

DOI: 10.1515/aa-2018-0003

Hate crime trauma and pain: Affiliation, becoming and in-Betweenness in *The Laramie Project*

Ivan Lacko

Ivan Lacko is an assistant professor at the Department of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. He teaches (and does most of his research in) theatre, American studies and literature, and popular culture. He has been involved in several performances as a practitioner, playwright and director, and regularly writes about theatre.

Abstract:

Tectonic Theater Project's documentary/verbatim theatre work entitled The Laramie Project charts the intricacies of the process of a hate crime victim's search for and acquisition of identity (becoming) and the concurrent success and failure of the community to engage in this process (affiliation). The productions, as well as the film version, of The Laramie Project tackle the crucial importance of understanding the grey area between the state of becoming (part of) something and being excluded from it (in-betweenness). This liminality, reflecting Victor Turner's illustrious ideas of "betwixt and between", shall serve to explore The Laramie Project as an attempt to show the facets of social and cultural affiliation and becoming, as well as an instrument to put them to use in socially and politically relevant theatre. The paper will seek to show how Tectonic Theater Project's work scrutinizes the significance of "in-betweenness" and employs it to communicate a message that is both humanistic and aesthetic.

Tectonic Theater Project's 2000 documentary/verbatim theatre work *The Laramie Project* succeeded in taking a stance on a traumatic historical event (the hate-motivated murder of a young gay man) by means of staging the story based on collected research material for a dramatic representation of the event in question through interviews with people who experienced the event directly. Using research and analytical methods to create *The Laramie Project* proved that a documentary/verbatim approach to devising a theatre performance can become an instrument through which a community may acquire a self-standing and independent social and cultural identity, and by means of which the theatre company can create an artistic work that will use its humanistic motivation (to address hate crime and the ensuing trauma and pain) to produce a theatre play that is both morally and aesthetically interesting.

My objective in this article is to show that *The Laramie Project* can be perceived as a hopeful/utopian performative (or narrative), as defined by Jill Dolan, who posits that utopian performatives provide “an affective vision of how the world might be better” (2005, p. 6), or more elaborately, that these are performances which make available “a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (Dolan, 2005, p. 2). In striving to achieve precisely this kind of “fleeting intimation”, Tectonic Theater Project’s creative team ultimately ended up looking for possibilities of “what alternative truth-seeking theatre can accomplish” (Fortier, 2016, p. 105), and provided audiences not only with a chance to participate in the creation of such hopeful narratives but also with an immersive experience that echoes Victor Turner’s ideas of “becoming” and the importance of the phase “betwixt and between” – two states of being (1967, pp. 93–110). Above all, however, this article endeavours to show the impact *The Laramie Project* had on communities and their collective awareness of “becoming”, as well as the importance of “in-betweenness” in the process of engaging with any relevant issues.

The murder of Matthew Shepherd, which is the central event of *The Laramie Project*, propelled a response from all corners of America’s social activism – from gay-support groups and liberal activists, through celebrities and politicians, all the way to far-right groups. Ever since, the play has acted not only as a means of testing the limits of the audience’s tolerance but also as a reminder that awareness can be raised about how such a horrid crime can become a turning point in a community’s development towards empathy and tolerance. The creative father of the project, Moisés Kaufman, has commented on the play’s history by saying that in the period following the murder “the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance” (2014). Over the years, *The Laramie Project* has sparked controversy springing from re-evaluation of the facts that led to the crime itself and following a renewed discussion about the relevance of these facts, for example, information provided by investigative journalist Stephen Jimenez about Matthew Shephard’s drug use (Bindel, 2014). On another occasion, the play became part of a nationwide discussion about political responsibility when a production of *The Laramie Project* at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. was almost cancelled because of the US government shutdown in 2013 (Wren, 2013).

