



Molasses Tank's production of Manfred Karge's "The Conquest of the South Pole" toys with the outer edges of sense. (The Boston Globe)

STAGE REVIEW

Fascinating 'Conquest of the South Pole' is a worthwhile journey

The Boston Globe

By Terry Byrne, Globe Correspondent | April 5, 2007

When despair sends four unemployed men on an imagined journey to the South Pole, the trail is fraught with difficulties. German playwright Manfred Karge's "The Conquest of the South Pole" plays like a fever dream, and Molasses Tank's bare-bones production at Charlestown Working Theatre toys with the outer edges of sense, which doesn't always work. But this play is such a fascinating mix of domestic drama and epic adventure, it's impossible not to fall under its spell.

Written in the mid-'80s, before the Berlin Wall tumbled, "Conquest" emerges out of the German theatrical tradition epitomized by Bertolt Brecht. Karge is a member of Berliner Ensemble, the company founded by Brecht, and the play's dreamy tone captures the characters' desperate effort to maintain their sense of humanity and individuality in the face of hopelessness.

Written with an enchanting poetic rhythm reminiscent of Dylan Thomas but filtered through Brecht's rough social context, the play follows four men in a small German town who struggle with the loss of purpose that comes with long-term unemployment. They find comfort in one another, "pinball and schnapps," but when one is driven to attempt suicide, their ad hoc leader Slupianik (Jason Beals) distracts them with the powerful story of Amundsen and his triumphant Norwegian team's conquest of the South Pole.

Using the attic room in one man's home as their clubhouse, the quartet, which includes Büscher (William McGregor), Braukmann (George Saulnier III), and Seiffert (Bob Mussett), reenact the explorers' journey as a way to help themselves face their own nearly insurmountable odds. As they proceed, Slupianik's commitment to realistic touches leads to some high jinks and petty thievery for equipment, displayed in a hilarious tableau. Their mischief incites the anger of La Braukmann (Janelle Mills), with whom Slupianik negotiates a tryst to encourage her patience with their "monkey business."

Like the television series "Lost," "Conquest" dismisses exposition and throws us into the midst of the struggle so the connections unfold as we go. Characters become our anchors, and the most interesting one in this group is Slupianik, a man who seems utterly unsuited to the job of leader and yet rallies his company onward again and again. Slupianik is a loner who cannot forge relationships with anyone but his South Pole crew. Beals plays him with strength, revealing a lovely bit of vulnerability when Slupianik decides he must go on for the sake of the child La Braukmann is carrying.

Karge's characters, like the explorers themselves, face the unending whiteness of the polar cap (laundry on the line), lack of food (La Braukmann is furious when her husband tries to make a pemmican soup in the middle of the night), and dissension in the ranks. At one point, Büscher says they are following the wrong team of explorers. Shackleton's crew, who didn't quite make it, would be a more appropriate role model. "We do failures better," he says. Ultimately, two of the men find work, and one decides to immigrate to Canada, but they band together for the final, symbolic ascent.

Director Steve Rotolo keeps us focused on the characters as they meander through the scenes, but his ensemble is not always up to the challenge of rooting these men completely in their characters. Still, despite some weaknesses in this production, Karge's story creates so many levels of connection, the journey is worth taking. ■

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