CONSIDERING
Matthew Shepard
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KLRU-TV, Austin PBS, in collaboration with Conspirare, is bringing *Considering Matthew Shepard* to television. KLRU has assembled an award-winning team to help adapt the three-part oratorio into a unique theatrical experience for the small screen. The *Considering Matthew Shepard* television adaptation will be formatted for a 60-minute broadcast and distributed nationally to PBS stations in 2018 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Shepard's death.

*Considering Matthew Shepard* is a Grammy-nominated three-part oratorio composed by Craig Hella Johnson. The work is an evocative and compassionate musical response to the murder of Matthew Shepard. On October 6, 1998, University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard was kidnapped, beaten, and left to die, in what became an infamous act of brutality, and one of America's most notorious anti-gay hate crimes. Shepard's murder ultimately led to the creation of the Matthew Shepard Foundation and provided a catalyst for legislation that expanded the definition of a hate crime to include sexual orientation. In 2009, Congress passed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Composer Craig Hella Johnson had a profoundly personal reaction to both the murder and its resonance. The Shepard family and Foundation engaged with Johnson in the creation of the work, and allowed the use of fragments from Shepard's personal diary.
The story of Matthew Shepard began on December 1, 1976 when he was born to Judy and Dennis Shepard in Casper, Wyoming. He went to public school in Casper until his junior year of high school when he moved with his family to Saudi Arabia. Matt had to finish his high school education at The American School in Switzerland because there were no American high schools in Saudi Arabia at the time. In both high schools, he was elected by his peers to be a peer counselor. He was easy to talk to, made friends easily and actively fought for the acceptance of all people.

Matt had a great passion for equality. His experiences abroad fueled his love for travel and gave him the chance to make many new friends from around the world. Matt's college career eventually took him back to Wyoming where he studied political science, foreign relations and languages at the University of Wyoming in Laramie.

The horrific events that took place shortly after midnight on October 7, 1998 would become one of the most notorious anti-gay hate crimes in American history and spawned an activist movement that, more than a decade later, would result in passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, a federal law against bias crimes directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. Two men, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, abducted Matt and drove him to a remote area east of Laramie, Wyoming. He was tied to a split-rail fence where the two men severely assaulted him with the butt of a pistol. He was beaten and left to die in the cold of the night. Almost 18 hours later, he was found by a bicyclist who initially mistook him for a scarecrow.

Matt died on October 12 at 12:53 a.m. at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado with his family by his side. His memorial service was attended by friends and family from around the world and garnered immense media attention that brought Matt's story to the forefront of the fight against bigotry and hate.

The life and death of Matthew Shepard changed the way we talk about, and deal with, hate in America. Since his death, Matt's legacy has challenged and inspired millions of individuals to erase hate in all its forms. Although Matt's life was short, his story continues to have a great impact on young and old alike. His legacy lives on in thousands of people who actively fight to replace hate with understanding, compassion, and acceptance.

Source: Matthew Shepard Foundation
Considering Matthew Shepard Production statement:

“I very much appreciate that people are aligning themselves with Matt’s story, with Matt’s life, and with this piece of music. It has really sparked all kinds of amazing conversations where [people] begin talking about the piece and the music and Matt’s story, and then it turns into a larger cultural conversation, a larger personal conversation, and this is how we heal.”

—Craig Hella Johnson
Founding Artistic Director of Conspirare

“I was the same age as Matthew Shepard when he was murdered. I remember being shocked at the event, shocked that someone my age was killed so brutally. It was such a sad time and the whole country mourned the loss of this young man.”

“Over the years I’ve followed his story and the important work being done in his name. So in 2015 when I learned that Craig Hella Johnson of Conspirare was working on a musical piece around the life of Matthew Shepard, I was immediately drawn to the idea. When I heard more about the artistic concept and goals, I made it a mission to realize this work for a television audience.”

“Over the course of this multi-year project I’ve had the gift of experiencing Matthew’s story and Craig’s work on a deep level. I fully believe in the power of self reflection and examination and feel this work and the resulting conversations have the power to spark dialog and understanding, which continues to be needed in our society.”

—Sara Robertson
SVP Production & Technology
at KLRU-TV, Austin PBS
The Power of Hatred, and the Power of Love to Respond

1. In the film *Considering Matthew Shepard*, celebrities such as Elton John and Ellen Degeneres share how Matthew's death personally touched them. Many years later, an anti-hate crime law was passed in Matthew's name. The tragedy reached a global impact. When working with a widely known story, what might have Craig Hella Johnson considered in creating his play? What new layers and elements did the form bring to Matthew's legacy?

2. Johnson discusses his use of the word consideration in the play's title, and the invitation it offers to examine the value of every human being. Why is it important to learn about “Matt” more intimately than we might have known Matthew?

3. Matt's words are written into the play, becoming song lyrics. Images of the journal entry are projected, showing Matthew's expressions of desires—to be loved, to be happy. The journal ends on the phrase “I love Wyoming,” which is repeated in the song. Why do you think the director chose to take this approach, and why emphasize this particular line?

4. In the film, Soprano singer Mela Daily calls the play personal and universal. How and why does art help a personal story resonate beyond the boundaries of individual experience? How does it work this way in *Considering Matthew Shepard*?

5. Bass Dashan Burton sings from the personified perspective of the fence that held Matthew's beaten body. What does the inclusion of this inanimate object add to the audience's understanding and experience? Why might Johnson have decided to write from this perspective?

6. While hate crimes are outlawed at federal level and rights have been secured for LGBTQ+ people, homophobia still exists in society, illustrated most brutally by the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando. In the film, Anton Armstrong says, “music can be a healing force, a force that transforms for good.” In the face of violence, what is the role of art in creating change? What are its limitations?

7. Matt's mom shares that ultimately they would like to see the foundation they started to no longer be of use. What do you think it would take for society to move forward? Consider realms of education, art, religion, policy, etc.

8. The final song of the play poses the question, “am I like you” to the perpetrators. Johnson explains it as a question for all of us about how we raise and teach young men societal responsibility. What are the messages about masculinity, and what it means to be a man, that boys are taught in the United States? What is the purpose of asking this question, on a personal level? On a societal level?

9. Johnson shares that the operating question of the show is posed every time they perform in front of an audience: *in the midst of such darkness... is love anywhere to be found?* After watching this film, what is your answer to the question, and why?
Responding to Hate With Love: The Choral Poem

The choral approach of Considering Matthew Shepard operates as a metaphor for the concept of community responsibility—to respond to hate, to rebuild after tragedy, to speak out, to tell the story. Inspired by Considering Matthew Shepard, this poem will take shape from multiple hands, and the guiding principle of anonymity offers a chance for contributors to quickly become vulnerable, write from the heart, and stand among a community of voices.

Each participant should begin with a blank piece of 8.5 x 11 inch paper, and write a single line responding to one of the following prompts, letting the last word or two hang below the rest of the line. The phrase can be poetic or simple, metaphorical or literal:

- How can we combat hatred of difference?
- How can we celebrate our similarities?
- What can we do to make actual change?
- What will you commit to engaging to create change?

After writing, the writer should fold the paper over so just the final words appear, and pass the paper to the right. Jumping off from this word, the next participant writes the second line. Repeat this process until the group has contributed to each paper (if a large group, you may want to stop after ten rotations.) Unfurl the folded paper and have the participant it landed on read the poem aloud. Take it further, and edit the poems together into a large statement and guiding mantra.

Sample Poem: