

High and Mighty, Sunday Herald 01/02/04

Those of us who have been hankering for the days when a show in Tramway's main performance space was a buzzing cultural occasion were amply satisfied by this ambitious mountaineering drama. Suspect Culture has long striven, with varying degrees of success, to prove that theatre is not an antediluvian pastime preferred by people who think a modem is a two-wheeled vehicle. With 8000m, it has combined technology and an innovative use of the human body to create a breathtakingly complete piece of drama. The company appears to have hit upon its perfect subject. The story of a diverse team of climbers, from the highly experienced professional (Selina Boyack) to the sponsor who uses his commercial influence to get himself on the expedition (Phil McKee), looks like prime cinematic material. Set on the Himalayan peak of Lhotse, the world's fourth highest, it offers the sort of courage, suspense and awe-inspiring scenery that are the very essence of the movies.

By contrast, the sheer scale of a major mountaineering expedition seems utterly at odds with the limitations of theatre. And that, one suspects, is a large part of director Graham Eatough's and playwright David Greig's motivation – the challenge of seemingly insurmountable odds.

At once a thriller, a society play and a comedy, this production knits its themes together as seamlessly as it combines its superb music and sound (designed by Nick Powell) with extraordinary lighting and set design (by Ian Scott). It is acutely, but never polemically aware of the fact that mountaineering is of most interest to our mass media either when people die or when a woman with children dares to take part in a pursuit which fathers have been engaging in for many decades.

Greig's script interweaves subtle and witty comment on these issues with the overarching question: what motivates people to push themselves to the edge of human endurance, and often beyond it, in pursuit of the peaks of the world's highest mountain? Indeed, what is it about our society that makes such expeditions increasingly attractive?

The language of the play shifts effortlessly between the poetic and the necessarily functional. The meeting between Boyack's stoical ice climber and a Buddhist priest takes us beyond agnostic cynicism, while the climbers' irritation with the demands of Catherine Keating's writer gives rise to some nice comic moments.

As the circumstances of the climb become increasingly dangerous, the tremendous cast (which includes Eric Barlow and Paul Blair), meet every demand, both physical and directorial, placed upon them. Consequently, the piece, which runs to more than two-and-a-half hours, is utterly compelling; not only emotionally, but also visually. The use of Tramway's famous "Brook Wall" is extraordinary, especially at the point where the audience's perspective is reversed, with the wall becoming the floor, and the floor becoming a climbing wall.

When, late last year, the name of Suspect Culture appeared on the Scottish Arts Council's list of companies whose future funding was under review, the Glasgow-based group seemed surprisingly sanguine. 8000m might explain why. Who would dare starve them of cash after they have pulled off such a stunning coup de théâtre?

Mark Brown