

# The laramie project essay

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Source: Drama for Students. Ed. Anne Marie Hacht. Vol. 22.

Detroit: Gale, 2006. From Literature Resource Center. Document Type: Critical essay Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2006 Gale, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* is most often referred to as a docudrama, a play that is largely based on real facts. To this point, the play is all but a work of nonfiction. But despite the fact that the basic elements of the play are based on actual events with their own inherent drama, Kaufman's talents as a playwright were used to enhance the emotional impact of the events and thus create an atmosphere that ultimately stirred his audience more than just the reading of the actual events might have caused. The question is then, how did he do this? How did he formulate the play in such a way that he made the events come alive not with just the details but with all the complexities that surrounded the crime? How did he piece together not only the central events of Matthew Shepard's murder, but also the information that he and the members of Tectonic Theater Project gathered? How did Kaufman arrange his material so that people who came to see the play were stirred to the point of wanting to ask more questions of themselves, of their community, and of their society as a whole? In other words, how did Kaufman turn real events into a work of creative theatrical drama? Pay attention to this, the playwright seems to be yelling. This is important, and I am not going to let you go without feeling the incredible and unforgettable drama of it all.

Most of these questions can be answered in a very simple way. The overall tool that Kaufman uses to create drama is contrast. But what is less obvious is how he uses this tool. To begin this exploration, one needs to go no further

<https://assignbuster.com/the-laramie-project-essay/>

than the beginning of the first act. It is here that readers can witness how the playwright pits one thought against another, as he dives into the interviews and arranges the sentences of each interviewee so that one stands either in partial or complete contradiction with the other.

For example, several townspeople offer background information about what life, under normal circumstances, is like in Wyoming. You have an opportunity to be happy in your life here,” states Rebecca Hilliker, a professor at the University of Wyoming, where Matthew Shepard attended classes. The setting that Hilliker describes is in stark contrast to the circumstances that are about to be discussed, of course.

But it is through contradictions such as this that Kaufman plays with the emotions of his audience. Another example occurs when Kaufman offers the statement of Philip Dubois, president of the same university. Dubois describes how safe he feels living in Wyoming.

In contrast to what he would do if he lived in a large city, in Laramie Dubois allows his children to play unsupervised outside at night. “ My kids play out at night till eleven and I don’t think twice about it,” Dubois says. This statement resonates with the audience, which is already aware that Shepard was killed at night, possibly in a similar location in which Dubois’s children might have played.

It is in this way that Kaufman sprays a mist of emotional colors throughout his play, teasing his audience first in one direction, than jerking them abruptly to the other edge of the spectrum. Even though the general consensus of the interviewees at the beginning of the play is that of peace

and the belief that Wyoming is a nice place to live, Kaufman weaves through these positive comments statements that hint otherwise. Another example is the comment of Doc O'Connor, a relatively new arrival to Wyoming. Although O'Connor agrees that Wyoming is a great place to live, he adds a sinister touch to his statement. "They say the Wyoming wind'll drive a man insane," he says. By including O'Connor's statement, Kaufman throws out yet another hint of the macabre acts that are later recorded—the brutal and irrational beating of Shepard.

O'Connor's comment thus becomes a type of foreshadowing of the murder or at least a warning that crazy things have previously occurred in Wyoming. It is in this way that the audience—which at first was being lulled into believing in an idyllic environment and is shown a virtual-Wyoming, where everyone is happy and where the "live and let live" attitude of the state's residents allows a seemingly unusual sense of freedom—is suddenly (and quite subtly) reminded that something dreadful is lurking in the background. Let the audience beware, Kaufman is suggesting. All is not perpetual goodness in this so-called paradise. So although Kaufman appears to be delivering just the facts of the case, he is cleverly manipulating the information. He could easily claim that he is only re-iterating the statements of the people he interviewed. And this is partially true. But by craftily layering one person's sentence upon another person's, Kaufman orchestrates the overall effect just as inventively as a composer who connects one note to another to build a musical work that creates a symphony that stirs the emotions.

Yes, Kaufman raises a lot of questions that he leaves for his audience to answer for themselves. However, the questions that arise are the questions that Kaufman wants the audience to take home with them. Another example of how Kaufman uses contrast to provide drama is shown with the presentation of the crime scene, which he does in several different ways. Each time the audience is taken there, the emotional reaction is purposefully deepened. The first mention of the field where Shepard was killed takes place in the beginning of the play. Sergeant Hing is talking about the Wyoming landscape and about how he took some reporters to the murder scene. Hing speaks about the area where Shepard was beaten as being a beautiful place.

