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Review: Three Art by Jon Krakauer

By Jim Philbrook

Mountaineer Jon Krakauer's three works in Theatre Cabrillo's show "Wilderness" comprise the author's accounts of Christopher McCandless' ill-fated journey into the Alaskan wilderness in "Into the Wild", a rendition of Sherpa Ang Dorjee's harrowing experience on Everest in "Into Thin Air" and the story of Krakauer's own near-death experience on Mt. Rainier in "Into the Wild". Adapted by Krakauer himself, the three stories are presented in a single evening of theatre.

Into the Wilderness (Friday, 7:30 – Saturday 2:30 & 7:30 – Sunday 2:30) Into the Wild tells a story known about the Christopher McCandless story, but Krakauer's version is the most comprehensive and well-researched. Krakauer's version of the story is based on his own research and his own experience in the Alaskan wilderness, and he has written a book about the story, which was made into a movie by Sean Penn. Krakauer's version of the story is based on his own research and his own experience in the Alaskan wilderness, and he has written a book about the story, which was made into a movie by Sean Penn.

Truth be told, a little education is probably the most that can be hoped for. Everest would without question be safer if prospective clients truly understood the gravity of the risks they face—the thinness of the margin by which human life is sustained above 25,000 feet. Walter Mittys with Everest dreams need to keep in mind that when things go wrong up in the Death Zone—and sooner or later they always do—the strongest guides in the world may be powerless to save their clients' lives. Indeed, as the events of 1996 demonstrated, the strongest guides in the world are sometimes powerless to save even their own lives.

Climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. It is an activity that idealizes risk-taking; its most celebrated figures have always been those who stuck their necks out the farthest and managed to get away with it. Climbers, as a species, are simply not distinguished by an excess of common sense. And that holds especially true for Everest climbers: When presented with a chance to reach the planet's highest summit, people are surprisingly quick to abandon prudence altogether. "Eventually," warns Tom Hornbein, 33 years after his ascent of the West Ridge, "what happened on Everest this season is certain to happen again."

For evidence that few lessons were learned from the mistakes of May 10, one need look no farther than what happened on Everest two weeks later. On the night of May 24, by which date every other expedition had left Base Camp or was on its way down the mountain, the South Africans finally launched their summit bid. At 9:30 the following morning, Ian Woodall radioed that he was on the summit, that teammate Cathy O'Dowd would be on top in 15 minutes, and that his close friend Bruce Herrod was some unknown distance below. Herrod, whom I'd met several times on the mountain, was an amiable 37-year-old with little climbing experience. A freelance photographer, he hoped that making the summit of Everest would give his career a badly needed boost.

As it turned out, Herrod was more than seven hours behind the others and didn't reach the summit until 5 P.M., by which time the upper mountain had clouded over. It had taken him 21 hours to climb from the South Col to the top. With darkness fast approaching, he was out of oxygen, physically drained, and completely alone on the roof of the world. "That he was up there that late, with nobody else around, was crazy," says his former teammate, Andy de Klerk "It's absolutely boggling."

Herrod had been on the South Col from the evening of May 10 through May 12. He'd felt the ferocity of that storm, heard the desperate radio calls for help, seen Beck Weathers crippled with horrible frostbite. Early on his ascent of May 24-25, Herrod had climbed right past the frozen body of Scott Fischer. Yet none of that apparently made much of an impression on him. There was another radio transmission from Herrod at 7 P.M., but nothing was heard from him after that, and he never appeared at Camp Four. He is presumed to be dead—the 11th casualty of the season.

As I write this, 54 days have passed since I stood on top of Everest, and there hasn't been more than an hour or two on any given day in which the loss of my companions hasn't monopolized my thoughts. Not even in sleep is there respite: Imagery from the climb and its sad aftermath permeates my dreams.

There is some comfort, I suppose, in knowing that I'm not the only survivor of Everest to be so affected. A teammate of mine from Hall's expedition tells me that since he returned, his marriage has gone bad, he can't concentrate at work, his life has been in turmoil. In another case, Neal Beidleman helped save the lives of five clients by guiding them down the mountain, yet he is haunted by a death he was unable to prevent, of a client who wasn't on his team and thus wasn't really his responsibility.

When I spoke to Beidleman recently, he recalled what it felt like to be out on the South Col, huddling with his group in the awful wind, trying desperately to keep everyone alive. He'd told and retold the story a hundred times, but it was still as vivid as the initial telling. "As soon as the sky cleared enough to give us an idea of where camp was," he recounted, "I remember shouting, 'Hey, this break in the storm may not last long, so let's go!' I was screaming at everyone to get moving, but it became clear that some of them didn't have enough strength to walk or even stand.

"People were crying. I heard someone yell, 'Don't let me die here!' It was obvious that it was now or never. I tried to get Yasuko on her feet. She grabbed my arm, but she was too weak to get up past her knees. I started walking and dragged her for a step or two. Then her grip loosened and she fell away. I had to keep going. Somebody had to make it to the tents and get help, or everybody was going to die."

Beidleman paused. "But I can't help thinking about Yasuko," he said when he resumed, his voice hushed. "She was so little. I can still feel her fingers sliding across my biceps and then letting go. I never even turned to look back."

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