

As I approached the FringeArts space on foot, emerging from the darkness below the overpass traversing Race Street, I noticed something strange without it then occurring to me that it might be a part of the performance I was on my way to see. Past the theater, past the street beyond, way out on the gray water of the Delaware River, I saw a man sitting astride some sort of industrial buoy, holding on with one hand and waving towards the shore with the other. The buoy seemed unmoored. While bobbing gently up and down, the buoy and its passenger were moving southward with the current, flowing swiftly out to sea.

Thrill seeker? Maritime construction worker having the worst day of his life? Was he waving to get help or to say goodbye? I had only caught a glimpse—or thought I caught a glimpse—of him for a few seconds. He had soon vanished behind the pier. I briefly thought about calling someone to report what I'd seen, but before I knew it a woman in a nametag was asking whether I had purchased my ticket in advance.

The performance began the moment I took my seat, as if it had been waiting for me in particular.

A man comes inching out of the wings with his back to the audience. He's dragging a heavy set piece, a crude, full-size mock-up of a street lamp. After much huffing and puffing and experimenting with leverage, he gets it upright. It turns on, apparently to his great surprise, leaving the performer standing, shaking in the little pool of light. He looks out at us imploringly, a hangdog, Beckettian clown.

“A throw of dice,” he says, “will never abolish chance.”

He goes on speaking as he charges off into the darkness again and begins hauling more set pieces onto the stage. Half his words are drowned out by the scraping of metal and wood. The other half don't seem to add up to much. The performer seems frustrated, as if he could capture our imaginations, get the text to mean something to us if only he could give it his full attention. Instead, he is bound to push and pull scenery. A doorframe set into a flimsy wall. A carpet stained with blood. Part of a car. Everything looks leftover, used, like it's been repainted one too many times.

It soon becomes clear that the set the man is assembling isn't meant to represent a particular place. The furniture and painted flats don't cohere. We are at once outside and inside, someplace genteel and someplace rough. A hospital waiting room. A military checkpoint. A porch made for watching fireflies. We're everywhere and nowhere, on a stage crowded with unrealized possibilities.

The scenery keeps on coming until the performer barely has any room to maneuver left. There are bathtubs full of wine glasses stacked on chairs stacked on desks. Still resolutely reciting his text, he is reduced to creeping around the periphery of the stage, tripping on people's feet and climbing over lighting instruments as he tries to make room for one more potted plant, one more throne. Where everything is coming from is a mystery—there's no way it all could have fit backstage.

When this jumble has accumulated to the point where it reaches way up to the fly space, the performer crawls out of the wings with one last prop, a book. He knows just where it needs to go, and he begins his treacherous ascent.

Out of breath and out of text at last, he reaches the top of the pile. “Every thought emits a throw of dice,” he says. He drops the book.

The scenery begins to groan and lurch. With a great wrenching sound, the stage opens up and swallows the lot, performer and all, into the earth. Some subterranean tributary of the nearby river flowing beneath the theater carries it all away. The stage is gone. Nothing else will ever happen here. As the audience leaps to its feet, I realize it was the performer I must have seen out there on the water. I don't know how, but I'm absolutely sure of it. And I'm sure he'll never be heard from again.