On the day he took the reporters there, Hing recounts that the sky was blue and the mountains had a dusting of snow on them. The area, Hing states, is a popular place with bikers and joggers. Upon hearing this, one reporter asks: “ Who in the hell would want to run out here? ” To which Hing confides that he thought this woman was “ missing the point. ” Hing felt that the media was stupid because they could not turn around and see the beauty of the land. “ They were just-nothing but the story,” Hing explains.

In other words, Hing has all but erased the memory of the murder that occurred at that place. He was in love with the land and, no matter what had happened there on that specific spot of land, all he saw was the beauty of the surrounding landscape. The reporters, however, were living in a completely different world. They had, of course, come to cover the story, but more than that, they felt the ghost of the murder around them when they stood on that spot. They could not be there and not have their minds

cluttered by the thoughts of despair and death as Shepard lay dying there after the beating. These reporters, most of whom had come from outside of Wyoming, looked at the crime scene with eyes focused on only one thing—the brutal murder of a young student. For Hing, Shepard’s murder might be one of many he has had to investigate, and he might be questioning why the Shepard case had gained such national attention. And Kaufman, through Hing, might want his audience to ask the same question.

Why was Shepard’s death more relevant than hundreds of other murders that had taken place that year? Why had the crime become so momentous it had caused a media frenzy? Whatever the reason for Kaufman’s use of these contrasting visions, the results pull the audience into the play. And Kaufman knows that the more an audience invests, the more emotionally involved the audience will become in his play. As act 1 closes, Kaufman takes the audience back to the crime scene. It begins with one of Kaufman’s “moments,” which has the subtitle “The Fence.” Stephen Mead Johnson introduces this section by telling the audience how this area has become a place of pilgrimage. Johnson’s depiction of the area drastically differs from the previous one given by Hing.

It is so stark and so empty and you can’t help but think of Matthew out there for eighteen hours in nearly freezing temperatures,” Johnson says. Then he relates Shepard’s experience to the suffering of Christ on the cross by quoting from the Bible “God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” This is the first real reference to Shepard’s pain. Previously, the accounts of his death are mentioned merely in an unemotional way. A few details are

provided but there is nothing mentioned of the pain. A young man was killed, is all the audience is really told up until this scene.

After Johnson's reference to the suffering that Shepard must have experienced, a member of Tectonic Theater Projects intensifies this moment by offering his own personal reactions to having visited the crime scene. " I broke down the minute I touched it [the fence]. " Now the audience not only has a visual image of the fence, they also have a sense of having touched it. And in doing so, the audience is touched in return.

The first act closes with commentary from people who were there on the night of the crime. First there is Aaron Kreifels, the young man who found Shepard. Next is a report from Officer Reggie Fluty, the first police officer on the scene. And the third person interjected into this part of the play is Dr.

Cantway, the physician on duty at the emergency room where Shepard was taken. All the bloody details are provided by these three people. And through them, Kaufman provides the audience with an in-your-face reproduction of that night.

From three different points of view, the audience sees Shepard's bloody body through the experience of the young boy who found him and called for help. Then Fluty describes the scene in a very clinical manner, noting such things as the position of his body and the way Shepard was tied to the fence. And the doctor, despite all the wounds he has seen in the past, describes the horror of discovering the unimaginable destruction caused by one human upon another. This is not going to be an easy play to sit through, the audience must be thinking at this point.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-laramie-project-essay/>

Kaufman is not going to allow anyone in the audience to passively watch and listen as the story encapsulated in the play unfolds. Kaufman has masterfully crafted this work of art, slowly wrapping his fingers around each person's heart and squeezing it. Pay attention to this, the playwright seems to be yelling. This is important, and I am not going to let you go without feeling the incredible and unforgettable drama of it all. Source CitationHart, Joyce. "Critical Essay on ' The Laramie Project'. " Drama for Students.

Ed. Anne Marie Hacht. Vol. 22.

Detroit: Gale, 2006. Literature Resource Center. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.

Document URL [http://ezproxy.gpc.edu:2126/ps/i.do? &id= GALE  
%7CH1420067172&v= 2.](http://ezproxy.gpc.edu:2126/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1420067172&v=2)

1&u= clar34424&it= r&p= LitRC&sw= w Gale Document Number: GALE|  
H1420067172