

Everests on stage: contemporary theatre's contribution to decolonising the mountain

Jonathan Pitches

For most people, transporting the highest mountain on Earth on to the boards of a stage sounds like folly. What can the theatre offer the cultural record of Chomolungma / Sagarmatha / Everest that hasn't already been achieved in literature, music, photography, or film? Its pragmatic limitations – auditorium size, stage dimensions, fly-tower height, scene dock access – are surely constraining enough to thwart the most concentrated efforts, before one contemplates the aesthetics of recreating the extremities of the death zone using haze and tungsten light.¹ Yet the dramatic record of Everest is rich, extensive, and long-lived. Indeed, there is a substantial repertoire of staged renditions of the mountain, spanning at least the same hundred years as the film record – from John Noel's *Epic of Everest* (1924) to Nirmal Purja's *14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible* (2021).² In the theatre, a parallel century of creative activity covers the full political spectrum and range of genres: a fascist tribute to Mussolini, Vitaliano Brancati's *Everest* (1928); a surreal, psychoanalytical verse drama, Auden and Isherwood's *Ascent of F6* (1937);³ a highly fictionalised account of the 1960 Chinese expedition to Everest staged at the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, *Zhumulangma* (1962); a 'delectably loony' romantic skit by Arthur Kopit, *The Conquest of Everest* (1971);⁴ and an operatic translation of the fateful 1996 expedition, *Everest* composed by Joby Talbot and Gene Sheer,⁵ premiering in Dallas in 2015 with a concert staging at the Barbican in London in 2023. All in all, a desk-based survey of staged works dedicated to Everest yielded twenty-five pieces, with dramatic interest in the mountain demonstrably increasing since the 1990s.⁶

How to make sense of this history of Everests on stage? What does a theatre historiography of the mountain reveal, to complement and/or challenge other historiographies? Are there developments in decolonial thinking in the Everest theatre record which parallel other disciplines in mountain studies? And what can be learnt from a close reading of some of the theatrical experiments of the

late 2010s and early 2020s? In this chapter, using the centenary of the 1924 Mount Everest expedition as a catalyst for reflection, I want to focus on the last half-decade of staging Everest in the theatre, asking what, if anything, these performances tell us about the changing symbolic significance of Everest in the contemporary world. I draw on newly conducted interviews with four artists (Matt Kambic, Carmen Nasr, Gary Winters, and Gregg Whelan)⁷ as well as an analysis of their stagings of Everest. How do these works differ from earlier expressions of triumphalism, conquest, and occupation, ones at play in Brancati, the Shanghai Art Theatre, and Isherwood and Auden in variegated ways?

Brancati was a Sicilian dramatist and poet who aligned himself clearly with Mussolini's Blackshirts at the beginning of his career, before distancing himself from fascism from the middle of the 1930s. Brancati's *Everest* is firmly in the former period. Although little has been written about the play, its first performance is notorious for prompting a chorus of (very brave) disapproval. At a time when it was forbidden to criticise Mussolini, Brancati's concluding image drew derision and outrage from its audience – an illuminated bust of Il Duce embedded into the fabric of the mountain, Mount Rushmore-style. The negative reaction was such that it led the poet Trilussa⁸ to proclaim Brancati a genius, although his tongue may have been in his cheek. Soon after, the playwright signalled his movement away from Mussolini with a companion piece, *The Old Man in Boots* – 'a work which dismantles *Everest*'.⁹

At the other end of the political continuum, the propagandist *Zhumulangma* testifies to the extent to which theatre was seen as an effective means of communicating socialist macro-narratives in the young state of the People's Republic of China. As Maggie Greene has pointed out, the Shanghai People's Art Theatre production, based on the first successful ascent of Everest from the north in 1960,¹⁰ was part of a wider cultural crusade in this decade which sought to connect mountaineering success with the socialist cause. 'The actors performing the play', she tells us, 'were both acting out mountaineering for audiences, and – just like the expedition itself – performing a politically perfect, noble and modern vision of Chinese socialism'.¹¹ Heroism expressed on the slopes of the mountain, became capital in the hands of the actors to inspire domestic audiences towards collective pride and commitment to Mao's communism.

Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6* is much more difficult to interpret, though it still grapples with tropes of empire.¹² Ostensibly an allegorical play, with F6 constructed as a mythic peak, Abbie Garrington's scholarship suggests

that there is little doubt as to the identity of the titular mountain. The barely veiled reference to the local name for the peak ‘Chormopuloda’;¹³ the affinities between the protagonist Michael Ransom and the historic figure of George Mallory; and the wordplay between F6 and the pre-Everest code name ‘Peak XV’, all point, she argues, to the inspiration for Auden and Isherwood’s collaboration to be Everest.¹⁴ At times impenetrable, and seemingly unstageable, *F6* plays out many of the colonial debates about mountaineering and its implicated relationship with empire. Ransom-Mallory as British hero is tasked by the Colonial Office with securing the first ascent of F6, beating its imperial rival (the fictional Ostnia) to the summit, and thus cementing Britain’s political credibility along with its ongoing occupation of Sudoland (another dramatic construct). The concluding image, however, hardly endorses Ransom as imperial hero: he dies on the summit in a Freudian embrace with his mother, she who had previously persuaded him to climb F6 as ‘the greatest climber in the world’ with ‘the power to stand alone’.¹⁵

Three Everests on stage

If *The Ascent of F6* exposed some of the fractures in dramatic formulations of Everest-as-conquest as early as 1936, how does the most recent dramatic output of the twenty-first century refresh the cultural record of the world’s highest peak? In this section, split into three subsections, I draw on interview testimony, primary source analysis, and wider contextual research to consider in finer detail the motivations, challenges, and dramaturgical approaches taken by four selected theatre artists to stage their versions of Everest in the period 2018–22.

Beyond their contemporaneity and variety of style, there is no overarching or guiding principle determining my choice; I do not wish to imply, or start to construct, a new canon of Everest dramas. Instead, this small sample should serve as a paradigm of the ways in which Western contemporary theatre has engaged with the history, culture, and geopolitics of the world’s highest mountain, using varied means to render Everest’s cultural complexity, contradictory reception, and historical density with a lightness of touch which belies its rigour and import.

The Sherpa and the Beekeeper: Summit on Everest,
by Matt Kambic

Constructed as a vibrant series of imagined dialogues between Tenzing Norgay (the Sherpa of the title, of course) and Edmund Hillary (the beekeeper), Matt Kambic's two-hander treats the summit of Everest as the platform for decades of speculative conversation between the two first ascensionists. His starting point is the controversy over which of the two stood on the summit first – Hillary (ironically a New Zealander, and not British born), or Tenzing, who had already been near the summit in 1952, proving his status, in expedition leader John Hunt's assessment, as a 'mountaineer of world standing'.¹⁶ While the summit plateau of the mountain remains constantly under their feet, Tenzing (played by Jericho Nicodemus) and Hillary (Cameron Smith) transform over the three acts of the play. From the hotly contested moment summiting on 29 May 1953, through dark reflections on unwanted celebrity years later, to a final section, again after an undisclosed passage of time, where the now-seasoned icons of mountaineering history meet once more, surrounded by 'detritus: discarded oxygen tanks and other bits of gear'.¹⁷ In this last act, both climbers weigh the impact of their success, literally taking the long view on the environmental damage and increase in footfall after 1953, partly occasioned by the development of Lukla airport,¹⁸ a project funded and overseen by Hillary:



Figure 16.1 *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper* at Meteor Theatre, Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand, 25 May 2022. Image: © Matt Kambic.

Hillary: It opened up a gusher of tourists, marching in with their empty stomachs and candy wrappers, and ill manners, right into the heart of your homeland. In droves, like fattened-up sheep.

They're down there right now, below us.

Not all, unwelcome, you know that. But so many, too many, so fast. I should've thought that out.

Tenzing: (*squinting to see*) They are so small from up here.¹⁹

The play concludes with a rapid return to the time and conditions of Act One, set just metres away from the summit point. Teasing the audience, US-born writer Kambic orders a blackout just before the two reach the summit, thus preserving the so-called mystery of who reached the top first. It was, says Kambic in my interview with him, 'the lovely wrinkle of getting them ready to go up and the audience anticipating "we'll finally see who *did* step up there first" and then just cutting it'.²⁰ Resisting the noise around 'who got there first', Kambic aimed to 'get the Hillary and Tenzing that the public knows [...] and then just say it really doesn't matter, it didn't matter in the end and you're not going to find out anyway [*laughs*]'.²¹

Kambic's reticence to contribute to seventy years of often-interneccine speculation about whose boots first reached the top of Everest is ironically not reflected in his two characters' attitudes. From the moment they have summited, marked on stage by Hillary taking the famous photograph of Norgay holding his ice pick aloft with flags attached, the two climbers exchange good-humoured claims to being the first:

Tenzing: I say, first, Hillary second. Hillary say first, Tenzing second. No, good. We both together.²²

This is Kambic's key dramatic ploy – to position the two individuals as emblems of the wider geopolitical storm and contested histories which emerged on the international stage following the successful expedition, a storm charged with the rhetoric of empire. As Hillary declares before they descend in Act One: 'And here you and I are; a Colonial and a Nepalese. That might surprise the Queen. She might have been happier if her two wards, Tom and Charles²³ had made it up here two days ago'.²⁴

Accurate and well-researched history is drip-fed through the fictional dialogues of Tenzing and Hillary, sometimes to the detriment of narrative momentum.²⁵ Although Acts Two and Three are entirely imagined, Kambic was motivated by a desire to treat the legacy of the two climbers accurately and respectfully: 'I wanted to bring Everest, Hillary and Tenzing to the audience in

as authentic a manner as I could, especially for the First Act', ²⁶ he states, a function of his scholarly immersion in Himalayan histories since reading Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* as a boy. This spirit of authenticity extends as far as the stage design – a bold and simple attempt to pluck the topmost section of Everest from Nepal/China and transport it unscathed to the theatre in Hamilton, New Zealand. Originally, Kambic 'wanted to build the summit [so that it was] identical to the geophysical Mount Everest summit'²⁷ but compromised slightly to allow for spatial dynamics and height differences which aren't a feature of the very top of Everest to be explored in the play. Nevertheless, the play exploits the geographical realities of the summit, playing with the border between China and Nepal that bisects the mountaintop and helping the audience visualise its striking liminality:

Hillary steps up to access the very summit and runs his finger in a line across the top. The line separates he and Tenzing, who stands on the opposite side of the peak (in Tibet).

Hillary: I am in Nepal, you're in Tibet.

Tenzing: Summit of Everest separates two countries. Now two men. ²⁸

This simple visualisation, which surfaces again later in the play when the two climbers drop their stove in Nepal and it falls into the neighbouring country, says much about the affordances theatre offers to the discourse of mountain studies. In a few seconds of stage time, decades of debate and dispute are crystallised: the right to claim ownership of a sacred Mountain; the stratified status games played by both the British and Indian governments to claim national victory and divide the collective achievement of Tenzing and Hillary; the class and cultural divisions between Sherpa and Explorer; and perhaps more philosophically the disconnect between the virgin white snow and untrampled territory we see on stage and the images many of us have when we think of Everest today: fixed-rope queues, graveyards of frozen climbers, and piles of empty oxygen cannisters. For Kambic, this capacity for a single stage image to speak volumes was a given, the opportunity to humanise the wider socio-cultural complexity of Everest enticing:

It was quickly apparent that I could take Hillary and Tenzing, guys with good hearts, down to earth, and present some of these larger issues and the way as you say how we relook at stuff in history that occurred [...] I wanted to remind myself and the audience that it was *the climb* that made all the rest of this happen and anchor it back into the reality of that day.²⁹

