

## The Need for Embodied Dramaturgy: The Laramie Project and Generation Z

By Carin Silkaitis\* & Zoe Rose Kriegler-Wenk‡

*20 years after the murder of Matthew Shepard, I introduced The Laramie Project to a group of undergraduate students. Observing cast members' first experience of the characters, a troubling lack of empathy to the complexity of this tragic story became apparent. Of primary concern was that decades of progress made towards LGBTQIA equality stripped this story of its relevance. Geographic and generational bias is natural and expected but ultimately requires a new dramaturgical approach. We offer reflections on the methodology developed to address this gap: an embodied dramaturgical approach to our pre-production work culminating in a full cast and crew research trip to Laramie, Wyoming. Through photos, video, soundscapes and observations, we illuminate the impacts of using a place-based, psycho-somatic sensory approach to dramaturgical research. This experience created physical and emotional transformation in the participants that can inform future dramaturgical work particularly for stories that are deeply unknown and unfamiliar to the cast and crew. Together, we found that stories like "The Laramie Project" continue to be relevant. Although progress has been great, the threat of anti-LGBTQIA violence is still very real for many people. Employing an embodied approach can enhance storytelling and empower further progress with the benefit of today's experience.*

### Introduction

"You [...] left him out there by himself, but he wasn't alone. [...] First he had the beautiful night sky and the same stars and the moon that we used to see through a telescope. Then he had the daylight and the sun to shine on him. And through it all he was breathing in the scent of pine trees from the snowy range. He heard the wind, the ever-present Wyoming wind, for the last time."<sup>1</sup>

Walking in the shoes of the perpetrators in Matthew Shepard's murder, tracing their paths through the grass and touching the iconic fence, had a deep and profound effect on our bodies. *This* fence: a national symbol of violence and hate. The same fence that Matthew was tied to for 18 hours, under that vast, pine-scented sky.

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1. Moisés Kaufman, and Members of Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project* (Dramatist Play Service, 2001), 84-85.



**Figure 1.** *Fence in Laramie Wyoming, 2018*

Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

As theatre-makers we are drawn to stories that hold a mirror up to society. We look for material that reveals truths that push us to consider how we can build a more equitable, more just world. The sheer brutality of the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie Wyoming in 1998 focused international attention on homophobia and led to the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which President Obama signed into law in October 2009. In the wake of intense national outrage, Tectonic Theater Project's Artistic Director Moisés Kaufman asked his company: What can we as theatre artists do as a response to this incident? Is theatre a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?

The next question is, of course, "How?" Tectonic's *The Laramie Project* is a striking example of theatrical activism by way of embodied approaches to research and composition. The play engages queer histories, and provides a foundation for intergenerational dialogue, site-specific research, and community engagement. Tectonic Theater Project accomplishes this by prioritizing the experiential aspects of performance research.

If a painter wants to learn to paint, they need to get into the studio and put paint to canvas. A sculptor has to acquire the physical materials and begin to sculpt. If we want to explore how the theatre, not simply *text*, is able to tell a story, then we have to create that story in the rehearsal room using all of the elements of the stage (lights, sound, architecture, costumes, props). Moisés Kaufman says, "this way it will carry within it the DNA of what's theatrical. If we

want to explore WHAT happens onstage – we must also examine *how* what happens onstage can be created.”<sup>2</sup>

Prior to in-studio experimentation, Tectonic is committed to active documentation and engagement with their source material. When company members went to Laramie, it was with open ears and a commitment to not only document, but truly embody the words of Laramie’s residents. This approach is not only beneficial to the artistic quality of the production, but actively communicates compassion towards those who have witnessed or experienced the trauma of Matthew Shepard’s murder. Given the prejudice lumped onto the town of Laramie in the wake of this tragedy, the pathway towards rebuilding connection and inviting dialogue can only grow from a foundation of reciprocal trust, respect and validation. Tectonic engaged with and documented the town sensorially and kinesthetically, in direct conversation with the people and the place. In the compositional phase of *The Laramie Project*, the creators avoided large scale rewrites, additions or fabrications, and focused instead on elevating the material gathered from the town itself.

