

The Life & Death of an Antarctic Explorer - Detached involvement marks Port City's production. By Brad Hathaway
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"A Fascinating Presentation"

It seems natural that Ted Tally's play about the things that drive men to extraordinary lengths exploring the world would stimulate fine work from a theater based in a port city. That is precisely what it gets in the new production of the Port City Playhouse at the Lee Center.

"Terra Nova" is a play about the expedition to the South Pole led by legendary explorer Robert Falcon Scott in 1911-12. He and his band of intrepid if ill-fated explorers traveled south on the ship "Terra Nova" and then over the frozen expanse of Antarctica dragging their supplies on a sled, accepting hardships in pursuit of the prize - to be the first to leave footprints at the South Pole.

History records that when Scott and his team got to the South Pole, however, they found that Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had beaten them by a month. As they trudged back toward civilization, hardships got the best of them, and one by one, they died.

Scott's journal was found on his frozen corpse. It is from the entries in that journal as well as excerpts from letters that Tally drew in crafting this 1977 play. His fascination seems to have been for the workings of the mind of men who will pay an extraordinary price to accomplish extraordinary things. It is a theme that marks his more famous work, the screenplay for the movie "The Silence of the Lambs." Of course, here the extraordinary things involved aren't cannibalism and serial killings but they are no less matters of life and death.

Director Don Petersen's production has a fairly detached feeling to it, just as Tally's script does. Tally wasn't just documenting the facts of the privations suffered by the five members of the Scott expedition - frost bite, gangrene, starvation as well as disappointment. He was examining the workings of their minds as they chose to accept these horrors as their fate.

He was also looking at the bond of a band of men in pursuit of a common but uncommon goal. The matter of Scott's duty to his men and their commitment to him and to each other is a constant element of the play.

Petersen allows his cast to exhibit all the emotions of fear, regret and frustration in outbursts of real emotion, but never allows that to obscure the intellectual issues of camaraderie, bravery and duty. It makes for a fascinating presentation over the course of two acts.

Blakeman Brophy plays Scott with an admirable sense of restraint - just right for the proper British gentleman in pursuit of glory for his country and his King. Tally writes in two characters who weren't along on the expedition in person but whose impact was important. One was Scott's wife to whom he addresses many of the passages in his correspondence. Erin Gallalee does a fine job with that fairly unsatisfying role.

The other presence, however, is a highlight of the play. The spirit of the victor, the Norwegian Amundsen, engages Scott in a series of conversations over his decisions as commander - the choice to pull the supply sled instead of using dogs (Amundsen brought along sufficient dogs on his own attack on the pole to use them as food as the load gets lighter, something Scott found ungentlemanly).

Jon Whittle, adopting a well defined but not excessive or distracting Norwegian accent, makes the scenes between himself as Amundsen and Brophy as Scott the most interesting of the evening.

Each of the four other members of the expedition is created as a unique and understandable individual by Ken Clayton, Gary Cramer, Carl Brandt Long and Scott Olson.

A nicely simple set of white provides the proper atmosphere while Paul Andrew Morton's costumes seem altogether functional in an icy wasteland. Andrew Wray's sound effects and musical underscoring enhances the production as well.

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