

British Theatre Guide

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The Conquest of the South Pole

Manfred Karge translated by Tinch Minter and Anthony Vivis

Arcola Theatre

25 April–26 May 2012

A group of out-of-work young men are hard up, frustrated and bored. For one of them things have reached such an impasse that he is about to hang himself. Then one of them gets caught up by the story he has been reading of Roald Amundsen's 1910-12 journey to the South Pole. He decides that they should recreate it, not as a real expedition to the Antarctic but in their imagination in an attic.

The play dates from 1986 and had its first British performance at the Edinburgh Traverse two years later in this translation and under the same director as this production. It seemed topical then and sadly still does today, though its form may not now seem so surprising.

Karge was a product of the Berliner Ensemble (he's apparently back with them again currently as an actor) and you can see the Brechtian influence. The writing is often poetic and the rich use of language comes through in Minter and Vivis's translation. It moves easily from near-naturalism to characters recounting their experience and then to the make believe journey but quite what Karge himself is trying to tell us remains a bit of a mystery.

These aren't dead-beat drop-outs and their crazy endeavour points up our society's failure to harness the imagination, energy and intelligence of these young men as part of our economy, but it doesn't look for reasons or point a questioning finger at economic structures or political policies. What it does do is demonstrate a wasted potential and, in the man who gets a job but stays involved in the Antarctic fantasy, the contrast between the imaginative adventure and the banality of the work he's obtained.

This isn't naturalism. You just have to accept that O-T Fagbenie's Slupianek and his mates would go ahead with his mad idea and having accepted it that they would be able to assemble the goggles, the padded clothing and the inflatable tent that appear or see them see them as imagination manifest, while the polar landscape grows out of the white sheets on the washing line that Slupianek declares are a glacier.

The pace of Stephen Unwin's production and the energy of the actors don't give you time to question practicality and Fagbenie makes Mohican-haired Stupianek a wildly charismatic enthusiast, but even he has a time of despair, his hand flailing repeatedly to his head. Mark Field's Buscher is his loyal lieutenant, though he reads up on the background and suggests that they really ought to re-enact Shackleton's unsuccessful expedition, not Amundsen's, since they are much better at failure. The rest of the party are Braukmann (Sam Crane)—it is his attic—Seiffert (Andrew Gower) and Frankieboy (Chris Ashby), sometimes the butt of the others, who has to be a husky, surviving when the rest of the dogs get shot to provide food.

Emma Cuniffeth plays Frau Braukmann (whom Stupianek fancies), a woman with her feet on the ground who works as a chip fryer, wiping lemon all over her body after work to get rid of the grease and the smell. They are all there in one scene to celebrate her birthday, along with Rudi (Daniel Weyman) and the girl he calls his "cherry stone", Rosi (Lauren Johns); I didn't really get where they fitted in but it is a moment of real life outside the fantasy. This is the nearest we get to any attempt to place these people in the world outside despite references to job centre and Braukmann getting work. Even in this scene the fantasy world is not forgotten with Frankieboy, real-life underdog, lying under the table, a dog being used as a footrest.

Stephen Unwin's production exploits the theatricality of the piece and it makes a showcase to display some impulsive performances so that when the cast stomp right round the theatre on the final 179 kilometre stretch of their polar journey (one step per kilometer) the audience is definitely with them.

One character, trapped in his situation declares, "I'm covered in crap up to my cranium" and I can't help wondering if I'd been as well, despite enjoying the surface theatrical effect, the rich language and the physicality. The life / fantasy parallel never quite gelled. All the upbeat energy of the enactment swamped the real life whose problems were not much explored.

Perhaps it's enough to remind us that so many never get the chance to realise their potential? One shouldn't demand a dramatist to provide answers, but here the questions are not very explicit either, though the audience must decide for themselves whether the cry of the new born signals hope for the future or warns that another generation will face the same problems unhelped by their governments.

This production will also play at the Rose Theatre, Kingston 29 May - 2 June 2012

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)