

At the Lyceum Theatre: Touching the Void****

In the programme notes for The Lyceum's new stage adaptation of *Touching the Void*, writer **David Greig** tells us that Ultra Running is 'a sport I particularly like.' Ultra Running: a sport 'for those people for whom standard marathons are no longer challenging'. As the lights go down, I am not sure that this play – which documents Joe Simpson's and Simon Yates' near death experience in the Peruvian Andes – is really going to be my can of Red Bull.

The facts are well known: in 1985 Joe and Simon attempted the first ever ascent of the West face of Siula Grande. Having reached the peak, they were descending when they got into big trouble. The weather worsened, their supplies ran out, Joe was badly injured in a fall and, despite heroic efforts to drag him down the 'hill' (mountaineers being masters of the geographical understatement) a further fall left Simon with no choice but to cut the rope. In 1988 (spoiler!) Joe wrote a book, *Touching the Void*, which was later turned into a critically acclaimed film – but can this story work on a simple theatre stage?

The play opens in the Clachhaig Inn; it is Joe's wake, attended by Simon, Joe's sister Sarah, and Richard, a gap year student who met the men while trying to find himself in Lima. Richard (an excellent **Patrick McNamee**) provides a foil to the obsessive earnestness of the climbers; he's funny but also philosophical, he gets why they do it, but he certainly isn't going to do it himself. Sarah (**Fiona Hampton**), however, is furious. Her raw, searing grief wants answers, and the question she most wants answered is *why* – why do people like Joe take such horrendous risks, and why don't they care about the people they leave behind them?

And this, really, is the nub of the play. Can it explain what drives people to go up 6,344 metre 'hills' in appalling weather, with only the bare minimum of equipment and supplies ('Alpine climbing' favours the 'go light, go fast' approach) in the full knowledge that they may not come back? Well yes, and also no.

Back in the Clachhaig Inn, Simon (**Edward Hayter**) tries to show Sarah the adrenalin buzz he gets from mountaineering. Using only chairs, tables and a pub sign he soon has her 'climbing' first in the Peak District, then the Alps. I found this scene less convincing; in a few short moments Sarah is converted from sceptic to enthusiast, manoeuvring around with a big smile on her face. I have tried indoor climbing; it's impossible; I did not smile.

Simon then moves on to describe the fated expedition to Peru; Joe (**Josh Williams**: outstanding) appears, and now we are watching the two of them as they start their ascent. **Ti Green's** Siula Grande is a masterpiece of stage design; a huge, angular frame covered in tattered white paper, which can be ice or snow, hard or soft. This mountain is terrifying but also alluring; it shines like a beacon in the dark, the ferocious Andean winds howling around it. As the men move, so the mountain itself rotates on its axis; we see it as they see it, a constantly shifting wall of glittering rock.

As Joe and Simon reach the summit, they are already thinking about their next climb and discussing their motivation. In a rare moment of self-awareness, Joe asks 'Do you ever think this is just another addiction?' Well yes I do, actually, but it's soon clear that Joe doesn't; he sees climbing as a natural activity, the one for which all of us were born. Children climb trees, adults climb mountains. To climb, he says, is to be truly alive;

'It's not climbing that's weird, it's normal life – offices, mortgages...why live like that when you can live like this?'

And at this point I think we do begin to understand what motivates these men. For them the ultimate goal is a purity of experience that transcends any high they can get at ground level. Pushing their bodies, and their minds, to an extreme that most of us will neither reach nor want to has become their reason for living.

After the calamitous accident that leaves Joe alone at the bottom of a crevasse, Sarah reappears (as a figment of her brother's imagination) to nag, cajole and bully him into crawling back to his friends. Whilst this part of the play has some effective visual jokes (chairs are used to create 'a rock that looks like a dying elephant') and sharp one-liners, I did feel that time dragged a little. Obviously we need to understand the enormity of the challenge and the agony (very well conveyed by Williams) of hauling oneself across rocks and ice whilst seriously injured, but for me this scene did seem overstretched. Maybe if the ending had not been common knowledge the tension would have been greater, but the fact is that we all know Joe couldn't have written the book if he'd died on Siula Grande.

When Sarah thinks Joe is dead, she reads a letter he has left for her. He tells her that he does not have a death wish, and that he wants her to know that;

'I died laughing, on top of the f-ing world.'

Addiction? Love? Who knows? Even when we can never imagine taking such risks ourselves, we can maybe start to see that people like Joe don't want to die; they want to live an extreme life 'because it's there'.

Touching the Void, a joint production of Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh, Bristol Old Vic, Royal & Derngate & Fuel, is at The Lyceum Theatre, Grindlay Street, until 16 February. For tickets contact the Box Office on 0131 248 4848 or click [here](#).