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## ENTERTAINMENT

# Moore: "Laramie Project" epilogue takes license with "truth," but is that bad?

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By **JOHN MOORE** | The Denver Post

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"The Laramie Project" is believed to be the most-produced play of the past decade. And its high-profile return last week, in the form of a new 90-minute epilogue, highlights the continued blurring of the lines between theater and journalism.

On the one hand, the new epilogue has real journalistic merit: Its writers landed the first interviews with Matthew Shepard's two killers since 2004. But on stage, those interviews are condensed, reordered and finely crafted to fit the team's creative purposes.

In other words, they are not necessarily accurately recounted — even though audience members, watching this "docudrama" and knowing the play was based on actual interviews, would assume that they are. Would be led to believe they are, in fact.

It's a disconnect, a liberty born from a sense of artistic license.

While the goal of any journalist is to produce a balanced and accurate news report, the goal of a playwright is to create an emotionally complex and compelling piece of theater that might galvanize audiences to action, understanding or acceptance.

Both noble pursuits — but not the same. So how does the audience sort it out?

"I just don't think we go to the theater for impartial journalism," said University of Denver theater professor Rick Barbour. "We go to be moved."

New York's Tectonic Theatre Company came to Wyoming five weeks after the Shepard murder in 1998 and conducted hundreds of interviews over the next year. Their transcripts make up "The Laramie Project," which debuted at the Denver Center in 2000. In it, actors take turns standing before the audience, assuming the roles of the "Laramie" writers and their interview subjects. Their lines come straight from the team's observations and firsthand interviews.

The Tectonic team returned last year to re-interview many of the same people for its new epilogue, which was simultaneously read Monday by more than 1,000 actors at 150 theaters around the world.

One, directed by Barbour at the University of Denver, featured a cast of 28 actors, students, teachers, politicians and media figures, including Gov. Roy Romer and myself. I played the "role" of Stephen Belber, who scored the prison interview with secondary Shepard killer Russell Henderson.

"The Laramie Project" and its epilogue provide important insight into the climate of a small town where a young man was robbed, then tortured and left to die because he was gay. Presented as "docu-theater," it looks like the whole truth and nothing but. It is, Barbour said. But not defined in the same objective sense that a journalist might use.

"Clearly, they had a particular dog in the hunt," Barbour said. "But the theater-maker's primary responsibility is tell the best theatrical truth we can, even at the possible expense of actual, literary truth. That's what art is. It's a product born of selection."

The company's interview with Shepard killer Aaron McKinney was picked up by the Associated Press and circulated around the world. It was newsworthy because, in a very matter-of-fact tone, McKinney told Tectonic's Greg Pierotti that he had a hatred in his heart for homosexuals, and that "Matt Shepard needed killing."

Audiences worldwide were chilled to hear actors read those very words aloud on Monday. But when Thomas Howard of the Matthew Shepard Foundation first heard the admission, he said, "I hollered for joy," because of how it might influence debate on the proposed federal hate-crimes law.

The Matthew Shepard Act last week passed the House and is now before the Senate. And much of the division is over whether crimes motivated by a victim's sexual orientation are any different than those without such extenuation.

### **"In his own words"**

Because of the play, Howard said, McKinney is now on the record for the first time admitting that the brutal killing did escalate from a simple robbery because the victim was gay. "And now we have it in his own words," said Howard. "In his own words!"

That makes it journalistically important. But the bottom line: Those key interviews don't happen if Belber and Pierotti are journalists. The killers would never have granted them.

"I feel like we have tried consistently to go beyond what journalists are capable of doing," Belber said. "Journalists provide an incredibly important service, but they don't have the luxury we do of returning six times over the course of a year to really track emotions and thoughts over that kind of time.

"I feel like the theatrical niche of 'docudrama' is pretty valuable, because artists can get in there in a deeper way. There's a humanizing quality that we are after as artists that allows us to gain their trust."

But here's the problem: The McKinney interview witnessed by tens of thousands on Monday didn't happen the way it was presented to them.

On stage, the interview lasts 10 minutes, ending with Pierotti saying he's running out of time. But Pierotti told The Associated Press that he made three separate visits to McKinney, once in November and twice last July. Each lasted more than three hours. And Pierotti was not allowed to record any of them.

So while we take it on faith that McKinney said every word that comes out of his mouth on stage, they didn't come out in quite the same way that Pierotti wrote them — and Tectonic has never claimed otherwise. Pierotti even refers to McKinney as "a character in our play."

Taking such creative liberties, Barbour said, is a fundamental right of any artist. The Tectonic team continued to edit the epilogue script that was read Monday until the final day.

It was a bit jarring, as a journalist playing one of the interviewers, to be told that a section dedicated to the writers' personal journal entries was being flopped. Something that had ostensibly been written by Pierotti was now being attributed to Belber, and vice versa. It was a small change, but if the writing team was willing to take Belber's words and make them Pierotti's, one can't help question what other liberties are being taken.

It's fair to question a journalist's ethics. Is it also fair to question a playwright's ethics when they are doing journalistic work?

"It does get weird," Barbour admits. "Where's the line?"

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## Guest blogger Billy Thieme on the "Laramie" epilogue

Read "Running Lines" guest contributor Billy Thieme's thoughts on the University of Denver's reading of the new "Laramie Project" epilogue on Oct. 12: [Click here](#)

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## The genre of "docu-theater"

The Tectonic Theatre Project hardly invented the genre of "docu-theater," which is as old as storytelling itself. Eve Ensler turned her interviews with women about their bodies into a worldwide phenomenon, "The Vagina Monologues," in 1996. That and "The Laramie Project" have made it a far more prevalent form of playwriting in the past decade. The family of Rachel Corrie, who died defending Palestinian human rights, turned her diaries into a controversial play. This season the Denver Center will premiere a new musical called "Mama Hated Diesels," crafted from interviews with truck drivers. Ping Chong's interview-based "Invisible Voices," told the stories of six Coloradans with disabilities at TheatreWorks in Colorado Springs. It closed Saturday.

