

A cry in the desert

The movie is not exactly new anymore, and it's based on events that happened far away. But last week I decided that in spite of the inescapable brutality, this was a drama I needed to know more about.

The basic outline is familiar. A man was taken away by hate-filled tormentors, who beat him savagely, fixed him to a wooden post, and left him to die a lingering death. The person who removes his motionless body, many hours later, says that his face is hardly visible through the gore, except where narrow rivers of tears had washed away the blood.

Who was to blame for the horrific act? Must someone be made to suffer and die for this crime? What might forgiveness mean? Can any spiritual good arise from such tragedy?

The Tectonic Theatre Company set out to explore these issues, and their work eventually became *The Laramie Project*, a movie which premiered at the 2002 Sundance Festival. The movie is named after the university town in eastern Wyoming, where a 22-year-old student named Matthew Shepard was beaten, tied to a fence post out on the high plains, and left for dead, in October, 1998.

Shepard was murdered because he was gay. At least a dozen other people in North America are murdered each year, just because of their sexual orientation, and few of these events reach public consciousness. Why did the story of Matthew Shepard lead nightly newscasts for a week running? Perhaps this is part of the explanation: instead of dying right away, Shepard remained in a coma for five days. During that time, millions of people learned of the unspeakable cruelty Shepard had endured, and had an opportunity to pray for his survival. Millions of people had a chance to care about him, and then millions of people were moved to mourn his passing.

After the throngs of reporters had gone home, the 25,000 residents of Laramie were left with their own questions: Is our town a

hotbed of bigotry? Did the victim deserve what he got? Should his murderers be executed? Should gay people feel safe in a small town?

The Tectonic Theatre Company pieced together a masterful docudrama based on 400 hours of conversations with Laramie residents. The focus is not so much on the bloody murder, as on the emotional aftermath for the survivors.

By the end of the film, the tone is cautiously hopeful. One gay man, who had lived in Laramie for decades, recounts his elation when a tribute to Shepard during a homecoming

parade spontaneously grew to include hundreds of people. Shepard's parents talk about support they have received from across the country, and they have established a charitable foundation dedicated to embracing diversity.

Yet as more recent headlines remind us, the struggle for fairness is by no means over. Many gay people still feel they are safe only if they are invisible. One gay man who returned to rural Wyoming wryly sums up what often passes for tolerance: "I won't tell you that I'm a fag, and you won't beat the crap out of me' ... what's so great about that? that's a great philosophy?"

During the trial of Shepard's murderers, a small group of men carried signs proclaiming that Shepard would burn in hell. And a local minister tells interviewers that he hopes Shepard had some conscious hours, while he was tied to that fence post on a hill, during which to reconsider his sinful lifestyle.

Was Shepard conscious? Did he pray for forgiveness, for himself or for his torturers? Did he pray for vengeance? Did he pray at all? We can only guess. Perhaps, like another man who suffered fatal blows of hatred, Matthew Shepard pierced the dark sky with a cry of anguish: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The Laramie Project is available on DVD and VHS.

