

The Conquest of the South Pole - by Manfred Karge, directed by Steve Pickering
[Odyssey Theater](#)

Runs 10/9-12/12/04

Translations - especially those addressing socioeconomic issues that affect other countries and societies - always run the risk of sounding, well, foreign. Such is the case in an otherwise superb production at the Odyssey Theater. Despite having three translators (!), much of the dialogue sounds rather stilted and upper-crusty, especially given the blue collar location in which the play takes place. Manfred Karge's script is originally set in Germany's industrial Ruhr Valley, and director Steve Pickering transported the action to the oddly Germanic-sounding town of "Herne" in the hopes of reproducing a parallel unemployment/despair situation here. To a large extent, this does work, as the pathos and downward spiral joblessness can produce needs no translation.

Four men (Braukmann [David G. Peryam], Buscher [Ben Shields], Slupianek [Rob Kahn], and Seiffert aka "Moose" [Christopher W. Jones]) have been laid off, and in the ensuing jobless months, they fill their time by drinking schnapps (an odd choice of beverage for Midwestern blue collar workers), while Braukmann's wife Luise (Dale Dickey) keeps him, however unwillingly, grounded in real life. Ringleader Stupianek coerces his friends into reenacting the Conquest of the South Pole (based on book about Norwegian explorer Roald Amudsen) and the ensuing "journey" involves some lively and wildly imaginative playacting in Braukmann's attic, where even the laundry has a role. While the "conquest" is a metaphor for their own struggles through the frozen tundra of unemployment, for Stupianek, the fantasy takes on a life of its own, an alternate reality which is threatened when Braukmann finally does get a real job.

Outstanding was Nina Sallinen's performance as Frankieboy, an odd and virtually wordless sprite-like character who maintains a poignant and heart stirring connection to everything and everyone - the conscience and what is good in every character. Also, Dale Dickey keeps us on edge with her unexpected and mercurial changes of mood and direction. Rob Kahn had the odd-sounding dialogue working against him but managed some nuanced moments throughout.

Staging was excellent, especially the wordless opening scene and all the adventure sequences, while Travis Lewis' set is a thing of functional beauty. Derrick McDaniel's lighting and Kevin Rittner's soundtrack and special effects worked powerfully in tandem (although a couple of "mood" moments were underlit). Pickering runs a tight ship, even if the words sometimes fail.