

THE PHOENIX

Games people play

The Conquest of the South Pole; Memory House

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They've lost their jobs, and pinball and schnapps aren't cutting it as amusement any longer. The forecast is grim for the four German men in Molasses Tank Productions' staging of Manfred Karge's *The Conquest of the South Pole* (at Charlestown Working Theater through April 14) until Slupianek (a combustible Jason Beals), the most ill-at-ease among the loafers, reads about Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer who in 1911 was the first to reach the South Pole. Slupianek gets the bright idea that he and his chums should re-enact the expedition in his friend Braukmann's bare attic. Braukmann (George Saulnier III) has recently landed a job, as his wife (Janelle Mills), the realistic anchor on the men's fantasy voyage, likes to remind the rest. Still, the group engage in their project with all the flourish of boys at recess. The play within a play is a transparent allegory: the imagined slippery ice, wide crevices, and uncertain destination stand in for the re-enactors' emotional vulnerability.

Molasses Tank's mission is to stage infrequently produced plays by noted writers. The troupe has done Václav Havel and Eugene Ionesco with varying success. Now it takes on Karge, a member of the legendary Berliner Ensemble, who writes in a Brechtian vein. His characters' language can be choppy and cryptic, and their desperation yields absurdity. The play is a recipe for artificiality, but Steve Rotolo's direction taps the au courant righteous-slacker sensibility, and the cast capably navigates the stylized text. As the story unfolds in measured bursts of anguish, the effect is surreal and dislocating, even as the men's plight speaks to universal social conditions. And because the characters differ widely in how they react to their shared situation (the play starts with one character attempting suicide and the others laughing at him), their real-life malaise comes into sharper focus within the cartoonish premise of the imagined journey.



The Conquest of the South Pole

Joblessness breeds misery in *Conquest*; in TheatreZone's *Memory House* (at Chelsea Theatre Works through April 29), employment is the soul-eroding factor. Kathleen Tolan's wrenching play, directed here by Danielle Fauteux Jacques, drags its feet at the outset. But once Maggie (Suzanne Ramczyk) and her sullen teenager, Katia (Becca A. Lewis), start going at it, the mother-daughter sparring could use some UN intervention. Former dancer Maggie, now an office drone, gracelessly bakes a pie and begs Katia to finish her college-application essay, which is due in hours. But Katia needs "context." So, it seems, does Maggie, whose bitterness Ramczyk conceals under a sweet, sunny façade — for a while. Katia, we learn, is adopted, and her growing need to know her past gets unleashed in typically vicious high-school form. With hunched shoulders and melodramatics, Lewis nails the smoldering, petulant teen. And Ramczyk is both tragic and witty as Maggie demonstrates how passion can compensate for cluelessness, whether in rolling out pie crust or in mothering.

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