

## Ice-Cold Tragedy Sheds Powerful Light on Human Spirit

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From left, Bowers (Scott Olson), Oates (Carl Long), Wilson (Ken Clayton) and Scott (Blakeman Brophy) face Antarctica. (Photos By Doug Olmsted)

It is not as difficult as might be expected to suggest a frozen Antarctic landscape onstage. Strategically placed white sheets, ice-blue lighting and a howling wind soundtrack nicely do the trick in Port City Playhouse's masterful production of "Terra Nova."

Much more challenging is making tangible the spirit of men struggling to stay alive in that environment. It is here where Port City's production soars, holding an audience spellbound. The true story of a doomed expedition to the South Pole, "Terra Nova" ("New Land") is an intense study of men confronting the harsh realization that anguish and death will be their sole rewards for courage and pride.

In 1911, adventurers Robert Scott of England and Roald Amundsen of Norway were racing to lead the first team to reach the South Pole. Amundsen used sled dogs for both transportation and as food, which Scott viewed as beneath English dignity. Instead, Scott and his team dragged heavy sleds themselves, month after month across the most hostile environment on earth for the glory of Britain. They made it to the South Pole, but found disappointment. Their bodies exhausted, the dispirited team had to battle their way out of the frozen wasteland. The journey home dominates the second act as the emotional intensity builds inexorably to tragedy and a haunting climax.

Using letters and journals written by Scott and his men, playwright Ted Tally crafted a tale that is difficult to stage, particularly in the exposition-crammed, dramatically inert scenes that begin Act 1. It

is partly an adventure story, partly a psychological analysis and a vague essay on the unraveling of the British Empire. Told with frequent flashbacks of memory and flights of imagination, the play challenges the cast to finesse an awkward scene structure replete with rapid emotional and mood shifts.

Director Don Petersen carefully avoids the pitfalls, leading seven actors to performances that simultaneously capture both the grand scope of epic adventure and the inner compulsions, fears and regrets of men dying for a dream. It is a remarkable achievement. And it is one that ultimately rests on the talents of Blakeman Brophy, who portrays Scott superbly. Brophy turns in a riveting performance in which traditional British reserve and understatement are sensitively used to vivid effect.

As doubt, self-recrimination and anxiety mount in Scott's mind, Brophy reaches not for the raised voice or tormented body language that an actor might employ. Instead he is quiet and often still, the agony flitting across his face, evident in closed eyes or the tremor of a hand. Brophy softly draws the audience to him, steadily pulling us into Scott's memories of his courtship and marriage and the fantasies of being reunited with his healthy team members after a celebrated return home to England.

By the middle of the second act during a performance last weekend, the audience was completely still, so much in the actor's grip that breathing seemed to have ceased in the theater. It was thrilling, a stunning example of live theater's magic.

Other cast members have different journeys to follow but support Brophy expertly. Carl Long shows us humanity in the pragmatic and driven Oates, who argues that an injured mate should be left behind. Gary Cramer is heartbreaking as Evans, whose physical deterioration leads to psychological collapse. Scott Olson is a rowdy Bowers in counterpoint to Ken Clayton's Wilson, the genial and reassuring physician. Jon Whittle is a brittle and practical Amundsen, a constant presence puncturing Scott's idealism, while Erin Gallalee's Kathleen comforts him with the tender memories of a strong-willed wife.

Supporting and building on each other's work, the actors create a powerful emotional spell. It is a harrowing journey into tragedy that they undertake, but it also honors the triumph of the human spirit. Go see it.

"Terra Nova," performed by Port City Playhouse, continues through April 28 at the Lee Center for the Performing Arts, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime is 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. A performance is also scheduled for 8 p.m. Tuesday. For tickets, call 703-838-2880. For tickets and information, visit <http://www.portcityplayhouse.com>.