

Duane - Laramie Project

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I've seen Duane in many, many different productions over the years. Last night I caught his latest show: "The Laramie Project." As usual Duane was spectacular, theatre is truly his calling. But this was quite different - both in the subject matter and in how it was delivered.

If you're not familiar with the story, it's a play based on a series of interviews with residents of Laramie, Wyoming, centered around the horrific torture and murder of Matthew Shepard, in October, 1998. Because he was gay, two assailants kidnapped Matthew, and tied him to a prairie fence outside of town, where he was repeatedly beaten and pistol whipped. They robbed him, took his shoes and left him to die. He was found 18 hours later, still barely alive, by a hiker, covered in blood, except for where tears had streamed down his face. He died days later, and the story made headlines nationwide sparking a heated debate on morality and anti-gay hate crime.

Back to Duane. With the number of actual interviews conducted and the limited number of cast members, Duane was required to play over 12 different characters. TWELVE. Indeed, the entire cast of 8 is required to assume various roles amounting to over 60 onstage roles. When you take this emotionally gut-wrenching story, and these powerfully revealing interviews, the staggering breadth of what an actor has to cover in this production span the gamut of the human condition. There are moments of hilarity, anger, intense grief, despair and all the nuances in between - woven together in what becomes a shockingly sober, albeit artistic glimpse into a mirror of who we are.

Of note, the closing monologues of Rulon Stacey (CEO of the hospital where Matthew was treated and spokesperson for the Shepard family) and Denis Shepard (Matthew's father) are two of the most emotionally crushing moments in the play. Duane delivered these raw declarations with a power and conviction I had not previously witnessed in the course of his now long-storied career in theatre. I was so drawn into those moments, the Duane I have known 55+ years was unrecognizable to me. That's how theatre should be. In a word: incredible.

Cheers to him and the entire cast and crew of this magnificent production. I am biased because Duane is my lifelong friend, like a brother to me, but truly each of the actors delivered stellar performances deserving of a much bigger stage. We are very fortunate to have access to this presentation locally.

Bravo.

If you are local to eastern Iowa, the production runs this weekend and next - (perfectly timed for PRIDE month.) Get to the Uptown Theatre in Mount Vernon and see this for yourself.