

Cliffhanger

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

Mountain climbing may be one of the few modern dramatic subjects that contain the key elements of Greek tragedy: terror and folly, hubris and courage. You get a staggering sense of all four in *Touching the Void*, Kevin Macdonald's film of Joe Simpson's book.

Simpson and his friend Simon Yates were the first to climb Siula Grande, a 21,000-foot peak in the Peruvian Andes, and it's a miracle that either of them got out alive. They designed their feat as a "pure climb," eschewing the idea of setting up camps along the route, though they did leave Richard Hawking, a companion they'd made in their trek through Peru, at a base camp at the bottom of the mountain.

At first they were lucky: challenging as the ascent was—across vertical fields of almost sheer ice amid mercurial weather—it proceeded according to plan. But on the way down the men ran out of fuel, which prevented them from hydrating themselves with "brew" (melted snow). Then Simpson slipped and broke his leg.

Yates devised a method for lowering his friend down by tying their ropes together. But Simpson fell over the edge of a crevasse, and was swinging in mid-air where his partner couldn't see him (and the force of the wind prevented them from hearing each other's cries). Yates felt he had no choice but to cut the rope.

Both men survived. The film eliminates suspense on this matter by splicing in reminiscences delivered by both Joe (played by Brendan Mackey) and Simon (Nicholas Aaron). (Hawking, playing himself, adds an occasional third perspective.) The story is so harrowing that you're grateful you know the happy ending.

Macdonald's approach is highly unusual. He shoots very close in (stunt doubles Dave "Cubby" Cuthbertson and Rory Gregory stand in for the two actors in the action scenes), only rarely pulling back to let us take in the magnificent Andean expanse. He and cinematographer Mike Eley (assisted by Keith Partridge) want us to share the weird, mixed sensation of exposure and claustrophobia, to experience the locked-in physicality of the climb, in which every move takes not only unreasonably intense

focus but involves layer upon layer of obstacles—the resistance of snow and ice, thirst, freezing cold, the agony of Joe’s injury, the dreadfully slow process necessary to move a few yards or extract a tool from a pack when the weather is at its most violent.

The alternation of these sequences (which are beautifully filmed) with the actors’ addresses to the camera makes the movie far more intimate than you’d expect. This is the first chamber drama about mountain climbing.

Both the actors make fine camera subjects. Mackey is classically handsome, with a wood-sculpted face; Aaron’s face is startlingly expressive, like that of a Dickens character. In a movie that trains us to be acutely conscious of the physical, we can’t help appreciating the casting of the open-countenanced Aaron in contrast to Mackey, who always seems to be holding something back. Hawking admits that he found it tough to get close to Simpson, but he was immediately comfortable around Yates, who wasn’t as reserved or standoffish.

That doesn’t mean, however, that we make the same kind of judgment about Simpson that Hawking, in his refreshing honesty, does. The depth of the bond between the two climbers and their enormous resilience ennoble them. The climbing community, we’re told at the end, censured Yates for cutting the rope, but Simpson has always defended Yates’s actions. It’s to the credit of the two actors that, without playing a single scene together, they make us feel the young men’s mutual respect and affection.

After solitary days of slipping down Siula Grande, without knowing if anyone would be waiting for him at the bottom—and clouded, on the last day, by delirium born of loneliness, deprivation and searing pain—Simpson is finally reunited with his friend. The first thing Simpson does is thank Yates for helping him after he’d broken his leg.

I’ve never understood the appeal of the kind of mountain climbing that laughs at danger; my response to the best seller *Into Thin Air*, about recent fatal attempts to climb Mount Everest, wasn’t admiration and excitement but a combination of bafflement and exasperation at the willingness of self-involved people to imperil themselves and each other. *Touching the Void* affected me quite differently. It’s a tribute not only to the resources a human being can access when under extreme conditions, but also to a camaraderie so profound that it touches grace.