One of the reasons why *The Laramie Project* is an important part of the social and cultural dialogue in the United States is the manner in which the play was conceived. Moisés

Kaufman claims that his decision to apply an investigative and analytical approach to collect material for the play was influenced by Bertolt Brecht's essay "The Street Scene", in which Brecht scrutinized how people respond to a traffic accident (and to subsequently create his well-known concept of epic theatre on the basis of this scrutiny): "[Brecht's] essay gave me an idea about how to deal with this project, in terms of both its creation and its aesthetic vocabulary" (Kaufman, 2014). As a result, Tectonic Theater Project's actors went to the town of Laramie and interviewed its people in order to accumulate sufficient material to dramatize the events of Matthew Shepherd's murder and its circumstances – this is why *The Laramie Project* is a play that became "an iconic example of a stakeholder/aesthetic performance based on systematic research" (Beck et al., 2011, p. 698). The group prepared for their staging of Shepherd's story by doing extensive "research for [the play] by conducting more than 400 hours of interviews with the townspeople of Laramie, Wyoming" (Beck et al., 2011, p. 698). Of course, most of the material was not used in the final version of the play, but the time the theatremakers spent with the people in Laramie made them part of the original story. In the manner of investigative journalists (just like Truman Capote, who became part of the community in the town of Holcomb, Kansas, when doing research for his famous non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*) the theatre company offered the people a chance to voice their opinions, feelings and concerns. As opposed to news reporters who would "arrive suddenly in droves and leave *en masse* as soon as interest dies down," Tectonic Theater Project's creative team took their time when communicating with the community – "the company stays and listens to people and the play becomes a place for them to speak in their own words" (Fortier, 2016, p. 105). This approach allowed oral history to be remediated on a theatre stage, thus providing audiences with both an authentic and aesthetic experience. In other words, the company members who conducted the interviews and then performed their research results onstage "[are] presented as [observers] who may comment on, but [do] not alter the testimony of the interviewee, who is the principal character" (Snyder-Young, 2010, p. 885).

Theorists and critics have recognized the extent and importance of the above-mentioned profound and detailed research conducted by the group and its bearing on the final theatrical result. Rich Brown, for example, elaborates on the significance of "the interplay between established creative techniques and the theoretical questions which are specific to the content [of *The Laramie Project*]" (Brown, 2005) and suggests that the deeply personal involvement of many of Tectonic Theater Project's members sparked their artistic creativity only within the limits of the research-based medium they chose to adopt. Others have opined that the script produced in this fashion "is both aesthetically rich and theoretically evocative" and that the

“[r]eception of *The Laramie Project* is reflective of the balance between form and content that the play strikes,” particularly in how the production’s “aesthetic qualities [correlate with] the political and social issues explored” (Beck et al., 2011, p. 698). Even in the presentation of the processed interviews (which were transformed into a written script), the performance maintained its docu-dramatic character, “[borrowing] heavily from aesthetic codes of documentary reporting” when the actors who were narrating the story would “introduce characters by name and social role” (Baglia and Foster, 2005, p. 135).

With the great number of productions of *The Laramie Project* – including productions performed at high schools and colleges – the play was transformed into an instrument that would help effect change in various communities (McKenna, 2014) and ultimately became a medium that can help communities (or perhaps entire nations) understand the implications of the trauma and pain brought about by hate crimes. As Mark Fortier suggests: “*The Laramie Project* was performed around the United States, and local groups are encouraged to put on the play for themselves, thus partaking more fully in the understanding of events” (2016, p. 105). In this respect, Tectonic Theater Project’s work confirmed the assumption made by Jill Dolan that in utopian performatives audiences are more than just passive recipients of theatrical content and can become “participatory publics” (2005, pp. 10–12).

Nevertheless, there are setbacks and complications as well, which is why I think it is relevant to discuss the fact that social and cultural affiliation (e.g. the simultaneous failure and success of Laramie’s community to engage) has to go through a process of becoming, thus reflecting the liminal stage Victor Turner refers to when he suggests that “the transitional-being or ‘liminal persona’ is defined by a name and by a set of symbols” (1967, p. 94). In *The Laramie Project*, this liminality is visible in the character of Matthew Shepherd, in the various members of the community and ultimately also in the fate of the play itself over the years. Several scholars pointed out the importance of doing research-based theatre responsibly, with the examined social group in mind, for example Janet Gibson, who claimed that “[t]here *are* ethical responsibilities when verbatim theatre is created, especially to those from whom stories are mined” and that “verbatim practitioners have, at the very least, responsibilities to negotiate with the subjects who provide the source material for their productions” (2011, p. 2). Similarly, open-minded and progressive collectives that devise their theatre using verbatim material should be aware of potential complications arising from the conflict between “the impulse to take a radical stance with this open communal form” and keeping their awareness of “the danger of co-opting the communal voice in service of an ideal that runs counter to the community that is being represented” (Claycomb, 2003, p. 115). This is an important aspect of verbatim or