It wasn’t until my third time directing *The Laramie Project* that I understood just how essential site-specific research is to the rehearsal process. This article will map the progression from my first engagement with the text of *The Laramie Project* through a twentieth anniversary production that revealed the importance of embodied dramaturgy in fostering intergenerational dialogue with regards to LGBTQA+ social histories.

The first time I directed the play, it was brand-new. I produced a staged reading with a few costume pieces, music stands, and sparse lighting shifts. We focused on the text. I wanted to highlight the story, the language, the many character shifts and the process. We delved deep into *how* to step into someone else’s voice and how to embody a number of different characters (10 or more) within the span of a few hours. We did this with a mix of Rudolf Laban’s *Efforts*<sup>3</sup> and Loyd Williamson’s<sup>4</sup> movement pedagogy focused on identifying weight, direction, speed and flow. In an attempt to avoid caricature and bring truthfulness to the piece, we dedicated a lot of time to table work and research into the people the play is based on.

My second journey into the pages of *The Laramie Project* began in 2007, when I realized I wanted to direct a 10th Anniversary production to commemorate Matthew Shepard’s death. I knew I wanted to keep the same “frame” for the play that Tectonic used; eight actors playing multiple roles and speaking in direct address to the audience. I invited Kelli Simpkins to our campus to do a “Moment

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2. Kaufman and Barbara Pitts McAdams, *Moment Work: Tectonic Theater Project’s Process of Devising Theater* (Vintage, 2018), 20.

3. Rudolf Laban was a dancer, choreographer, and theorist of expressionist dance.

4. Williamson technique is a movement pedagogy for actors based on a physical process of communication.

Workshop.” Kelli is a Chicago actor, Tectonic Theater Project ensemble member, and one of the original writers of *The Laramie Project*. The students responded to the workshop in incredibly dynamic ways. They were more confident in movement and gesture work. The room was alive with ideas!

In an attempt to embody the characters and differentiate between them, I combined our exploration of Moment Work<sup>5</sup> with a focus on the physical world of the play. This rehearsal process brought me one step closer to understanding the importance of bringing body and place into the dramaturgical conversation. I watched students come alive within their characters through physical and sensorial exploration, and by participating in workshops detailing Tectonic Theater Project’s compositional process. This embodied engagement unlocked key theatrical insight that could not have been gleaned from traditional dramaturgical research or rehearsal strategies.

In keeping with Tectonic’s focus on community engagement, we worked hard to engage *our* audience in a variety of ways. Student artists and I visited classrooms and we worked with our campus radio station to broadcast a variety of programming related to the play. We also collaborated with a number of other departments and hosted a campus-wide discussion with Kelli, who returned as part of our ongoing collaboration. The show and the discussion were extremely well-attended, with close to 400 people in the audience and at least 250 present for the post-show discussion.

That said, we also received some pushback. We ended up on a Westboro Baptist Church picket list, several students objected to content, one costumer quit the show because of the themes of the play, and many audience members walked out of the production. The show provoked strong responses, but I tried to make the controversy an opportunity for engaged learning by urging the students who remained on the project to consider what it means to have your art become a lightning rod for hatred. What do you do? How do you respond? The answer will likely be different for each person, but I believe the act of asking the questions together was its own pedagogy, one that pushed them to consider how they would handle such controversies in their own professional lives.

My first two experiences directing *The Laramie Project* were rich investigations of how to engage emotionally, physically and collectively with vulnerable and essential performance material. Those processes brought deep revelation and empathy to the text and strengthened my commitment to embodied research and community engagement. I was prepared to embark on a

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5. A moment, according to Tectonic, is a self-contained theatrical unit. “Moment Work” was coined by Tectonic to describe the process of creating these individual self-contained theatrical units. Then, the units can be sequenced together into, “theatrical phrases or sentences” that will eventually become a play: Kaufman and McAdams, *Moment Work: Tectonic Theater Project’s Process of Devising Theater*, 2018, 29.

similar process in 2018 when I directed the piece for a third time. But this time, something was different.

