

# Review: Terra Nova | Fort Worth Community Arts Center | Hardy and Betty Sanders Theatre

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Photo: Adriana Bate

Malcolm Stephenson and Meagan Harris in *Terra Nova*

*"Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale."*

Fort Worth — Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?

British explorer Robert Falcon Scott reached the South Pole in January 1912 — but too late. He arrived a full month after his rival Roald Amundsen planted Norway's flag on that icy and much-coveted piece of real estate. Amundsen left Scott a note, asking him to spread the news if the English team got back first.

**Fort Worth Community Arts Center's** fledgling in-house company does a bang-up job with playwright Ted Tally's version of the Scott story in *Terra Nova*, a ripping yarn of the old school with a famously tragic end. And, just as it would be crazy to plan a *Lear* without having an actor in mind for the part, director Bert Pigg's consideration of this play might well have begun in knowing he had the makings of a great Scott in actor Malcolm Stephenson. Both men trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and have collaborated before.

Stephenson's chiseled face and piercing eyes — all we can see of him, really — look past us to the icy horizon of the Antarctic. Does his Scott feel as confident as he seems to the four other members of the core team he's picked to come with him? Tally (best-known today for his Oscar-winning screenplay for *Silence of the Lambs*) interweaves remembered scenes with Scott's outspoken sculptor wife Kathleen (Meagan Harris), an independent New Woman who admires "Con's" strength yet calls him on the ego, social pressure, and fear of mediocrity that drive him to make this second attempt (he'd tried before in 1901) — more than a decade older, and with a young son at home.

Fine ensemble acting and Tally's crisp, sometimes unexpected dialogue carry the day in this storytelling. Stephenson's Scott reveals himself through his dealings with the four men he chooses, with his wife, and with the one man who's in his mind all along the way, Amundsen. At his side are even-keeled doctor and naturalist Wilson (Andrew Manning); soldierly, principled Oates (Joshua Hahlen); cheerful and caring "Birdie" Bowers (Shawn Gann); and strong, loyal "Taffy" Evans (Carter Frost), who went with Scott on his earlier try for the Pole, and will risk anything to be there for the triumph. Though the four "sidekicks" are more sketches than deeply investigated characters, each impacts us emotionally as they face the increasingly grim realities of the journey.

The amused, acid-tongued Amundsen (played by David Graham) mocks Scott for his insistence on "playing the game" as an English gentleman. Amundsen heads for the Pole with dogs pulling the heavy sleds. A husky, he says dryly, is "50 pounds of dinner." In Tally's version, Scott views this strategy as dishonorable and insists on using manpower alone — his small band pushing and pulling across the ice, collecting scientific samples along the way, their labor "the pride of English manhood." (*Terra Nova* was written in the mid-1970s and premiered in New York in 1984; Scott's stance, by more recent accounts, wasn't quite that clear-cut; he set out with dogs, ponies, even motorized sleds — but they didn't last long in the grim Antarctic conditions.) Still, even his rival can't help but give him a grudging epitaph:

*"The world's changing, Scott. It's a smaller place, but not a more neighborly one....[And] where, in such a world, are the men who used to walk like gods?"*

Scott and his four companions died on the return journey, some of them only a few miles from a supply point that could have saved them for the homecoming celebrations they imagine in one poignant scene of the play. Scott's gallant effort became an instant legend that fed hero-hungry England for generations — perhaps because, in his one bit of really good fortune, Scott got to tell his own story, in the vivid, haunting, and dramatic journal accounts found with his body.

*Terra Nova* is an over-the-top, manly-men story if there ever was one, but Tally's smart script, in showing us both the public and the "interior" Scott, allows us to understand and feel for the man who risked everything on a challenge he set for himself. Does our world need heroes like that? Perhaps not in quite the same mold. But as so many of our leaders and public figures prove opportunistic, amoral, even downright evil, it feels cleansing to let Scott's journey flow through our minds and hearts, reminding us "what a piece of work" is the striving human spirit. **TJ**