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## This week's theater openings

Opening Tuesday, Oct. 20, through Nov. 22: Arvada Center's "**The Second Tosca**"

Opening Thursday, Oct. 22, through Oct. 25: Full Escape Productions' "**Face the City**" *Colorado Springs*

Opening Thursday, Oct. 22, through Oct. 30: Curtains Up's "**Bunnacula**"

Opening Friday, Oct. 23, through Nov. 15: Evergreen Players' "**Picnic**"

Opening Friday, Oct. 23, through Nov. 1: Backstage's "**Happy Hour**" (sketch comedy) *Breckenridge*

Opening Friday, Oct. 23, through Oct. 31: Colorado Homegrown Tales' "**Ghostlight**," Byers-Evans House

Opening Saturday, Oct. 24, through Nov. 14: Modern Muse's "**The Woman in Black**" Margery Reed Hall, University of Denver

Opening Saturday, Oct. 24, through April 24: Buntport Theatre's "**Trunks**"

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## This week's closings

Saturday, Oct. 24: Denver Center Theatre Company's "**The Voyage Inheritance**,"  
Space Theatre

Saturday, Oct. 24: Curious' "**Yankee Tavern**"

Saturday, Oct. 24: Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company's "**The Sunset Limited**"  
*Boulder*

Saturday, Oct. 24: Square Product Theatre's "**Why We Have a Body**" *Boulder*

Sunday, Oct. 25: Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center's "**Broadway Bound**"

Sunday, Oct. 25: Arvada Festival Playhouse's "**Curse of the Werewolf**"

Sunday, Oct. 25: Bas Bleu's "**Collected Stories**" *Fort Collins*

Sunday, Oct. 25: TheatreWorks' "**Our Town**" *Colorado Springs*

Sunday, Oct. 25: Town Hall Arts Center's "**Grease**" *Littleton*

Sunday, Oct. 25: Lake Dillon's "**Third**"

Sunday, Oct. 25: Union Colony Dinner Theatre's "**Altar Boyz**" *Greeley*

## Best bet: "**Luminous Emptiness**"

Naropa University is exploring the Tibetan Book of the Dead with a performance of "Luminous Emptiness," described as "a beautiful Butoh-styled interpretation of the bardo journey." The project began with the directive from the late Naropa founder, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, to create a "Book of the Dead" stage or film adaptation. "He wanted to explore new ways to share the essence of this sacred text with the modern western world," said writer Douglas Penick. "The bardo journey is filled with extraordinary sights and sounds and is the key to how to live our lives fully every day, every moment." Final performance 2 p.m. today, Oct. 18, at 2130



Arapahoe Ave., Boulder. \$5-\$15. 303-245-4798 or  
[brownpapertickets.com/event/79202](http://brownpapertickets.com/event/79202)

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## Most recent openings

**“And Then There Were None”** Classic Agatha Christie mystery (first called “Ten Little Indians”) in which 10 people are invited to spend the weekend on a mysterious island. Soon they are each accused of different crimes — and begin to die off. Through Nov. 15. *73rd Avenue Theatre, 7287 Lowell Blvd., Westminster, 720-276-6936 or [the73rdavenuetheatrecompany.com](http://the73rdavenuetheatrecompany.com)*

**“Dracula”** Steven Dietz’s adaptation revisits many of the often-forgotten themes from the original Bram Stoker novel. It focuses on the sensuality, secrecy and religious undertones that first made “Dracula” a legend. Through Oct. 31. *E-Project, 9797 W. Colfax Ave., Lakewood, 303-232-0363 or [theeproject.org](http://theeproject.org)*

**“Fat Pig”** What happens when a young, handsome executive falls in love with a “plus-sized” woman? Can their relationship endure the societal pressures that surround them? By Neil LaBute. Through Nov. 1. *Presented by the Vintage Theatre at the Aurora Fox, 9900 E. Colfax Ave., 303-739-1970 or [vintagetheatre.com](http://vintagetheatre.com)*

**“Menopause, the Musical”** Two dozen pop songs, re-lyricized to menopausal themes (“Stayin’ Alive” becomes “Stayin’ Awake”). It’s now been seen by more than 10 million people in 13 countries since 2001. Friday and Saturday only *Lincoln Center, 417 W. Magnolia St., Fort Collins, 970-221-6730 or [lctix.com](http://lctix.com)*

**“Twilight Zone Returns!”** Three more episodes from the classic sci-fi series are staged live, along with vintage commercials. Through Nov. 7. *Theatre Company of Lafayette, 300 E. Simpson, 720-209-2154 or [tclstage.org](http://tclstage.org)*

**“The Voice of the Prairie”** In the early days of radio, Davey Quinn becomes a star telling his true stories about an itinerant old hobo named Poppy and a blind girl he rescued from a cruel father. But with fame comes surprises from his past. Through Oct. 31. *Presented by Coal Creek Community Theatre at the Louisville Center for the Arts, 801 Grant St., 303-665-0955 or [ccctheater.org](http://ccctheater.org)*

**“The Winterling”** In the darkness of an English farmhouse, three twisted gang members are locked in a power struggle, while someone upstairs holds a box with something important in it. From freaky Brit Jez Butterworth (“The Night Heron”). Through Nov. 14. *Presented by Paragon Theatre at the Crossroads Theatre, 2590 Washington St., 303-300-2210 or [paragontheatre.org](http://paragontheatre.org)*

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## The new-look Running Lines blog

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### John Moore

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John Moore is The Denver Post's former theater critic.

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