### *The Laramie Project and Generation Z*

20 years after the murder of Matthew Sheppard, I introduced the material to a group of undergraduates. As I listened to the cast read these characters, I was struck by the stereotypes they inadvertently presented. I noticed right away that they didn't seem to *feel* much for these people. As I continued to ask questions of my cast, I realized they thought very little of residents of some "hick town" who murdered a gay kid. They put on voices and opinions about the characters.

I attempted to break down some of these stereotypes in an open discussion with my cast. At the time the piece was created, Moisés Kauffman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project also noticed that media outlets portrayed Laramie as a town of rednecks and hillbillies. They realized that many people from outside Laramie thought that what happened to Shepard could happen in "a town like that," but it would *never* happen in a big metropolis or near a coast. When prompted to explore a perceived lack of emotional connection to the material, one of my cast members in 2018 said, "Everybody's queer now, so it's no big deal."

As educators and artists, we look forward to a reality in which physical and emotional violence is relegated to the past, and yet, it is easy to jump to privileged generalizations based on geographic location, socio-economic status and political affiliation. We begin to position our own liberal, urban perspectives in opposition to the perspectives of those who come from conservative or rural roots; thus creating a dichotomy that promotes an "either or" mindset instead of acknowledging a spectrum of experience and identity.

How do we celebrate significant progress in the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities while simultaneously acknowledging that things are not better for everyone? How do we acknowledge that things are not better for everyone without perpetuating the narrative that all non-urban and non-liberal spaces are morally corrupt? The cast's ingrained geographic and generational bias was likely a natural result of their lived experiences, but this mindset does not necessarily do justice to the material or the methodology used to create and compose the piece.

I began to question if the story of Mathew Sheppard was relevant to the day-to-day experience of a young audience, but came to the conclusion that it is relevant specifically *because* it seemed far removed. This break, this jump, this distancing, is rich material for further theatrical investigation. Why? In the pursuit of what? Connection? Empathy? Family? Yes. Perhaps, the question is not, "Should we attempt to bridge this gap?" but "How?" When something seems

culturally distant, how do we connect with it? How do we create art that comes as much from the body and the heart as it does from the mind?

The first step is to work holistically: engage the body, train it to notice and be sensitive to external and internal stimuli. This requires dedication and trust in the process, along with the willingness to be vulnerable to the external world, and to engage fully with sensation. It was Guy Debord<sup>6</sup> who articulated a form of artistic and political research that began with wandering through a cityscape: "The *derive* may lack a clear destination but it is not without purpose. On the contrary the *deriveur* is conducting a psychogeographical investigation and is expected to return home having noticed the ways in which the areas traversed resonate with particular moods and ambiances."<sup>7</sup> Here, Debord emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the emotional and physical effects of noticing the geography through which the artist travels. To borrow wisdom from another knowledgeable artist, Gertrude Stein writes: "A walk is not where the door shows a light, a walk is where there is a request to describe a description. A walk is when a place is not to be exchanged."<sup>8</sup> Stein draws an essential link between the act of walking and the place in which the action of walking occurs. In order for a walk to earn its name, it must include an essential place and the inclination towards description and dialogue. John Berger sheds some light on our temporal relationship to place: "The events which take place in the field [...] acquire a special significance because they occur during the minute or two during which I am obliged to wait. It is as though these minutes fill a certain area of time which exactly fits the spatial area of the field. Time and space conjoin."<sup>9</sup> According to Berger, it is precisely the act of being physically present in the field and allowing time for embodied observation that causes the revelation of meaning and the unification of a previously disparate time and space.

