

General Audience Discussion Guide

The Laramie Project invites response. Everyone's response will be different, because it will stir up different things in each person. As you discuss what you have just experienced and what it has stirred up in you, take a page from what the Tectonic Theater Project folks did in their conversations with the people of Laramie: suspend judgment and exercise curiosity. Here are some pieces of background information and discussion prompts you may find helpful in your conversations.

- **Docudrama:** *The Laramie Project* is a docudrama, a specific kind of theater that is quite familiar to Bethany audiences! We often present stories of actual people and events on the Bethany stage. But this play is unique in that every word spoken in the show comes from an interview, a journal entry, or a news story. In other words, the “writers” didn’t actually write lines for people. They quilted together the actual words spoken by these real-life people. Put another way, this play is a fact-based representation of events, in which the primary concern is to present the truth of what really happened.
 - The Tectonic Theater Project members maintained relationships with many of the people they interviewed. One continuing relationship was between Greg Pierotti and Marge Murray. Greg was with her when she died.
 - ***Did the people in this play remind you of any people you know?***
 - ***Look up people portrayed in this show and learn more about them!***
- **The Setting:** At the time of the events of this play, Laramie, Wyoming was about the size of Goshen. It’s home to the University of Wyoming. Like Goshen, it has a small-town feel, and also like Goshen, the college plays a big role in the identity of the town.
 - Everyone is connected to everyone in Laramie.
 - There is a divide between the “university people” and the “town people.” This often manifests itself in distrust.
 - In the Goshen area, we are used to a much denser population than there is in the Laramie area. In western towns like Laramie, there is usually a lot of wide-open prairie between towns, with occasional ranches popping up. Large spaces and low population density make us move differently in the world.
 - ***Where did you see some of these small-town dynamics in the play?***
 - ***Look Laramie and the state of Wyoming up on a map and notice the space between towns, the layout of towns in accordance with the railroad, population density,...***
- **Moment Work:** “Moment Work™ is the process we use at Tectonic. Used to create classic works such as *The Laramie Project*, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, and *33 Variations*, Moment Work™ explores the theatrical potential of all the elements of the stage (props, sound, architecture, lights, costume, etc.) in order to create strong theatrical and dramatic narratives. The technique is our attempt to create theatrical narratives from the ground up—in other words, to “write performance” as opposed to “writing text.” When we start work on a new play, we start with an idea, or a “hunch,” and then we go into the rehearsal room to explore it through Moment Work™. In this way, company members are encouraged to dream about the material they find

compelling in a theatrical setting. Moment Work™ gives us the freedom to create individual, self-contained theatrical units (Moments) and then sequence these units together into theatrical phrases or sentences that will eventually become a play.” (from tectonictheaterproject.org)

- This production incorporated a lot more light and sound work than most of our plays do. With a realistic acting style and simple staging, the theatricality of the play came more from lights and sound.
- We practiced moment work as we prepared this production. Here’s one exercise we did that you may want to try!
 - ***Place a collection of random “props” (chairs, household items…) in the middle of the room.***
 - ***Take turns coming to the props and choosing one to present in a way other than its intended use. When you’re ready, say “I begin,” and utilize the prop. When you’re done, say, “I end,” and set it down. For example, one of our actors picked up a step stool and held it over his head so he was peeking out between the steps. He said, “I begin,” and proceeded to walk like he was in zero-gravity, transforming the prop into an astronaut helmet.” After a few steps, he said, “I end,” and set it down.***
 - ***After you’ve found your way with this exercise, add a twist. When a person begins, ask, “How can we further theatricalize this moment?” Add other people/props, sound, and lights. In the example above, maybe you turn the lights off and shine a flashlight on the “astronaut” while making wind sounds.***
- **Faith Leaders:** There are five faith leaders portrayed in this play: a Catholic priest, a Mormon ecclesiastical leader, a Baptist minister, a Unitarian minister, and Fred Phelps (who was not from Laramie, but from Kansas). These leaders each responded very differently to what happened in Laramie. The four local leaders all had layers of complexity to their responses, including relationships with the perpetrators (Russell was Mormon, and Aaron attended the Baptist church occasionally).
 - ***When did these leaders respond in ways that “rang true” for you?***
 - ***When did you find yourself flinching or uncomfortable with their responses?***
 - ***If you have a faith community, how do you think your community and leaders would respond to a crisis like this?***
- **Spirituality in *The Laramie Project*:** Many of the people in this play wrestle with their faith, wrestle with making faith-sense of what happened. And even aside from the explicit references to God, there is an undercurrent of spirituality in the play. In research, we have learned that church and spirituality were very important to Matthew Shepard. His family is Episcopalian (a denomination only represented by the minister in the funeral scene).
 - ***When did you sense these undercurrents in the play?***
 - ***Much of the music is faith-based. How did you find yourself responding to the music?***

- ***What is stirring in you?***
 - **Hate Crime:** “A crime, typically one involving violence, that is motivated by prejudice on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, or other grounds” (Oxford Dictionary). In Aaron McKinney’s confession, as well as in interviews with him by the Tectonic Theater Project since this play was written, he is clear that his and Russell’s actions were motivated by hate for Matthew based on his sexuality.
 - ***Look up hate crime legislation, and learn more about the process of its development.***
 - ***How do you think hate crime should be addressed?***
- **Other Discussion Questions:** These questions, organized in no particular order, may lead to some interesting conversations!
 - ***What did you notice happening in your body as you watched the play?***
 - ***What made you uncomfortable? Excited? Angry? Sad?***
 - ***What was confusing?***
 - ***Did you ever experience more dramatic emotions, like laughter or tears? What triggered those?***
 - ***Does everything depend on perspective, or are there some universal ideas on right and wrong?***
 - ***Who is responsible for actions or beliefs: the individual of the community?***
 - ***Why do you think they did not choose to have a character playing Matthew in the play so we could see and understand the actual circumstances of his death?***
 - ***In Act III, we see a lot of characters evolve, grow, or show a change in thinking through the interview process. What changes did you notice? Do you notice any shifts in yourself?***
- **For more background information:** The Tectonic Theater Project has a guide with background information and exploration ideas in it. See <https://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/BAMLaramieStudyGuide.pdf>.
- **Practice Conversation:** One important part of our process was the conversation assignment. Students simply had a conversation with someone they didn’t know well. Some chose to talk with someone who they knew had opinions that differed from their own, and some simply chose someone they weren’t well acquainted with. This helped us understand the work of the Tectonic Theater Project better, but it also increased our empathy, raised our capacity for vulnerability, and exercised our muscles for having non-polarizing conversations. Try a conversation of your own!
 - Ask a person you don’t know well or someone you frequently disagree with to have a conversation. Maybe you want to do this over coffee, ice cream, or some other snack. Food greases our conversational gears!
 - Talk without agenda. Be curious about them. Ask them questions and draw them out. Get to know them as a human being.