The Climbers, by Carmen Nasr

Where historical fidelity and geographical verisimilitude were drivers for Kambic, British Lebanese writer Carmen Nasr has constructed what she terms ‘a fever-dream’ with *The Climbers* – a neoexpressionist and slippery whodunnit where ‘the higher the altitude of the scene, the more unreliable the truth is’.³⁰ This device, to implicate the audience in a parallel journey of altitude sickness and confusion, leads to a sparse and disjointed dramaturgy – a controlled ‘messiness’, Nasr calls it.³¹ Two acts hold a total of twenty-seven scenes, the majority demarcated by their height above sea level (it is only the choric interventions of Tshering, the guide, that are placeless). Resisting blackouts between scenes, Nasr calls instead for ‘shifts’ from one scene to the next: ‘It’s sort of a shift in memory,’ she observes, ‘a shift in Yasmin’s [the central female climber’s] mind, I guess, or a shift in feeling or place’.³² Billed as an ‘offering to the creative team’,³³ the term suggests that dramatic fluidity and momentum exceed any need for spatial specificity. In marked contrast to *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*, place is experienced kaleidoscopically: from a camp just below the summit (26,000 feet) to a hotel room in a Nepali valley (4,600 feet); from Base Camp



Figure 16.2 *The Climbers*, premiering at the Theatre by the Lake, Keswick, UK, 17 June 2022. Image: © The Other Richard.

(17,700 feet), back to the hotel and on to a comfortable rural dwelling in the south of England (115 feet). Dizzy from these rapid location shifts, we reach relative stability with Tshering's first chorus, zooming out to provide a bird's-eye view:

Tshering: People arrive here with their story already written out in their head, but just like the mountain's history was overwritten by the Europeans, nature re-writes the stories the climbers bring with them, and they quickly find out that things never go to plan.³⁴

The casual reference to unplanned occurrences is an oblique allusion to the tragedy at the centre of the play: Yasmin's partner Charlie's death high up on 'The Mountain' (the name Everest is never explicitly used in the play). But in this second of five choruses, Tshering, the only local, Indigenous voice in the play,³⁵ also aligns Eurocentric history-making – the act of appropriating the mountain as Everest rather than Chomolungma or Sagarmatha (names used in Tibet or Nepal)³⁶ – with a cognate European arrogance in mountaineering prowess. Assuming control, he pointedly observes through language and nomenclature, partial histories of claimed ownership, or narratives of expeditionary immortality that the most fundamental shadow cast by potential outcomes is fatality.

Indeed, alternative versions of history are both the stimulus for and the dramatic pivot of *The Climbers*. Reading John Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (1997) alongside Anatoli Boukreev's *The Climb* (1997), Nasr became fascinated by the contrasting versions of the same 1996 tragedy: 'these are two published books by two very well-respected climbers who are saying different things and remembering it differently', she notes.³⁷ That realisation sparked an extensive research process, taking her to Herzog's *Annapurna* (again), to Himalayan ghost stories, the documentary film *Sherpa* (2015), and other 'rabbit hole' investigations into subjects as diverse as Kathmandu and karaoke. This detective work is embodied in the character of Connie, a private investigator working for the mother of the lost climber Charlie. Connie is well aware of the vagaries of memory, particularly when cognitive function is compromised by altitude and grief:

Connie: I understand that this is all very upsetting. But memories they fade and change, it's important we talk as early as we can, when the truth is still within our reach.³⁸

Despite her best efforts to ascertain a single truth, ostensibly motivated to secure closure for Charlie's mother, several parallel versions of the tragedy emerge: Charlie 'fell for miles', accidentally slipping down the mountain;

he was lost in a storm, separating him and Yasmin from Tshering, their guide; Tshering willingly left Charlie solely to Yasmin's care; Charlie is still alive and using his satellite phone to ring his mother at night; Yasmin pushed Charlie in a deadly marital row; Charlie (either alone or not) met his end slowly under a ledge with no fall. These anomalies are summed up simply by the other female climber, Gwen, speaking to the PI: 'Can I give you some advice, from a hardened climber? There's no such thing as truth up there'.³⁹

This may be true at the level of the character but constructing a rationale and logic for the cast remains a crucial part of the creative process, as Nasr put it: 'you do have to explain yourself to a room of actors because they are, like, "why" and "what?"'⁴⁰ In the final image of the play, as with *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper* one of rich and layered complexity, Charlie and Yasmin are together in his last moments. The atmosphere is other-worldly, 'glittery', different to or beyond the other versions of Charlie's death witnessed earlier; arguably – perhaps – more definitive. A physically fit Yasmin is tarrying briefly but according to a pact struck between the couple, the stronger must leave the weak behind if one should get into trouble. They dance in the shimmering snow to the strains of a karaoke tune, before (in the staged version) Yasmin leaves her partner to his fate, stripped now of her protective gear, climbing up the ladder to a new life.⁴¹

Describing in prose this multi-sensorial theatrical moment is unavoidably reductive but even in the two dimensions of a written chapter the layered meanings should come through. Nasr's final scene offers several things at once: a thought-provoking take on the individualism of modern tourist-climbing, where walking past a dying fellow human being is pragmatically normalised; a haunting vision of a mountain's blend of beauty and suffering, the weather both deadly and desirable, enhanced through the effects of extreme altitude; a pointed reminder of the senselessness of it all, the addition of yet another frozen body unable to be airlifted to the morgue. And an existential prompt, in one spectator's eyes 'about the inevitability that every partnership must end, and one will always leave the other behind, no matter what'.⁴²

On Everest, by Lone Twin

Originally conceived as a final degree show piece for the BA Performance Writing at Dartington College of Arts in 1997, Gary Winters and Gregg Whelan's *On Everest* has had several outings since, the latest at stage@leeds in the University of Leeds in 2018.⁴³ The 1997 show was the first time Winters and Whelan worked collectively as Lone Twin, initiating a long-standing

and critically acclaimed repertoire of performance pieces with task-oriented, endurance-based self-referentiality and mock heroism as common ingredients. In David Williams and Carl Lavery's tight phrasing, Lone Twin has an enduring 'interest in manufacturing simple structures for complex conversational outcomes'.⁴⁴

In *On Everest*, that simple structure is nothing less than the performed climbing of Everest in front of an audience – achieved by the walking of a line of white gaffer tape on the floor, measuring 1/400th of the height of the mountain. In Whelan's words, the attraction was the idea 'of a studio that [...] conceptually went uphill. But there was no physical manifestation of that other than how you would behave in the space'.⁴⁵ Winters does the walking – 400 traverses of the stage – while Whelan delivers an academic paper, also titled *On Everest*, spending much of his time in a paddling pool full of polystyrene beads.

Needless to say, we are in very different territory from the heightened stage poetics of *The Climbers* or the faithful Socratic dialogues of *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*. Indeed, inaccuracy and invention are framed as fundamentals from the outset, and some of the information, Gregg tells us at the top of the show,



Figure 16.3 Lone Twin's *On Everest*, stage@leeds, 22 March 2018. Image: © Jonathan Pitches.



Figure 16.4 Lone Twin's *On Everest*, stage@leeds, 22 March 2018. Image: © Jonathan Pitches.

'is a bit shaky'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, *On Everest* is the product of a similar dedication to research⁴⁷ and draws on cognate ideas, particularly in relation to the effects of altitude and the relationship between hypoxia and nostalgia – 'climbers identifying that [while] they should be self-monitoring or thinking about what's happening to them physically' the lack of oxygen instead makes for an out-of-body feeling of 'nostalgia or melancholy'.⁴⁸ This discovery led Whelan to focus on Everest 'the poster mountain of all mountains'⁴⁹ and to the central device: the pivot between the events on stage and past historical endeavours, 'myths, legends and fibs about this place'.⁵⁰

Place here is essentially plural – the place of Everest, of the original Studio 11 in Dartington in 1997, of stage@leeds in 2018, of the act of performance-making as place-making for this theatrical company being asked 'to write, to fold, one space into another'.⁵¹ For Lone Twin, this does not mean the transplantation of

a recognisable mountain feature – Kambic’s summit of Everest, for instance – rather a perspective that values the ‘imaginary’ and ‘dreamt’ aspects of place as much as its physical realities.⁵² *On Everest* explores that concept in stark, simple terms – an expansive, largely empty stage space, demarcated by the white line of tape and punctuated by three cheap paddling pools – ‘little islands’ in Winter’s words,⁵³ the smallest housing an office fan. There are no grand scenic gestures to Everest but little indications, wrought with the artificiality of the stage: a pile of white polystyrene beads, shaped into the smallest of summits, wind gusting from the fan, a bear suit aping a yeti. Constructed as a lecture delivered by Whelan, broken down into sixty chapters (some which exist purely as titles), Winters gets on with the job in hand, hiking the equivalent of the five and a half miles of Everest on the flat in the background. Artifice constantly rubs shoulders with the very real in *On Everest*, a signature of the company’s oeuvre since 1997.

Though melancholy and nostalgia were the driving first ideas, the piece is light in tone, humorous, and beguilingly unserious about itself. Summiting success is by no means guaranteed as they wrote two possible endings. The doubt hanging over the feat – a nod to the attraction and emotionalism of live sport – is part of the fun for Whelan and Winters. Any whiff of heroism associated with endurance or walking five-and-a-half miles in an hour, sometimes in a shaggy bear suit, is sharply undercut by the suit itself and by the duplication of endings:

I think for all of us a very emotional moment. We have come a long way, and what’s more, we have come a long way together. It is hard to know exactly what to say at a time like this, I’m sure – and I know it’s true of Gary and myself – that our thoughts are by and large, a little bit muddled and confused, but nevertheless, charged with a great sensation of achievement, or perhaps its opposite.⁵⁴

These are the words for *both* Chapter 58, ‘On not quite making it’ *and* Chapter 60, ‘On the summit’, although a live audience may not be aware of these parallels. Viewed together in the performance script, the conflation of success and failure returns us to the artifice of the piece: ‘Whatever happens it’s still just the last 5 minutes of the show’, Whelan notes, ‘and it needs to deliver a certain thing for the “showness” to end’.⁵⁵

But in the context of this chapter and the different approaches to conquest and heroism that we have seen, both conclusions to *On Everest* quietly question the notion of achievement itself. Climbing Everest is an accomplishment, ‘or perhaps its opposite’. This gentle jibe is heightened by the final joke of the performance – a reminder to the audience that ‘we’ means all of us, and that

collectively we now need to descend ‘and find our own ways down’.⁵⁶ For some, this command might chime with the theme of abandonment seen in *The Climbers*. For Lone Twin, this is a playful extension of the contract they have struck with their audience, the co-operative ‘endeavour’. Our quotidian existences in the days after the play are thus fused with the residue of *On Everest* – ‘it’s a flip of one of the first ideas in the piece about the effects of altitude sickness [...] You’re in everyday life, but we are putting you on the mountain [...] you are walking down it in a conceptual way, but you’re actually going through these places in your life’.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Kambic, Nasr, and Whelan and Winters came to their respective Everest projects with very different motivations. But, speaking to each of them, their common conviction is in the value of rigorous research, drawing on and critically evaluating some of the vast literature dedicated to the world’s highest mountain. At some stage in the process, that research had to stop – none of them aimed to produce a documentary – and it is down to the shrewd judgement of an artist when to set aside inspiring extant literature to carve out what Nasr calls a new ‘space of imagination’.⁵⁸ The iterative relationship between imaginative theatrical thinking and existing research on the Himalayas is important. It suggests that the many stage versions of Everest should not be isolated from other contemporary work in mountain studies. Dramatic art is part of that interdisciplinary field, whether the creatives in this chapter see themselves embedded in it or not.

As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that this chapter has identified similar revisionary and decolonial agendas at work in the stage record of Everest, a parallel distrust of historic simplifications, misrepresentations, and appropriations. For Kambic, that revisionary urge is reflected in the extended thought experiment he stages – Hillary and Tenzing engaged in an enlightened and impossible dialogue, separated at the summit from their cultural histories, and blessed with all the benefits of hindsight. For Nasr, it is in the solipsism of the Western tourist-climber, sharply contrasted with the unromanticised wisdom of the Nepali guide, Tshering, a business-savvy custodian of the mountain. And for Whelan and Winters, the self-aware mockery of their own immersion in tropes of masculinity and endurance means that we never take them too seriously: ‘We say we like stiff-upper-lipness, and we’re sort of driving that, and trying to skewer that’ at the same time.⁵⁹ As the sensitive and complex process

of revisiting monolithic histories gathers apace, there is something to be said for the agility theatre has in striking such a double-edged critique – a view from the wings, at once implicated and dislocated.

Notes

- 1 Haze is an atmospheric effect used in the theatre in conjunction with light, a mist which stays suspended for sometimes long periods in the air to provide definition to the lighting.
- 2 John Noel (dir.), *Epic of Everest* (UK: BFI, 2013 [orig. 1924]); Torquil Jones (dir.), *14 Peaks: Nothing is Impossible* (USA: Netflix, 2021).
- 3 Vitaliano Brancati, *Everest: mito in un atto* (Catania: Studio editoriale moderno, 1931); W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Ascent of F6* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).
- 4 Arthur Kopit, *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis & Other Plays* (London: Samuel French, 1993), a collection of one-act plays, with contents detailed in: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230320090659/https://store.bizbooks.net/daythewhorescameouttoplaytennis.aspx>
- 5 Joby Talbot (composer), *Everest: opera in one act* (London: Chester Music, 2017).
- 6 Fifteen of the twenty-five plays, musicals, and operas were written and/or performed after 2010. The preliminary research for the survey, as well as transcriptions of the interviews, was undertaken by Dr Ceri Pitches, postdoctoral researcher in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds. Without this pivotal research, this chapter would not have been possible.
- 7 I am indebted to all four artists for their generosity and insights. Full transcripts of the interviews conducted for this chapter are hosted on the *Performing Mountains* website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240123174831/https://performing-mountains.leeds.ac.uk/newwritingandinterviews/>
- 8 Real name: Carlo Alberto Camillo Salustri.
- 9 Interview with Corrado Sofia in Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 166.
- 10 The first ascent of Everest from the north in 1960 was made by a mixed Chinese and Tibetan team of climbers, following in the footsteps of Mallory and Irvine. It was subject to much scrutiny and some unseemly Western scepticism at the time but is now largely recognised as genuine.
- 11 Maggie Greene, 'Performing socialism at altitude: Chinese expeditions to Mount Everest, 1958–1968', *Performance Research*, 24:2 (2019), 63–72, 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1624030>
- 12 Isherwood himself likened its form to a 'mad rugby scrum', quoted in Lawrence Normand, 'Modernity and Orientalism in W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's The Ascent of F6', *Modern Philology*, 108:4 (2011), 542, <https://doi.org/10.1086/660366>
- 13 Auden and Isherwood, *Ascent of F6*, p. 31.
- 14 Abbie Garrington, 'What does a modernist mountain mean? Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*', *Critical Quarterly*, 55:2 (2013), 26–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/crq.12043>. There are other possible genealogies of F6, it should be noted, including potential mappings to the Pamirs and Karakoram. Auden's brother John took part in the Karakoram surveys in the 1930s – thanks to Jonathan Westaway for pointing this out.

- 15 Auden and Isherwood, *Ascent of F6*, pp. 45, 47. While much has been made of Auden and Isherwood's time in Berlin as being influential on their theatre writing, Breon Mitchell suggests an Ibsenite influence to the conclusion of *F6* is more likely, specifically from *Peer Gynt*. Breon Mitchell, 'W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood: The "German Influence"', *Oxford German Studies*, 1:1 (1966), 163–72, <https://doi.org/10.1179/ogs.1966.1.1.163>
- 16 John Hunt, *The Ascent of Everest* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), p. 61.
- 17 Matt Kambic, *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper – Summit on Everest* (2022), 20. All quotations are from the unpublished manuscript generously shared with me by the author.
- 18 Lukla airport, a short flight from Kathmandu, opened in 1964 and is reputedly the most dangerous airport in the world, with a poor safety record.
- 19 *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*, 33.
- 20 Interview with the author, 24 February 2023.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*, 5.
- 23 Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans. Both men were forced back on 26 May 1953, less than 100 metres from the summit, due to problems with Evans' oxygen supply.
- 24 *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*, 7.
- 25 For instance, in Act 2 scene 1, where Hillary narrates back to Tenzing the latter's climbing career in documentary detail.
- 26 Interview with the author, 24 February 2023.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*, 6.
- 29 Interview with the author, 24 February 2023.
- 30 Carmen Nasr, *The Climbers* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2022), p. 4.
- 31 Interview with the author, 10 March 2023.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 *The Climbers*, p. 19.
- 35 Nasr clearly agonised over the representation of the Sherpa community in the play: 'either you leave that voice out, or you include that voice, and if I'm going to be driven by fear, then that's gonna silence that character and all the stories I was reading on Everest, people from the Sherpa community were there. They're there, you know, in all of the different stories. So I thought, No, there has to be a character.' Interview with the author, 10 March 2023.
- 36 Sam Ellis, "'No name intelligible to civilised men:": hidden voices in Mount Everest's nomenclature', *Charleston Hub*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240123174437/https://www.charleston-hub.com/2022/09/no-name-intelligible-to-civilised-men-hidden-voices-in-mount-everests-nomenclature/>. See also the Introduction by Hansen, Gilchrist, and Westaway, and Chapters 1 and 2 by Ruth Gamble and Felix de Montety in this volume.
- 37 Interview with the author, 10 March 2023.
- 38 Nasr, *The Climbers*, p. 8.
- 39 Nasr, *The Climbers*, p. 37.
- 40 Interview with the author, 10 March 2023.
- 41 Nasr, *The Climbers*, pp. 72–3. In the published version the play ends with the couple dancing.
- 42 Interview with the author, 10 March 2023. The spectator was Jonathan Westaway.
- 43 To date, *On Everest* has been performed at Dartington College of Arts (1997), the ICA in London (1997), Nottingham Expo (1997), Glasgow CCA (2000), Bristol's Arnolfini

(2006), and stage@leeds (2018). An edition of 150 bespoke scripts of the piece is produced for each performance, with subtle adaptations. My quotations are from the stage@leeds version.

- 44 David Williams and Carl Lavery (eds), *Good Luck Everybody: Lone Twin – Journeys, Performances, Conversations* (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2011), p. 22.
- 45 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 46 Lone Twin, *On Everest* (Leeds, 2018), 6.
- 47 For example: ‘place-based, spatial theory, arts practice, philosophy, critical thinking, literature, and looking at contemporary ethnography, anthropology, cultural geography’. Gregg Whelan interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 48 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Lone Twin, *On Everest*, 6.
- 51 Gregg Whelan, ‘Here we are, let’s go: Dartington College of Arts, 14 June 1997, Studio 11, 6:30 pm. A revision of Lone Twin’s *On Everest*, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 9:3 (2018), 431–44, 436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2018.1503615>
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 54 Lone Twin, *On Everest*, 26, 28.
- 55 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 56 Lone Twin, *On Everest*, 26.
- 57 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.
- 58 Interview with the author, 10 March 2023.
- 59 Interview with the author, 31 March 2023.