To understand why something happened, you have to enter into conversation with that place. I decided right there at that first reading, **we were going to Laramie, Wyoming**. The cast was going to walk through the town, and talk with the people, walk through Shepard's final night in Laramie, sit at that fence, listen to the Wyoming wind and breathe in the night sky. I wanted them to take it all in, to engage themselves more deeply, so we might have a more genuinely intergenerational collaboration and achieve a nuanced production that respected the stakes of history.

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6. Guy Debord was a French Marxist theorist, artist and founding member of the Situationist International.

7. Debord as quoted in Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Pocket Essentials, 2006), 96.

8. Gertrude Stein, *Geography & Plays* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 113.

9. John Berger, *About Looking "The Field"* (New York: Random House Inc., 1980), 200.



**Figure 2.** *Laramie Wyoming Population Sign, 2018*

Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

### Site-Specific Research and Embodied Dramaturgy

We arrived in Laramie and the first person we encountered was a server at a local restaurant. She seemed as if she walked off the pages of *The Laramie Project*. She regaled us with stories, made fun of herself for being a “terrible server,” and told us that Laramie is “not that kind of place... you know... where people hate on people for being... you know... different.” We exchanged glances, realizing that this was nearly a direct quote from the play. We headed to the hotel, noticing that Big Sky Country was aptly named; it seemed as if the deep blue sky would swallow us whole.

We settled into the hotel and made plans for interviews, video work, photography, and exploration. There were 11 of us: eight actors, two faculty members, and our composer/sound designer. We made some preliminary contacts before we left: faculty members at the University of Wyoming and a dispatch officer at the police station. The residents of the town were welcoming and chatty. Everyone was wondering where we came from and why we were there. Everyone had an opinion about the event of Shepard’s death.

It came time for us to travel outside of town to find the fence to which Shepard had been tied and left for dead. We were meeting Don, a University of Wyoming Professor, near the site. He lived one house over from the fence. We pulled over to the side of the road after encountering a large, angry sign scrawled



in red paint that read: "PRIVATE PROPERTY. DO NOT ENTER." We knew we were in the right place.

Soon a pickup truck pulled up alongside us. It was Don. He said his neighbors were tired of people coming to visit the site. He said, "It's been 20 years now... and they're still coming." He was excited that we were from Chicago. He invited us to follow him to his house. This man allowed us to come onto his private property, camp out for a day in his driveway, and even called his neighbors to get us access to the fence. His neighbor, "shotgun Larry," still owned the property and that fence, and, according to Don, he would shoot before asking questions. Needless to say, we were thankful we had permission.

We were also thankful we were able to spend time at the fence. It affected us deeply and profoundly. Our composer, Chris Kent, wrote an original song from the perspective of Matthew's mother, Judy Shepard. The lyrics swung seamlessly between imagery of the Wyoming landscape and Judy's journey from grief to hope. As a companion to the song, Chris recorded hours of the Wyoming wind. That particular sound, the sound of the wind that was so very powerful right at the fence, is something I will never forget:

*I see the same sky - you saw that night  
I hear the same Wyoming wind... howling  
Dust in my eyes - was the same dust in yours  
I cry the same way... you were crying<sup>10</sup>*



**Figure 3.** *Cast Member at the Fence, 2018*  
Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

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10. Original lyrics by Chris Kent (2018).



In addition to the wind, there were smaller, subtler sounds that became essential to our aural exploration. Chris recorded a family of deer; first running parallel to the fence, then eating grass and moving over the landscape. These deer were remarkable, not only in their natural stature and grace, but also because of their constant presence across multiple visits to the fence.

When we first approached, one of my students noticed the deer right away: a beautiful, large family. As we got closer, the deer ran from us, but they didn't go far. They gave us space to explore the area surrounding the fence, but chose not to leave. There was something so perfect about their presence, as if they were watching over this sacred place. I made eye contact with several of them. We studied each other.

