

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

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

Metro Scotland,

The statistics are alarming. One in six people who attempt a Himalayan summit will not come back alive. And many, according to Scottish company Suspect Culture's incisive, ambitious new play 8000m, will not return at all – stepping over corpses being a hazard of climbing peaks more than 8,000m high.

So why do it? Why endure the altitude sickness, extreme cold, abject fear and ultimately, death, just to stake your flag at the peak?

Director Graham Eatough and writer David Greig tackle this eternal question with customary panache – leading us on a fictional expedition up the slopes of Lhotse, and 8,000m peak next to Everest, and through the ambitions and emotions of six very different climbers.

Selina Boyack gives tense, steely life to the fiercely driven Ice Climber, while John Macauley plays the patient husband waiting at home.

Eric Barlow is The Leader, experienced but past his personal peak. Paul Blair is the gung-ho Alpinist, Catherine Keating playing his girlfriend, a rookie climber and The Writer, mustard keen to elicit poetic images from her more cynical team.

Matthew Pidgeon is wearily brilliant as the jaded camp doctor and Phil McKee is the Sponsor, fulfilling his boyhood ambition while doing his bit for Mackays Butter Cookies' Scary Biscuits ad campaign – a wonderful comic touch.

En route, the characters unfold, their motivations for being there laid bare and chewed over with every step.

Suspect Culture lifts this play from stage to the famous Peter Brook wall, creating a landscape of the imagination as the actors scale a specially created climbing wall, covered in layers of gauze and projections conjuring up Lhotse's icy face. This is a beautifully wrought play, characters and dialogue are woven in very satisfying layers. But it is the staging – the way it tips our world perspective by having the action scale unimaginable heights on Tramway's walls – that makes it remarkable.

Who needs Touching the Void's dizzying camera angles?

Ellie Carr