

Style

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Theater

'Terra Nova' a Chilling Polar Race

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Here's something you won't see on "Survivor": a group of Antarctic explorers nearly passing out from the sight of a comrade's frostbitten toes that have fallen off in his boot. The onstage gagging that accompanies this revelation in Project Y's compelling production of "Terra Nova" is almost contagious.

Ted Tally's 1977 play is based on the race to the South Pole nearly 90 years ago between Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen. Obviously, the details of this harsh 800-mile trek across ice make TV's suspiciously well-lighted "reality" show look like sissy stuff.

"Really, it's an extraordinary place," an awed Amundsen murmurs to Scott as they stare out at the hard, white nothingness. "It wants so much for you to be dead."

There's nothing like life-and-death situations to throw philosophy and ethics into sharp relief, and this is what gives "Terra Nova" its edge. The play focuses on Scott, an Englishman who haughtily subscribes to a rigid system of codes and rules having to do with some vague notion of British superiority and honor. The Norwegian Amundsen is Scott's opposite, a pragmatist who, to Scott's disgust, plans to eat the dogs who will drag his crew's sled to the Pole.

Of course Scott and Amundsen are not racing

side by side, shouting at each other over the icy wind that's an almost constant presence in Dave McKeever's sound design. They took different routes, so Tally had the bright idea of making Amundsen a nagging voice in the increasingly paralyzed Scott's head.

Tyson Lien, who has put together a string of absorbing performances over the last two seasons, plays Amundsen like Mephistopheles with a Nordic accent. Lien creates a tantalizing figure: vaguely sinister with his buzz cut, bushy goatee and lines purred with the savor of a James Bond master criminal, yet inarguably wise when it comes to dealing with brute life.

As disaster looms, Amundsen urges Scott to make decisions. Scott can't, and then does, and can't seem to make a right move. Scot McKenzie initially seems a little wooden as Scott, capable of stentorian proclamations and not much else. But the performance takes on a lot of color as Scott's certainty gets stripped away. Antarctica shows him the world in a cold new light, and it almost blinds him.

Set designer Matt Soule and director Alex Cranmer drape white fabric across vast spaces in the Clark Street Playhouse, home of the Washington Shakespeare Company (a co-producer of this show, which is running in rep with the WSC's "Blood Wedding"). Project Y shows, aimed at an audience in its twenties and thirties, are typically earnest, intense and actor-driven, and Cranmer's production is no



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Tyson Lien, left, and Scot McKenzie as Antarctic explorers in "Terra Nova."

exception. The teamwork between McKenzie's Scott and his band of explorers—played by Clinton Brandhagen, Sam Elmore, Peter Makrauer and Richard Kirkwood—is close-knit, though the young actors are a little too prone to working at full throttle.

The understated performances by Lisa Walsh (as Scott's wife) and Kirkwood (as the medic on Scott's team) offer a good change of pace, and Lien's nuanced turn is a constant delight. There is an un-failing force in the storytelling, and Cranmer sees to it that all the details slip squarely into place in Scott's journey from moralizing arrogance to the spiritual abyss.

Terra Nova, by Ted Tally. Directed by Alex Cranmer. Lights, Ayun Fedorcha; costumes, Deb Sivigny. Through May 19 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Arlington. Call 703-418-4808.