

Arts

The Conquest of the South Pole

The frozen tundra of the mind

by Jenna Scherer

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At its core, theater is little more than an expensive, highfalutin and wildly impractical excuse to play make-believe. It's a glorious compulsion, a means to escape from the cramped confines of one's own life. Even Brecht couldn't escape from Escapism, flail his frantic political legs though he might.

Nor could his disciples—as is the case with Berliner Ensemble alum Manfred Karge. His play *The Conquest of the South Pole* is a show about the same impulse that drives theatermakers: the thing that moves a person to manufacture high drama out of nothingness. Seething with weird ambition, Karge's play takes us from a dingy suburban attic to the ice floes of Antarctica. It's a headier trip than most domestic-setting plays could offer, and it's a tricky transition to make. Add to that Karge's frantic poetic language, and you've got a potential clusterfuck on your hands. No worries, though—Molasses Tank's production at the Charlestown Working Theater has got what it takes.

The setting: East Germany, 1986. The economy isn't doing so hot (natch), and four working-class small-town guys find themselves out of work. All the obligatory personalities are on hand: the rowdy leader, Slupianek (Jason Beals); the spaz, Seiffert (Bob Mussett); the asshole, Büscher (William McGregor); and the pussy-whipped wallflower, Braukmann (George Saulnier III). Their lives have become endless rounds of "pinball and schnapps" as they sleepwalk through their days. But Slupianek is fed up. He gives his cronies a mission: to conquer the South Pole. Thing is, it's someone else's mission, and it happened already—in 1911.

Rather than engage with real life, the guys hole up in Braukmann's attic to re-enact Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen's historic expedition to Antarctica. They get into the game with the giddy ardor of fanboys at a LARP convention—stomping around the attic in furs and snow goggles, traversing imaginary crevasses and debating the proper way to cook husky meat.

Reality rears its palsied head when Büscher suggests that maybe Amundsen's success isn't what they should be playing at, but rather the botched South Pole-bound journey of the Norwegian's contemporary, Ernest Shackleton. "We do failures better," he says. "They're our staple diet." Thus begins the story's real quest, into the heart of the everyman's malaise.

Though it's relatively well-known among modern German plays, *South Pole* hasn't gotten much love in the States recently. There's always the worry that it could feel distant and dated; Karge wrote and set his tale in a society on the brink: the Eastern Bloc only a few years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But even though it's about a specific historical period, *South Pole* has an aura of timelessness. It's about unemployment and boredom, after all, and that stuff's pretty universal.



In any case, the hardest thing about this play isn't its foreignness, but its dense, bizarre language. I'm not sure how it sounds in the original German, but translated, the dialogue comes off a lot like Dr. Seuss—lousy with alliteration and limericky rhythm. Despite their best efforts, the actors don't always get into the swing of Karge's words. As Seiffert, Mussett gets the worst of it; he's loaded down with lines like "Clear off, comrades, and kindly put the curtain back" and "I nearly blew a gasket getting here. Getting here, I nearly blew a gasket." The gimmick gets obnoxious sometimes, but for the most part, the language serves the piece more than it hinders it.

Having already gotten his feet wet in the CWT space with last fall's *Almost Asleep*, director Steve Rotolo directs the volatile action of *South Pole* with a capable hand. We believe the actors when they teeter across imaginary precipices, because Rotolo's blocking smoothly navigates the haze between the characters' reality and their fantasy world.

He's got some solid tech work to back him up. Christopher Allison's shipwreck-meets-the-projects set is as high-concept as it is functional, and Matt Breton's elegant lighting design makes even the most unlikely transitions easy to swallow.

Of course, it's the actors' raging enthusiasm that keeps things going. As an ensemble, the cast makes a whole lot of stupid stuff (e.g., dangling off an imaginary ice cliff) look really freaking fun. Appropriately enough, Beals's frothing, passionate take on Slupianek is the standout performance of the night.

Now in residency at the CWT, Molasses Tank doesn't have something to prove so much as a reputation to uphold. The company has already established itself as a haven for artists of all stripes—as with past productions, this one includes an original score by an area composer and promotional art by a local painter (this time around, George O'Connor and Duncan Reid, respectively.) Much like Karge's loopy go-getters, the Molasses guys manage, once again, to make a whole lot out of a little.

THE CONQUEST OF THE SOUTH POLE

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