*You were the strong one - Fearless and bright  
A friend to all who - crossed your path  
You were a wanderer - gentle and kind  
A son and brother... a voice for these times<sup>11</sup>*



**Figure 4.** *Cast Member at the Fence, 2018*

Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

The second time we visited the fence, there were only four of us. Two of my students' flights were delayed, so Chris and I took them back to the spot. The deer were there, but this time they didn't run as far. Chris was able to get much

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11. Original lyrics by Chris Kent (2018).

closer to them and record their movements in and out of the grass. It was magical: a spark of hope at the site of a tragedy.

*When the leaves make their fall  
I'm reminded... I'm reminded...  
To keep on*

*Keep me hopeful... keep me moving...  
Keep me hopeful... keep me movin', movin', movin'  
Keep me hopeful... keep me movin'<sup>12</sup>*



**Figure 5.** *Carin Silkaitis at the Fence, 2018*

Source: original photo by Chris Kent.

The wind, the deer, the trees and the birds; all sounds that would have accompanied Matthew's final hours on this earth: 18 hours to be exact. Listening to the landscape recordings, it was impossible to not imagine what it must have been like for Matthew, tied to that fence, with nature as his only companion.

*As the sun goes down  
I can almost... I can almost...  
Feel you here  
Cuz you are the stars  
That shine... that guide me home  
And you are the wind  
That keeps me hopeful - keeps me moving<sup>13</sup>*

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12. Original Lyrics by Chris Kent (2018).



**Figure 6.** *Chris Kent Sings Their Original Song at the Fence, 2018*  
Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

Chris' choice to compose lyrics from the perspective of Matthew's mother made the story personal, connecting the cosmic wonder of the Laramie landscape with a specific experience of loss and hope. A quote from Valeria Luiselli's novel, *Lost Children Archive*, comes to mind: "Conversations, in a family, become linguistic archaeology. [...] The question is, when, in the future, we dig into our intimate archive, replay our family tape, will it amount to a story? A soundscape?"<sup>14</sup> We cannot claim a biological place in the Shepard family, but it is a story that resonates, in the broader cultural sense, with a more global community. What were we doing in Laramie if not excavating an archival tape, replaying it through a harmony of new voices and asking ourselves, "How do we tell this story?" The inclusion of a soundscape in the final performance was simply essential.

Chris also recorded audio from the police station and the courthouse. They recorded the busy, work-day symphony of Poudre Valley Hospital and the bustling chatter of a local cafe. Creating music and recording sound throughout

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13. Original lyrics by Chris Kent (2018).

14. Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).

Laramie reminded us to take the time to pause and to *listen* to our surroundings. We found the emotional core of Laramie when we took the time to tune in with all of our senses. The deceptively simple task of embodied listening brought out the visceral, emotional core of Matthew's story. To borrow from Dr. Shrinkhla Sahai: "The theatre of sounds is an emotional, intimate, powerful theatre. It is the theatre of screams, whispers, words and silence."<sup>15</sup> I could not agree more. Suddenly our connection to the material was no longer stagnant, instead it ran rhythmically and intimately through our bodies.

The cast member who played the doctor in charge of Matthew's case physically changed as he stood outside the red brick walls of the Poudre Valley hospital. We put him in a dress shirt and lab coat and videotaped his lines outside that hospital, as if we were giving a press conference. Doctors and nurses passed by on their lunch breaks and asked what we were doing. When I explained our dramaturgical research, their bodies took on the slump of quiet resignation and their voices took on the soft irritability of an unwelcome memory. They wished us the best and told us they would let security know why we were there. The exchange took place against the backdrop of sirens, the open and close of emergency room doors and the scattered conversation of doctors and nurses entering and exiting the building. The actor's body took on the weight of those lines as he stood in the very spot where Rulon Stacey told the entire world that Matthew succumbed to his injuries. It was in that spot that Stacey teared up when relaying Matthew's mother's words: "Go home, give your kids a hug, and don't let a day go by without telling them you love them."<sup>16</sup> It was this slip in emotional composure that prompted open hostility towards Rulon Stacey from a viewer who jumped at the opportunity to redefine empathy as weakness: "Do you cry like a baby on TV for all your patients or just the faggots?"<sup>17</sup>