documentary productions to be taken into account, particularly when the subject of research and the subsequent staging is a sensitive or potentially controversial event.

But ultimately, the liminal state (which is, after all, a state of uncertainty) is a source of creative potential for the artist as well as a catalyst for social (perhaps even political) change. As Jan Suk argues when discussing the artistic freedom of Tim Etchells, whose creativity is characterized by “[a] liminal experience of the in-between,” which is a strong manifestation of “ultimate authorial freedom” (2015, p. 158), the possibility of emptiness or failure in the liminal state becomes a promise of change and progress. I posit that it is through this liminality that a play like *The Laramie Project* can present a piece of theatre that “[is] grounded in the humble, messy attempt to seek out human connectedness, rather than a grandiose, fixed vision of *one* perfect future or *one* fixed idea of a better life,” thus becoming a prime example of a hopeful, or utopian performative (Dolan, 2005, p. 136). Despite the fact that in theatre aesthetics, “ultimately *all* dramatic representation implicitly calls for empathy, sympathy, commiseration and compassion” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 118), it is the way *The Laramie Project* focuses on a traumatic event and its painful aftermath that, combined with the meta-story of the development of the play itself, renders the play an outstanding theatrical work that explores the crucially important grey (liminal or in-between) area between exclusion, inclusion and “becoming” – stages of a process that leads to understanding and affiliation within a community.

Works cited

- Baglia, J. and Foster, E., 2005. “Performing the ‘Really’ Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in *The Laramie Project*.” In: *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring, pp. 127–145.
- Beck, J. L., Belliveau, G., Lea, G. W. and Wager, A., 2011. “Delineating a Spectrum of Research-Based Theatre.” In: *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 8, pp. 687–700.
- Bindel, J., 2014. “The truth behind America’s most famous gay-hate murder.” In: *The Guardian*, 26 October 2014. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/the-truth-behind-americas-most-famous-gay-hate-murder-matthew-shepard>>.
- Brown, R., 2005. “Moises Kaufman: The Copulation of Form and Content.” In: *Theatre Topics*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 51–67.
- Claycomb, R. M., 2003. “(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics.” In: *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring, pp. 95–121.
- Dolan, J., 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fortier, M., 2016. *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Gibson, J., 2011. “Saying it Right: Creating Ethical Verbatim Theatre.” In: *NEO: Journal for Higher Degree Research Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 4, pp. 1–18.
- Kaufman, M., 2014. *The Laramie Project and The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Lehmann, H.-T., 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*, London: Routledge.

- McKenna, J., 2014. "Creating Community Theatre for Social Change." In: *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 84–89.
- Snyder-Young, D., 2010. "Beyond 'An Aesthetic of Objectivity': Performance Ethnography, Performance Texts, and Theatricality." In: *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 10, pp. 883–893.
- Suk, J., 2015. "Immanent Performances in the Writing of Tim Etchells." In: *From Theory to Practice 2014: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Anglophone Studies*. Zlín: Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně, pp. 145–162.
- Turner, V. W., 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wren, C., 2013. "Despite Hurdles Put Up by Government Shutdown, Ford's Stages Fine 'Laramie Project'." In: *The Washington Post*, 2 October 2013 [2018-02-27]. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/despite-hurdles-put-up-by-government-shutdown-fords-stages-fine-laramie-project/2013/10/02/9cf8f24c-2b93-11e3-b141-298f46539716_story.html?utm_term=.4ab4d143953c>.

Ivan Lacko
 Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave
 Gondova 2
 814 99 Bratislava
 Slovakia
 ivan.lacko@uniba.sk