

SYNOPSIS

Hunger: Still lifes of the Donner Party Expedition

hunger

Structural concept: A series of scenes, each representing a moment of crisis for the Donner Party, each one focusing on a single character's dilemma/decision or moment of peripety.

July 1846 - A feud over whether to trust a dubious map which indicates a shortcut through the mountain passes threatens to split the expedition the two, jeopardizing everyone's safety.

Early October - Young John Snyder tangles with old Milt Elliot; Snyder pulls a knife. James Reed intervenes, and Snyder turns on Reed. Reed's blade goes into Snyder's breast and Snyder dies. The societal microcosm attempts to decide what punishment should be levied against Reed. In the end, they vote that Mrs. Reed must pronounce sentence upon her own husband. Mrs. Reed turns her terrible choice turns into a hopeful resolution when she demands her husband be brave and for their children's sake...survive.

Late October - Turning back has not been an option for several weeks. The question now is whether to spend the winter here and risk running out of food and possibly freezing to death; or whether they should bolt across the mountains, hoping to beat the winter weather. They bolt for the mountains. But blizzards cut off any hope of forward progress...or returning back the way they came. They form a desperate rescue party to stride through the hip-high snow with the dim notion of making it across the mountains, and into Nevada, where help might be found.

December - One of the rescue party, Whitney Galliard, realizes he is holding everyone back, and with great dignity and peace, he magnanimously stays behind. But the remaining rescuers are pressed to the end of their endurance, battling hallucination and madness. Patrick Dolan offers up his life, so that the others might have sustenance. William Eddy sees no other choice, and fingers a knife, but ultimately his Christianity won't allow him to do the deed. William Eddy says that he would rather lay his own life down than take someone else's, and he offers his neck and the knife to Milt Elliot. Milt can't draw upon William Eddy. Eddy practically begs him, but Milt and everyone else refuses. Eddy proposes that they draw lots to see which of them will receive the reward of sacrificing himself to the others. Virginia insists that she be included as well. William Eddy cuts a twig into equal pieces, with one short piece. It's Virginia who gets the short piece. But William Eddy cannot lift the knife to her. Nor can anyone else. Instead, William Eddy proposes that whoever dies first, he shall freely and willingly give of himself to the others. They all agree.

Late December - A wordless scene in which the party trudges through the snow, pressed to the limits of human endurance. One excruciating step after another, they simply trudge, refusing to give up life. Finally, Milt Elliot falls. They all stare, looking for signs of life. Milt rises. They continue to trudge. Then Patrick Dolan stumbles. And does not get up. Milt Elliot takes up William Eddy's knife. The party surrounds Patrick Dolan's lifeless body. And Milt plunges the knife.

April 1847 - Jacob Donner writes a letter back East, relating reads about the fates of each of our cast members (who appear in spotlights, if they're not already on the stage). He hopes that history doesn't judge the Donner party; they did what they needed to do so that they could save the lives of others.