

Franklin

by Kilian Melloy
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Stacey Fischer and Alexis Scheer in 'Franklin,' continuing through April 2 at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre (Source: Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

Boston Playwrights' Theater premieres "**Franklin**," an intriguing, often gripping, new play about a lost polar expedition and the researchers -- lost souls in their own right -- who come looking for answers nearly 170 years later.

The play takes the true story of Captain John Franklin's lost expedition, consisting of two ships and 129 men, which set out in 1845 to chart the remainder of the Northwest Passage, a route passing close to the North Pole by which ships could get from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific without having to sail nearly to the South Pole. Franklin's two ships were *Erebus* and *Terror*, both of which have, in real life, been located by researchers. The object of this play's fictional researchers' quest, *Terror*, was only discovered last year by researchers from the Arctic Research Foundation. (The sunken remains of *Erebus* were located in 2014.)

"Franklin," written by Samantha Noble, presents the search for the *Terror* as the decade-long obsession of a determined young woman named Caroline (Stacy Fischer) -- though Brett (David Berger-Jones), her closest friend and associate on a university-sponsored search for the long-missing ship, cheekily calls her "Mulder" because of her single-mindedness.

"Does that make you 'Scully?'" asks Kira (Alexis Scheer), a songwriter whose proposal to accompany the search mission in order to create a new concept album has been embraced by the university, but is scorned by Caroline, who has no time for anything artsy, frilly, or otherwise not seriously and exclusively dedicated to her quest. For Caroline and Brett, it's all about data gathered through archaeology and charts and what records they can find. But Kira -- who grew up hearing Inuit stories about the explorers from her grandmother -- might possess culturally-preserved clues that the science simply, and wrongly, does not credit.



Felix Teich, David Berger-Jones, and Kai Tshikosi (Source: Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

Unfolding in parallel is the story of those on *Terror* all those years ago, including two adventurers, Henry (Felix Teich) and David (Kai Tshikosi), who have lied about their seafaring experience to secure a place on the expedition and have an adventure. And what an adventure it becomes: As the ice-bound ship runs low on supplies and tensions among the crew rise, lead poisoning (either from the tinned provisions or a filtration system the crew used for water) claims man after man. Spooked, starving, and stranded, the crew begins to splinter, with the sharp rivalry between two officers -- Handfod (Berger-Jones) and Johnson (Caleb Cedrone) -- symbolizing the breakdown of morale and order.

The single set, by Mary Sader, serves equally well for the 19th-century wooden ship and the modern research vessel with all its comforts. An atmospheric lighting scheme by Gifford Williams helps create a polar ambiance, and J. Humbelic's sound design completes the sensory journey to a dark, cold place where it's hard to hold off despair in the best of times. (The space's heating system seemed not to be up to the challenge, as well, which contributed to an icy sensibility. Bring an extra sweater.)

Stephanie LeBolt's direction finds no hesitation or snag with the play's constant switching from ship to ship, cast to cast, and time to time. Lost British explorers in the mid-1800s? We see them, we hear them, we believe in them. 21st-century academics gambling their professional and personal reputations on a quest that's been a wild goose chase for so long they're on the verge of a humiliating shut-down? Their anxieties - and the glimmers of hope they grasp at with each desperately pursued new clues -- become our own.

Special mention must go to Berger-Jones, who transits from one setting to the next in his dual role, sometimes bridging adjacent scenes. The cast all make the job look easy, but his task is twice as hard, and a lesser actor might have become the production's weakest link.

What's not as clear is the writing, which accomplishes the task of explaining some dense theory and allowing us to understand the tortured history of a long search without feeling unbearably expository. Still, something gets a little lost in the translation; there's a "murder board"-style wall where clues and maps are pinned up to create a visual reference for all the relevant data. Kira's insights involve "Square 23," and green ink, but exactly how all the clues click into place, creating a logical chain of proof is murkier than the sea water through which the sunken *Terror* finally, grandly becomes visible.

That's nothing that can't easily be fixed. Meantime, the sense the play generates -- dread and cold, and (thanks to one odd character with an unquenchable sense of adventure) lit by a sense of wonder and appreciation -- is the sort of palpable theatrical magic you always hope to encounter.

"Franklin" runs through April 2 at the Boston Playwrights' Theater. For tickets and more information, please go to <http://www.bu.edu/bpt>

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