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Peak entertainment

Dragon ends season on a high note with 'K2'

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

Dragon Productions Theatre Company started its 2018 "Season of Everything" with "Insignificance," a play partly about Albert Einstein's attempt to figure out a unified theory of the universe. Patrick Meyers' "K2," the last show in Dragon's current season (and part of its Second Stage series), fittingly also delves a bit into Einstein's theories, albeit from the perspective of two mountain climbers in a very perilous situation.

K2, located in the Himalayas on the Pakistan/China border, is the world's second-tallest mountain and among the deadliest. I'm always morbidly attracted to stories of doomed explorations and snowy mountain misadventures, partly because it boggles my mind that some people embark on them for no reason other than "fun." In "K2," the climb has stopped being fun for friends Taylor (Chuck Phelps) and Harold (John Rutski), who've successfully summited K2 but ended up stranded on the ledge of an ice wall on the way down after an accident with their rope. Harold has a badly broken leg (and soon receives a serious head injury as well) while Taylor has a bum shoulder. They've also lost much of their critical gear along the way but, against all odds ("no odds," they bemusedly reflect), have managed to survive the night on the ledge and have a window of a few sunlit hours in which to try and attempt to get down. If they can't, they're sure to perish.

Over the course of the 85-minute one-act play, the two bicker, wax philosophic and come to understand that they'll both need to make some pretty big sacrifices in order to hold out any hope that one of them might make it home to the Bay Area alive.

It's a tense and cleverly designed production. Set designer Tom Shamrell manages to ingeniously transform the small Dragon space into a mighty mountain top using fog machines, a platform, some shimmering ice-crystal backdrops and a climbing wall. Sound design by director Janine Burgener is very effective as well, with haunting, plaintive songs interspersed with the terrifying sounds of avalanches and howling winds.

Because the actors are costumed in thick jackets and other cold-weather gear, the theater is kept at an even chillier temperature than usual, so audiences are advised to dress warm. There are hot drinks for sale and cozy blankets available to rent for \$2 (reader, I rented one, and verily it was most snuggly). The cold atmosphere helps give the audience an immersive feeling of being there on K2 with the characters, although, thankfully, not at the 40-below temperature they're experiencing.

Since it's a two-man show, establishing the rapport between the two climbers is key. Meyers' script lays out the differences



John Rutski and Chuck Phelps star in "K2" at the Dragon Theatre. Photo by Lance Huntley.

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between them clearly. Taylor is a foul-mouthed, hot-tempered district attorney who revels in his lonesome, chauvinistic bachelor life. Harold is a devoted family man with a beloved wife and young son. He's a nuclear physicist, a big thinker and the gentler of the two. He also has the tendency to drone on for long passages about the meaning of life, the universe and everything while active Taylor is risking life and limb to climb up and down an ice wall to retrieve some critically needed rope. Phelps has to do a lot of physical work shimmying about the set and it makes for exciting viewing, even as the script gets bogged down with self-importance at times. Rutski struggles to make some of the clunky dialog sound natural but gives a touching performance as the doomed dreamer.

The climbers spend a good deal of time arguing with and insulting one another, and it sometimes seems hard to believe they can go from nearly dead from oxygen deprivation, cold and fatigue to long-winded, high-minded conversations, but by show's end their deep bond is solidified and the audience is vested in their fates.

Taylor and Harold must push their friendship to the limit and alternately learn when to hold on and when, to quote from another story of frozen adventure, to let it go. And of course, mountains can serve as symbols for any life challenge -- "the purest, simplest metaphors," Harold says. In the case of "K2," though, the biggest thrills come from the misadventures on the literal, rather than metaphorical, mountain. As usual when confronted with tales of icy disaster, I left the theater thankful that I have no desire to ever become a mountain climber and, also as usual, glad the Dragon is here to offer us such interesting entertainment.

What: "K2"

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

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

Cost: \$27-\$35.

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

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