming January production of *The Laramie Project* will be a featured program within “Take the Challenge Week,” a school-wide endeavor designed to teach themes of “Diversity, Acceptance, Respect and Tolerance.” In preparation, Urioste convened a community reading-group to go over the play because he felt the need to get the general public on-board. This is a clear indication of the pressure schools feel to justify their use of controversial material. In response to the question of whether performances like *The Laramie Project* have a place at high schools, Urioste placed great emphasis on the need for education beforehand:

High school students, and ultimately our community can in fact deal with the dialogue and the content if there is education...To do a production of this type without educating the students first would be a mistake...Yes, productions of this type (minus the profanity) can be performed at the high school level but only if the proper foundation has been laid first. That foundation involves much education. That education involves the historical, geographical, social and religious perspective.

It is important to note that the educational context Urioste views as necessary applies to not only the actors involved in the production or the general student body but also to the community as a whole. When asked to elaborate on the dangers of a performance without the proper educational program, Urioste explained, “The danger is a young audience not fully appreciating nor comprehending all of the issues involved. Your rightly note that this is a complex production.” He highlights the issue of age, with the implicit

assumption that high school students are not old enough to fully comprehend and adequately judge for themselves without guidance.

Context is frequently cited as necessary for the presentation of controversial modern theatrical productions. If context is so critical to understanding, why doesn't it exist in the first place? Why is context always something to be created? Vicky Greenbaum, a high school literature teacher, reflects in an essay on what she calls the "myth of appropriateness". She cites recent research that challenges the notion of appropriate behavior defined by a specific age (Greenbaum 16). More interestingly, she explains that challenging censorship is actually about defending the ability of high school students to cope with difficult material, to benefit from it rather than being disturbed or corrupted. She posits that perhaps if students are "adult" enough to recognize and raise questions about complexity that should indicate their readiness to deal with dialogue on the subject. She makes a critical teaching point: "Intelligent reading obviates the need for censorship, because active readers are able to participate in making meaning from texts instead of being possibly swayed by any 'message' the words might convey" (Greenbaum 17).

Censorship in schools comes down to the willingness of society to trust both teachers and students to approach material intelligently. This is difficult both for the community, because the issues at stake are often unresolved in society as a whole, and for the school, because in an age of intense scrutiny the public educational system cannot afford to be perceived as promoting one agenda over another. Nevertheless, the necessary educational context should consist, not so much of a specific program used to communicate the message of tolerance as in the case of Burroughs High School, but rather of an already existing framework for intelligent analysis. This requires community trust that teachers and students do not need to be told what a work means, but rather can be provided with the skills to form their own opinion. Greenbaum talks about how literature provides comfortable distance in which to partake in serious discussion (18). This idea brings us full circle to the purpose of *The Laramie Project* itself. The form of

the play creates a larger space than would otherwise exist, allowing dialogue to occur. It requires both its audience and actors to evaluate the content critically from their own personal context. Censorship of this work, while not as unconscionable or simple as often depicted, is an unfair lack of trust in the skill of the authors and subtlety of ideas of *The Laramie Project*, and a lamentable lack of trust in students' ability, and that of people in general, to evaluate difficult material intelligently.

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