Standing there, within the cacophony of daily life and sporadic tragedy, the actor, usually bubbly cheerful, began to cry too. At one point, an emotional family rushed into the hospital through the sliding doors. We stopped filming out of respect. We were trying to understand and embody a tragedy of the past, while these people were experiencing it in real time. However well-intentioned our dramaturgical process was, we were reminded of our distance from the event itself and the privilege that this distance inherently holds. We chose to come to Laramie to search for the emotional core of this play through sensorial interactions with the place. By showing up emotionally and physically, we found a bridge between a cast of Chicago-based undergraduates in 2018 and Laramie Wyoming in 1998. And still, bearing witness to an unknown family rushing through emergency

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15. Shrinkhla Sahai, "Exploring a Theatre of Sounds," in *Proceeding of Sound, Sight, Space and Play 2009 Postgraduate Symposium for the Creative Sonic Arts* (United Kingdom: De Montfort University Leicester, 6-8 May 2009).

16. *The Laramie Project* (2001), 69.

17. *The Laramie Project* (2001), 69.

room doors poked holes in our constructed memory and caused us pause. This was grief; fresh and fueled by the adrenaline of the unfathomable. Our proximity to this intimate outpouring of emotion, however brief, sunk heavily into our already weighted bodies. We would carry their story into our production in some small, intangible way, hoping to pay homage to their personal heartache with the same care we applied to the national debate sparked by Matthew's death.

Our trip to Laramie as an ensemble gave us the inkling of a process worth further exploration and reminded us of the importance of considering the actors' bodies in conversation with the place. The work of embodying the other is, in and of itself, a task of radical empathy; one that requires physical and sensorial immersion. This engaged artistic approach, most importantly, helped bridge the generational gap between my students and Mathew, and to feel the stakes of the tenuous, shaky social gains that the LGBTQIA+ community has made over the course of several decades.



**Figure 7.** *Twentieth Anniversary Production of The Laramie Project, North Central College, 2018*

Source: original photo by Carin Silkaitis.

### **Performance as a Platform for Intergenerational Dialogue**

When we performed our 2018 production of *The Laramie Project*, we repeated some of the forms of audience engagement we had used for the 2008 production: spreading campus-wide messaging about the play and offering myself or members of the cast for class visits. We also reached out to local high schools with some success. An English teacher asked us to come perform a few pieces and talk with her class about the show. We brought Kelli Simpkins back to do an audience

talk-back. Almost 100% of the audience members stayed for the discussion. That night, as a way of extending intergenerational pedagogy and mentorship, I invited my cast from 10 years ago to join the new cast in a long pre-show dinner and discussion. Five of the original eight cast members traveled to Naperville to join us. I wanted them to have the opportunity to talk about their respective experiences working on this production. We also invited the cast from 10 years ago to join Simpkins on stage for the talkback, and the audience had so many questions for the previous performers.

Listening to their perspective on performing this play was fascinating. They were quite moved watching the new cast, and they all reported how much *they* would have wanted to travel to Laramie to do that kind of embodied dramaturgical work. They also found themselves moved quite differently now that they were 10 years older. They spoke beautifully about what has changed in our world and what has remained the same (or, in some cases, gotten worse.) This kind of dialogue prompted an intergenerational connection that deepened student learning, alumni relationships, and the sensory and intellectual experiences of the community members. We need each other as much now as we did ten years ago, and we will continue to need each other in order to make meaningful progress towards a more just world.

In the words of our composer and sound designer:

*[...] you are the stars  
That shine... that guide me home  
And you are the wind  
That keeps me hopeful - keeps me moving.*<sup>18</sup>

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18. Original Lyrics by Chris Kent (2018).



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