

THEATER

Terra Incognita

By Bob Mondello

Terra Nova

By Ted Tally

Directed by Alex Cranmer

At Clark Street Playhouse to May 19

Inferno

Adapted from Dante by Bill Largess

Directed by John MacDonald

At Source Theatre to May 15

The maxim that theater requires nothing more than “three planks and a passion” has stood a long enough test of time that it’s probably not wise to amend it at this point. Still, let it be said that adding a couple of bolts of fabric doesn’t hurt.

That’s all designer Greg Mitchell and the design team of Matt Soule and Alex Cranmer have needed this week to turn—for off-nights at the Source Theatre and the Clark Street Playhouse, respectively—a Mametian junk shop into hell, and a stylized Spanish desert into a persuasively frigid glacier. Who’d a thunk?

In each case, the designers are abetting a more extravagant dramatic transformation than initially meets the eye, for in etherealizing the settings of *American Buffalo* and *Blood Wedding*—plays that are, for all their poetry of expression, ferociously concerned with the day-to-day existence of characters—the designers are creating spaces more attuned to theater that has precious little to do with the here and now, and everything to do with ideas.

That’s admittedly an odd claim to

be making for *Terra Nova*, Ted Tally’s drama about British explorer Robert Falcon Scott and his 1911 bid to beat Norway’s Roald Amundsen to the South Pole. Much of the evening’s dialogue is concerned with subzero temperatures, frozen toes, and the mechanics of hauling a sled packed with 1,000 pounds of provisions some 800 miles to a desolate spot no man has ever reached. But as Project Y’s clever, sharply conceived production chronicles the Scott expedition’s increasingly perilous predicament, complicated by accidents, nature, and human nature, what ratchets up the tension is a clash of ideologies.

Scott (Scot McKenzie) is a Brit of the arrogant, stiff-upper-lip sort, secure in the opinion that his nation’s empire-building has ever been, and will continue to be, good for the globe. He’s also prone to judgmental pronouncements about his Norwegian rival, who so haunts his thoughts that the author can’t resist bringing him onstage, even though it’s only the Scott mission to the pole that’s being depicted. As played acerbically by Tyson Lien, Amundsen is a marvelously annoying creature, tall where Scott is slight, scientific by nature where Scott is scientific only by inclination. What Scott really believes in is man’s nobility and the importance of the heroic gesture. So it’s not surprising that he’s utterly confounded by a declaration made by Amundsen about the use to which he intends to

put man’s best friend: “A husky,” says the pragmatic Norwegian, “is 50 pounds of dinner, hauling you along until you need to eat it.”

Scott can’t imagine the kind of mind that would conceive of eating dogs, but once on the Antarctic ice, with an injured man slowing his party and death looming in a hostile landscape, he’s faced with decisions far more dire. Tally’s script wisely keeps the conversation elevated as complications keep piling on, and if Cranmer’s staging exhibits a morbid fascination with the stench of gangrene and the blackening of frost-bitten toes, it concentrates most of its energies on the exploration of ideas and ideals.

Project Y has struck me since its inception as the smartest of the city’s younger theater troupes, perhaps because it’s an offshoot of the similarly idea-oriented, fiercely political Potomac Theatre Project, which struck me as the smartest of the city’s previous generation of itinerant companies. Devoted to providing thought-provoking theater for 20-something audiences, Project Y has consistently aimed high and hit higher, although it has mostly been performing at a distinct disadvantage in cramped quasi-theatrical spaces.

Freed up by the comparatively vast expanses of the Clark Street Playhouse, and with its energetic ensemble performing in a caution-to-the-winds style that translates smartly to a big auditorium, the company is now marking a major step forward with *Terra Nova*. So far forward, in fact, that as Scott’s weary explorers pitch their tents before the stage’s parachute-silk promontories (occasionally bathed in a subdued aurora australis by lighting designer Ayun Fedorchka), you may have trouble deciding if the

chill you feel is due to the persuasiveness with which fabric is standing in for ice or to a palpable, invigorating sense of theatrical discovery.