

Play Reviews

(Norm Gross reviews plays on a 0-5 scale, 5 being the best. Norm has been a play reviewer for a number of radio stations.)

THE CONQUEST OF THE SOUTH POLE

Review by Norm Gross

At the Charlestown Working Theatre in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, Molasses Tank Productions presents "The Conquest of the South Pole" by Manfred Karge. Translated from its original German by Tinch Minter and Anthony Vivis, this is the play's Boston area premiere. Written in the 1980's by Karge, a prominent member of the Berliner Ensemble, the legendary theatrical company founded by Bertolt Brecht a few years after the end of World War II. As an adherent, he was greatly influenced by Brecht's politically critical tradition. Set in a small German community, four young men, still unemployed for a very long time, try to alleviate their ongoing desperate boredom by re-enacting Amundsen's successful expedition to the South Pole, during the early part of the 20th century. They've all congregated in the attic of the home of one of their buddies, and they're playing a "game" which was thought up when Slupeniak and his two pals Braukmann and Buscher unexpectedly showed up to discover their compatriot Seiffert trying to hang himself. Slupeniak attempts to defuse his friend's depression by suggesting that they all try to recreate Amundsen's triumph. They all see it as a possible relief to their persistent killing tedium. Reading from a book about this historic achievement, the white laundry, hung about the attic space, becomes a substitute for the polar ice caps. As interpreted by Slupeniak, the great Norwegian explorer's victory becomes a symbol for the challenges they face from a system that, in spite of their desire and ability to work, leaves them both perpetually unemployed and also convinced that they themselves are somehow to blame. However, Buscher, being a realist, contests this view by suggesting that the failure of a competing Polar expedition at that same time, by the explorer Shackleton, is the true example that relates to their present troubled situation. But whether they must look to Amundsen's celebration or Shackleton's defeat, they all agree, whatever outcome their play-acting arrives at, that they all still remain lost in the system's dead end of unemployment. Effectively performed by Jason Beals as Slupeniak, William McGregor as Buscher and George Saulnier III as Braukmann, with an equally strong portrayal by Janelle Mills as Braukmann's very hard-pressed and concerned wife. While several of the other minor roles were unevenly performed, Steve Rotolo, the drama's fine director, did quite well in

his brief appearance as a fascistic neighbor. Christopher Allison's minimal set, composed mainly of tall lengths of wooden framing, served the production just barely, while George O'Connor's musical choices proved to be more effective. Now playing through April 14. (My Grade: 4)
