

SUBJECT: ANGELS AMONG THE TREES
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THEATRE

Giles Croft explores basic human instincts in *Angels Among The Trees*

When the 85-strong wagon train led by George Donner decided to head out into the pristine wilderness of mid-19th-century USA, nobody could have imagined the decision some of them would have to make in order to survive the journey. And director Giles Croft, whose new play, *Angels Among The Trees*, details the traumatic events surrounding that ill-fated expedition, would prefer it if no-one in the audience could imagine it either.

'In an ideal world, the audience wouldn't even know about the choice they eventually end up making,' notes Croft. 'That would be perfect, so when it happens, they would just go, "Oh, my God!"' That choice isn't a simple decision like deciding on a different route, although a poor sense of direction does play a part in this particular tragedy, but instead involves one of the last taboos in civilised society – eating human flesh.

Yet Croft, artistic director of

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Nottingham Playhouse, is eager to not sensationalise events. 'We certainly don't shy away from the subject,' he says. 'But this isn't a play about cannibals. This is about people trying to survive in extreme conditions, although there are certainly moments the squeamish will find uncomfortable to watch.'

Titled *Angels Among The Trees* in reference to a survivor's coma-induced vision of angels, the play trails the Donner party on their way to the promised land of California, following in the footsteps of eager migrants who were seduced by the possibilities of land and wealth on America's west coast. They're soon left stranded in the imposing Sierra Nevada mountains, with dwindling supplies and defenceless against snowstorms. Some succumb to madness while others attempt a doomed escape. But does Croft feel a duty to stay faithful to the history of how it all actually unfolded? 'It's necessary to stick wherever possible to the historical reality,' he argues. 'There are different versions, of course, and in the end you have to



Tragic journey: Caroline Lennon and Nicola Harrison rehearse for the play, which tells the story of the fateful 19th-century Donner migration to California

Historical look at a fight for survival

make certain dramatic choices. You just have to try and stay honest.'

Croft has been working side by side with writer Jonathan Holloway ever since the show's inception in preparation for this premiere run at the Playhouse. It's a partnership he sees as vital to the play's success. 'We've been working on it for almost two years,' he says. 'We actually workshoped it at the National Theatre studios about 18 months ago and since then we've done a series of readings with the actors. It's still very much Jonathan's play, but our

communication has made it much easier in rehearsal because I know why certain dramatic decisions were made.'

Angels Among The Trees is the second chapter in a trilogy that began with the pair's 2000 production, *Because It's There* – writer and director are fascinated by the topic of how far a person will go to survive. 'That first play was about the assault on Everest by Mallory and Irving, and for this one we looked at the same story elements,' says Croft. 'Extreme hardship, survival, lack of resources, but this also

has one of the biggest moral questions you could ever deal with.'

Croft sees new writing as essential to the Playhouse's continued growth, something he's been keen to nurture since becoming the venue's artistic director five years ago. 'We've had a good couple of years with increased audiences,' he explains. 'New writing has always been part of the programme here, and you also have to realise we have no studio space, so all our new work has to be done on the main stage.'

That new work is set to continue with the final instalment of his and Holloway's three-part study of human endurance, although Croft won't be drawn on what it will be about. 'It's set in the late 20th century,' he says. 'Suffice to say, it's about another terrible situation, something no-one could ever imagine themselves in.' It's a topic at the heart of *Angels Among The Trees*: the limits of imagination often unable to compete with the horrors of reality. *David Baldwin*

Sat until Jun 19, Nottingham Playhouse, Wellington Circus, Nottingham, 7.45pm, mats Jun 12 2.30pm and Jun 17 1.30pm, £5 to £20.50, conc available. Tel: 0115 941 9419. www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk