

The Herald,

If the biggest challenge facing Suspect Culture were to transform the Tramway's stage into the glaciers, rock towers and snow-fluted ridges of an 8000m Himalayan giant, then they could truly claim to have "knocked the bugger off".

8000m is a triumph of stage artistry. Director Graham Eatough and designer Ian Scott have turned the theatre's wall into the cold and threatening ice face of Lhotse, Everest's neighbour at the head of Nepal's Khumbu valley. The play emphasises the near-death struggles faced by those who climb above 8000m, and early on we're told that one in six doesn't survive. 8000m's climbing expedition has six members and, guess what?

David Greig's script closely follows the Lhotse expedition of an ageing leader (Eric Barlow) the ultimate goal of which is to put cold, determined professional ice climber (Selina Boyack) on Lhotse's summit. We follow the journey from Kathmandu to Everest base camp and ultimately the climb itself. It tips a hat to recent mountaineering writings of Alison Hargreaves, Joe Simpson, Jon Krakauer and their peers while also addressing issues that have grabbed media headlines: the families climbers leave behind, the ethics of guided Everest climbs, the numbed responses to the deaths of others.

As the ice climber leave her family to face her biggest challenge, events force her to question her motivation. Various minor characters – her husband, a Buddhist monk, a radio DJ, a base-camp gossip, all played by John Macauley – scrape away at her frosty exterior but it's difficult to develop sympathy for a character who, even as she tends a dying climber, maintains that cold exterior.

The question of why people climb goes unanswered. Ice climber's response – "it's what I do" – is unquestioning and, towards the end, unravelled.

But it's the transformation of the stage that makes the play a visual spectacle and a fine contribution to mountaineering's rich culture. You can almost feel the frostbite.

John Manning