

SUPPORT SYSTEM: SHANE MEIER AS MATTHEW, KRISTEN THOMPSON AS HIS FRIEND ROMAINE PATTERSON IN THE UPCOMING NBC BIOPIC.



# Laramie's legacy

**MATTHEW SHEPARD'S DEATH HAS INSPIRED NOT ONLY A TV MOVIE WITH SHANE MEIER BUT ALSO A NEW SONG BY ELTON JOHN AND AN HBO PRODUCTION OF THE LARAMIE PROJECT. WHY DOES THIS STORY STILL MOVE US? BY BRUCE SHENITZ**

IT MAY SEEM LIKE THERE CAN BE NOTHING TO ADD TO the story of Matthew Shepard's death and subsequent transfiguration into the most recognizable symbol of antigay violence in America. And yet something about this tragedy, which moved so much of the country as it unfolded during the second week of October 1998, continues to grip writers, musicians, and the general public. One writer called the crime "too awfully iconic"—the setting on the Western prairie, the gruesomely crucifixion-like death, and Shepard's youthfully frail appearance all help explain why the case captured the nation's attention almost from the moment it occurred.

The killing was exceptional, even in a year that saw more than 13,000 "ordinary" homicides: of that total, 13 were classified as hate-crime murders, and four of those were GLBT-related. Among the hate crimes was the notorious June 7 lynching of James Byrd Jr., during which he was chained to the back of a pickup truck and dragged to his death in Jasper, Tex. But today, relatively few top artists have been inspired by Byrd, while the Shepard myth lives on. In "American Triangle," a track on Elton John's *Songs From the West Coast* (due out this month), the British star is joined by out singer Rufus Wainwright to tell of the crime that left "two lives ruined,

one life spent." *The Matthew Shepard Story*, the upcoming NBC movie that was authorized by the Matthew Shepard Foundation ([www.matthewshepard.org](http://www.matthewshepard.org)) and developed in cooperation with his mother, Judy Shepard, tells how Matthew's family came to terms with his death. *The Laramie Project*, a documentary play based on more than 200 interviews with the city's residents, has had successful runs all over the country and has been filmed for an HBO broadcast early next year.

What is it that makes any such killing—particularly the murder of a gay man—stand out against a daily background of violence all around the country? In his introduction to the published script of *The Laramie Project*, author Moisés Kaufman writes, "There are moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing into sharp focus. At these junctures the event becomes a lightning rod of sorts, attracting and distilling the essence of these philosophies and convictions." But even Judy Shepard, who actively lobbies in favor of hate-crimes legislation, is surprised at the continuing interest in her son. She says that after the murder "we felt we had just a little window of opportunity [for this work] when people would remember Matthew and know who we are. I'm surprised that interest is still as high now as it was then."

SHANE AND KRISTEN: BROOKE PALMER; MATTHEW: GINA VAN HOOF

(She is compiling a book of the letters of condolence she and her husband received after Matthew's murder.)

A brief recap of that night for the benefit of those with short memories: Sometime toward midnight on October 6, 1998, 21-year-old Matthew Shepard left the Fireside Lounge in Laramie in the company of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, who were also 21 years old. The two young roofers, who paid for a \$5.50 pitcher of beer in dimes and quarters, had fallen into conversation with Shepard. According to the confession made by Henderson after his plea bargain was completed, the two pretended to be gay in order to lure Shepard out of the bar. After the three left, they piled into the front seat of a truck and drove to a deserted area just outside town, where McKinney began to beat Shepard; he dragged Shepard outside, where he continued to bash his skull with a .357 Magnum, then tied him to the fence; McKinney and Henderson removed Shepard's wallet and patent-leather loafers before leaving him in near-freezing temperatures sometime after midnight on October 7. After a bicyclist discovered him around 6 P.M. the unconscious, bloodied Shepard was brought to Ivinson Hospital in Laramie. He was quickly moved to Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colo.; he never regained consciousness and died there five days later.

