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The Conquest of the South Pole

Manfred Karge

Everyman Company

Everyman Theatre, Liverpool

24 March–8 April 2017

What adventure does life have to offer if you're poor, long-term unemployed or caught in a shitty, low-paid job? Poverty, drudgery, indignity and hopelessness.

A lone character, wanders around the stage as the audience enters and settles. She (although we shall learn that Emily Hughes is playing a man) waves and smiles, in a fixed but genuine way and, as she goes, she begins to pile upon an old tumble dryer, suitcases (which, set on old dining chairs, line the perimeter of the stage), vinyl records and, on top of all this, a stool. Her t-shirt (for those in the know) bears the legend, "No Pasarán".

Placing a large stepladder alongside the tower she has built, she climbs to the level of the stool, before a tubular red velvet curtain drops to conceal her. From different corners of the auditorium, three men enter, each carrying a fishing rod. The play begins.

When Seiffert (who Emily Hughes gives a touching, naïve charm) finds out that even the very rich suffer from a sense of life's pointlessness (*l'Ennui*), what else is there for him to do but top himself?

He is caught in the act by three friends who have come to take him fishing. In a desperate attempt to prevent his suicide, one of the friends, Slupianek, proposes an adventure. The four of them will reenact Amundsen's conquest of the South Pole. Seiffert is dragged free of the noose and the game begins.

Like all games of the imagination, this one can only succeed if approached with deadly seriousness. Slupianek delegates his team to take cookery lessons, and steal equipment and clothing from the "eskimo store".

Just like any leader of an expedition, Slupianek must overcome challenges. The first comes in the shape of Braukmann's wife. "La Braukmann" is plausibly down-to-earth; stinking of fat from a day's toil in the chip shop will tend to do that to a woman. La Braukmann also takes care of the laundry—in this case, sheets and other white items that have come to represent the icebergs, glaciers and mountains of Antarctica.

To distract her from removing these, now dry, items from the attic washing line, Slupianek makes a crude pass at her, asking if she's on the pill. Far from retreating in outrage, La Braukmann accepts his offer, telling him that a childhood illness makes it *almost* impossible for her to conceive the child she so desperately desires. Conceiving is a lottery and Slupianek has, unwittingly, offered her a ticket.

Preparations for the assault on the South Pole seem to be gathering pace, until Bruscher suggests that, rather than Amundsen's triumphant team, they should take on the roles of Shackleton's

unsuccessful expedition—"we do failures better". Slupianek berates them all in an angry rap, giving a parting kick to Frankieboy, the "sled dog". It seems this Pole will never be conquered.

The political climax of the play happens at a birthday party for the now pregnant La Braukmann. Rudi, an arrogant, successful "old friend" of the group, first parades his wealth and then harangues the rest for failing to realise Hitler's great insight, that "*Arbeit macht Frei*". Get a job, is his message, ignoring that the Braukmann's already graft for little reward. At the height of this rant, Rudi punches his simpering girlfriend, Rosi (Keddy Sutton), in the stomach.

Before leading the injured woman to safety, La Braukmann challenges the others to do something about Rudi. In a scene, which epitomises this play's skilled blending of reality and metaphor, Frankieboy the dog rips out Rudi's throat. So die all class traitors?

That done, La Braukmann now joins the expedition and, exuberantly, the South Pole is conquered (think: *Slava's Snow Show* in miniature). To his credit, Karge does not leave us with this implausible happy ending to his characters' story.

A wreath is brought onstage. It spells "Endgame". Slupianek seems unable to move on. With Frankieboy as his sole companion, he delivers a despairing monologue whilst looking on at the hanged figure of Seiffert. Has the conquest proved too little to overcome his friend's suicidal inclinations?

Suddenly, from offstage, a baby cries. It is a distressing sound. Slupianek leaps to his feet and exits to investigate. Is this the hope of new life—the winning of the lottery—or merely the beginning of another hopeless, downtrodden journey? We are left to ponder.

Dean Nolan gives us an energetic, yearning bear of a man in Slupianek. The weight of the show falls on his shoulders and he bears it well. Laura Dos Santos has the immovable, dour practicality of a woman with a secret, agonising dream down to perfection in La Braukmann. Patrick Brennan's appearance as Rudi is confined to one scene, but is notable for its impervious brutality (especially for those who saw his polar opposite role as Tevye in [Everyman's recent Fiddler on the Roof](#)).

There is a powerful irony in the Everyman Company design team's (Molly Elizabeth Lacey Davies, Michael Vale and Jocelyn Meall) set—the suitcases on rickety dining chairs acting as a visual taunting of the characters' social and geographical stasis.

Nick Bagnall brings strong performances from all his cast, which will get even stronger once the moments are more clearly marked. Once again, Tom Jackson Greaves deserves mention for movement direction—the Everyman's round stage is exploited to maximum effect without the actors' orientations and actions ever seeming contrived.

Manfried Karge's play, written just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only has much to say to a contemporary British audience, it says it (here, in Tinch Minter's translation) with poetry.

The Conquest of the South Pole (one act, running at 95 minutes) is a challenging and rewarding production. Whilst the deeper philosophical questions are left for the audience to reflect upon, there are other conundrums to which you will be given an answer, such as: Can a camel ride a bike?

Get your crampons on—join the expedition.

Reviewer: [Martin Thomasson](#)