

British Theatre Guide

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Touching the Void

Based on the book by Joe Simpson, adapted by David Greig

Bristol Old Vic

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26–29 May 2021

A momentous moment for the UK's oldest theatre; it welcomed patrons back to its hallowed and historic building for the first time this year. So it is timely to bring back one of its most recent accomplished productions, *Touching the Void*.

Prior to the curtains being drawn, director Tom Morris addressed the audience with a buoyant introduction, informing those in the building they were “significantly outnumbered” by those around the world. Viewers from Sri Lanka to Canada tuned in as Morris's team aimed to “break new ground” with an “exciting and experimental” form of theatre. If successful, it could see every opening night beamed across the world, he says.

We have been accustomed to live-streamed productions in the past 12 months, but to put on a production to a live audience for the first time in months, whilst trialling a new, multi-camera set-up, is testament to the theatre's persistence and will to entertain.

Nevertheless, all the bells and whistles of breaking new ground cannot paper over the cracks of a bad show. Those in the audience still yearn for an experience (more than ever) and those sitting on their sofas want to feel the intimacy of a great show. So it is welcome news that Tom Morris's production lives up to the bill—and then some.

Touching the Void tells the mountaineering saga of Simon Yates (Angus Yellowless) and Joe Simpson (Josh Williams), a pair of ambitious climbers who embark on an ascent never before done up the Siula Grande's west face in the Peruvian Alps in 1985. A tense and thrilling narration navigates the pair through their journey up the 6,260m peak and the duo's life-threatening descent.

Much of the narrative is pushed through by Richard Hawking (Patrick McNamee), a non-climber who stays at base camp, and Sarah (Fiona Hampton), Joe's sister who acts as his spirit guide as he fights for survival.

While nothing can replicate the live and in-person aura of the theatre, it is clear a production on this inventive scale actually lends itself to a multi-camera set-up. The sharp cuts, optimal camera placement and effective use of overlays all add to the experience. The viewers are offered angles not provided to those in-person, contributing to the tension of Simpson's fight and Yates's agony.

The physicality of the performances by Williams and Yellowless, as well as Hampton, are incredibly impressive. The show's movement director Sasha Milavic Davies's work is on display throughout as the cast navigate the terrific 3D staging, designed by Ti Green.

A survival story unlike any before, told through smart set design and effective storytelling. The experiment clearly pays off. The four-show run is sold out, but a chance to catch this online for just

£10 is worth every penny.

Reviewer: [Jacob Newbury](#)