The manner of Shepard's death contributed to the emerging mythology: "If Matthew Shepard had died instantly of a gunshot wound to the head, his death may not have gotten as much publicity," says Jack Levin, a professor of sociology and criminol-

ogy at Northeastern University and the director of the university's Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict. The fact that he lay in a coma for several days only added to a building sense of drama. Camryn Manheim, a costar of *The Practice* who portrays University of Wyoming drama professor Rebecca Hilliker in the film version of *The Laramie Project*, observes that if Shepard had been dead when he was found, most people would "move on, because we can't possibly feel for each victim or none of us would be able to function." But, she notes, because Shepard was in the hospital for several days—the hospital's Web site registered a million visitors from all over the world while he was there—"the whole country was hoping and praying and standing vigil for him. So by the time he did pass away we did have an investment."

For many, the scene of his death immediately called to mind a crucifixion. In a collection titled *Blood & Tears: Commemorative Poems for Matthew Shepard*, the brutality of the beating, the loneliness of his night on the near-freezing prairie, and the blood-soaked face marked by two tracks of tears are some of the dominant images throughout the book. And in a song called "Stigmata," openly gay singer-songwriter Tom McCormack writes "'Cause he bleeds / From his hands / From his side / He's bleeding all over / From his head / And on the inside."

But it was not just the circumstances of Shepard's demise, it was Shepard himself who seemed to predestine the tragedy for immortality. His death at age 21, barely on the thresh- → (page 110)



## MATTHEW SHEPARD

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old of adulthood, contributed to the growing mythology. "He died before his time, and he reminded many Americans of their own children," says Northeastern's Levin. Adds Stockard Channing, who plays Judy Shepard in *The Matthew Shepard Story*: "This is the story of everybody watching. It's about parents and children. It's not just a story that's associated with someone's sexual preference."

It takes nothing away from the horror of the crime and the brutality of its perpetrators to point out that the saturation coverage resulted in part from the fact that Shepard was white and middle-class and—despite an attempt by his murderers to invoke the so-called gay panic defense by smearing Shepard as a sexual predator—that he could be seen as an "innocent" (read: not sexually threatening) victim. Had he been, say, a transgendered black man who was knifed on the wrong (read: gay or poor) side of town, it's almost certain that we would not have heard so much about him either then or now. (By contrast, Amanda Milan, a black transgendered prostitute who was murdered in New York City last year, has begun to attract some attention from activists but less from the mainstream media.) In an article for *The Progressive*, writer JoAnn Wypijewski surmised that one reason even conservative folk uncomfortable with homosexuality could sympathize with this case is that for them, "Matthew Shepard is the perfect queer: young, pretty, and dead."

It's likely that the creative fascination with the killing of Matthew Shepard will continue for some time. Artists will likely continue to extract meaning from circumstances that remain horrible precisely because of

their meaninglessness; drama, after all, originated in part out of a communal need for catharsis. But there may be something even darker, as typically American as the cowboy imagery that still permeates the city of Laramie. Playwright Tony Kushner wrote in *The Nation* just a month after the murder, "Democracy is a bloody business, demanding blood sacrifice. Every advance American democracy has made toward fulfilling the social contract, toward justice and equality and true liberty, every step forward has required offerings of pain and death."

Kushner may be right, but it may be overly optimistic to expect that these "blood sacrifices" will result in social change. What, after all, has actually happened since the events of three years ago? Laramie does have a local bias-crimes ordinance, though a hate-crimes bill has yet to make it through the Wyoming state legislature. Judy Shepard has become a full-time activist working for hate-crimes legislation and as an advocate for gay youth. She has joined the ranks of mothers who have lost children to antigay violence—a sorority that continues to grow. In August she participated in a memorial service for Fred Martinez, a 16-year-old transgendered Navajo who was murdered near his hometown in Colorado. It's enough to make one wonder if anything has changed very much since that night in Laramie. "There is a difference in public opinion," says Judy Shepard. "It's pushed people off the fence, people who felt it didn't affect them." Despite such progress, she says, "I think the backlash is going to get worse before it gets better." ■

*Additional reporting by Jeffrey Epstein*