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Community News

Theater review: 'K2' soars to breathtaking heights

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT** | For The Daily News

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Taylor (Chuck Phelps in orange jacket) hugs fellow mountain climber Harold (John Rutski) in Dragon Theatre's production of "K2," playing through Dec. 2, 2018. (Photo credit: Lance Huntley)

Get set to suspend reality — at least part of the time — if you attend the spellbinding, intense and somewhat chilly drama succinctly titled "K2" now playing through Dec. 2 at the Dragon Theatre in Redwood City.

The enigmatic title is actually the shorthand version of the name of the treacherous Pakistani mountain known as Chogori or Mount Godwin-Austen. Patrick Meyers' taunt script boils the extreme sport of mountain climbing down to the survival of two men who are close to frozen, have lost some of their climbing equipment and one has broken his leg.

What's so surprising is that despite the fact that most of the setting — other than several outsized vertical sheets that give a darned good impression they are made of real ice crystals — doesn't look like a mountaintop, yet half-an-hour into the 85-minute production (done without an intermission), the audience believes it definitely is.

Setting the thermostat down low helps, which means theatergoers are well-advised to dress warmly, but it's somehow the wonder of theater that a large, whitewashed wall with handles on it at irregular intervals morphs into a steep snow-and-ice packed mountainside. And watching the two credible actors try to warm their hands, take frequent gulps of oxygen and visibly shudder from the cold makes us, the audience, feel they really, really are enduring a temperature of 40 degrees below zero.

It's definitely an immersive experience.

Chuck Phelps is sterling as the older, far more cynical and very foul-mouthed lawyer, Taylor. He's the one who has to be the cheerleader, encouraging his injured friend Harold to stay awake, drink water, take oxygen and — most of all — not give up hope. And Taylor's the one who risks his life numerous times on that dreaded icy precipice to try to recover a 60-foot piece of rope that he left behind when it got stuck. It's their only hope of getting off the mountain.

As Harold, a married father who is both a nuclear physicist and a self-styled spiritualist, John Rutski does his best with dialogue that is frequently mired in clichés and/or cheap-sounding mystical catchphrases.

Taylor asks Harold to talk to him as he makes several death-defying climbing attempts to get the literal (and figurative) life-saving rope. But after a couple of minutes of Harold's sing-songy, monotone monologue, the audience just accepts it as background noise, ignores it and concentrates on the climber.

There are moments of dry humor sprinkled here and there, which generates welcome laughter from the audience, eager to grasp at something to break the intensity. Early on, the two laugh heartily at the absurdity of it all — rank amateurs out on a limb both physically and metaphorically. The biggest laugh of the night comes when Taylor tries to cheer up Harold and tells him ruefully, "We should have stuck with go-carts."

By play's end, Taylor finally accepts the fact that he'll have to leave his partner behind, and both men become somber. Harold asks Taylor to relay a message to his son: "Tell him that life is about 'holding on.'"

It's important to give credit to the production artistry that created Dragon's "K2," which is definitely not an easy one to construct. Director Janine Burgenen and scenic artist Tom Shamrell must have worked tirelessly to fashion the cocoon that engulfs the actors and the audience alike. John Owens' lighting is simply so colorful and electrifying that it stands in a class of its own.

As sound designer, Burgenen generates terrifying noises, sometimes low rumblings that foreshadow avalanches and snowfalls, sometimes the crunching of feet walking on breaking ice, and even sounds of a frozen tarp that snaps and crackles as it's moved about.

Costumer Ambera DeLash flawlessly dresses her two actors in suitably rugged outdoor clothing and boots, and Rutski, who doubles as properties designer, came up with all the de rigueur tools of a mountain-climber's trade: crampons, ice screws, an ice axe, portable oxygen tanks, climbing rope and 30 feet of twisted nylon.

In fact, it's kind of a running joke that whenever things get too bleak, Taylor blurts out "Situation assessment!" and the two do a check of their climbing equipment.

Still, it does seem that for two fellows who are in freezing conditions and have about three hours before it's going to get dark and start snowing again, they spend an inordinate amount of time bantering about their home lives and personal differences rather than concentrating on the problem at hand: Survival.

But that's because "K2" is actually a surprising metaphor for deep friendship, and climbing a treacherous mountain is code for "the higher you go, the deeper you get," as Harold laments. They have learned valuable lessons, but at a steep price.

And the audience leaves enveloped in a feeling that they have experienced a breathtaking, daring and highly unusual piece of theatre.

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Theater

What: “K2”

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City, CA 94063

When: Thursday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sunday, 2 p.m.

Through: Dec. 2, 2018

Tickets: \$27-\$35; \$15 rush tickets on Thursday and Friday; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net

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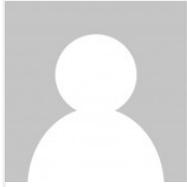


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