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Tom Crean - Antarctic Explorer

Aidan Dooley
Waterloo East Theatre
(2011)

Tom Crean - Antarctic Explorer is not so much a play as a piece of story telling, but story telling done in character and performed with great theatrical flair..

You may not have heard of him, but Tom Crean was a real man from Kerry and something of a hero, a fact acknowledged by the Albert Medal for bravery pinned on his chest by King George V. He joined the Royal Navy as a 15-year-old and when he was 24 was on the Discovery as part of Captain Scott's first expedition to the Antarctic. He was with Scott again in 1910-11 on the Terra Nova and then with Shackleton and the Endurance in 1914. His tale is an amazing one and, had he been an officer instead of a seaman, would probably be much better known.

Writer and performer Aidan Dooley first played him a decade ago in a fifteen-minute Living History segment of a National Maritime Museum Antarctic Exhibition (bringing historical characters to life for Museum presentations has been one strand of Dooley's career). He has played Crean many times since, at one format a show that ran two hours, but though the current presentation lasts about 80 minutes without an interval.

It is simply staged with a red silhouette of the Discovery on the backing and an Arctic sledge displayed above, potent images for what follows. Boxes and unloaded equipment provide something to sit on and Crean enters with a lantern as an excuse for illumination in the Antarctic night.

We are told about recruitment, about equipment and clothing, like that that he is wearing, and the most exciting episodes of his polar experience. Though, to his disappointment, not selected for the party trying to reach the Pole with Scott, he was part of the support group and his return journey to Hut Point with William Ashley and Lieutenant Edward Evans is a terrifying story of endurance with a wild blind descent down steep slopes across crevasses and a final solo slog fighting exhaustion to get rescue for the seriously sick officer and Ashley. "The struggle to survive," he tells us, "is what true heroism is about."

With Shackleton their ship is trapped in the pack ice, floating with it far from their intended location and eventually crushed and sunk. They take to the lifeboats to attempt to reach land and find themselves on Elephant Island where the ship's carpenter modified one of the boats and Cream was one of Shackleton's small party that set off in it, eventually reaching South Georgia where storms put them on the uninhabited side of the island and they were forced to cross the unexplored central mountains to reach a whaling station.

Dooley tells it grippingly, with a leavening of humour, often at the expense of the English, and a skilful interaction with the audience. He tells it with enormous energy but beneath that energy is great control that ensures there is some in reserve to add another emotional level as things

become even more agonisingly painful. It is skilfully constructed, we have blinding snow blizzards and images of all the colours of the rainbow bouncing around the depths of a crevasse, and a delightful description of the way Mrs Chippy, the ship's cat on the Endurance, parades in front of the expedition's dogs makes the telling of the necessary shooting of the dogs and her even more painful. It is a stirring story but it is Dooley's performance that makes this a gripping piece of theatre.

This was my first visit to the Waterloo East Theatre, which opened last September, and it is an attractive and hospitable venue. Seats are unreserved and the auditorium is not steeply raked. If you find yourself behind someone taller it is worth checking whether there is space left in the front row.

"Tom Crean - Antarctic Explorer" is at Waterloo East Theatre until 19th June 2011

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)