

Early on in *707 Hazardous Moves*, New Paradise Laboratories' latest strained attempt at shadowy profundity, artistic director Whit MacLaughlin shares that the piece we are about to see was nearly a decade in the making. My first suggestion for MacLaughlin is that he keep this embarrassing fact to himself. An audience that had not been disabused of the notion that this travesty was hastily concocted with meager resources would likely be more forgiving.

Alas, *707 Hazardous Moves* is truly unforgiveable. After a long, quasi-distinguished career as a director, MacLaughlin has succumbed to vanity and cast himself as leading man. What is worse, inveterate narcissist that he is, MacLaughlin has determined that his life story will be as fascinating to others as it is to him and has taken his own pedestrian biography as subject matter.

Either of these offenses would be difficult to take; combined, they are simply grotesque.

The piece is ostensibly based on Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*, a real literary wonder that arguably inaugurated modernism. Mallarmé's principal innovation was typographical; on the page, the poem is splayed across verso and recto in a way that forces the reader to reorient her relationship to the textual encounter. The size of the typeface varies. Lines are unpredictably indented, italicized, and capitalized. Some lines follow on conventionally from top to bottom, while others carry their thoughts across the spine of the bound pages. Attempting to deduce a narrative is an exercise in frustration. What was most unprecedented about the poem when it was posthumously published in 1897 was that it offers up great expanses of blank space in lieu of tight alexandrines, with one page containing just a single word, "ABOLISH."

Many of these conventions have become de rigueur, but it is difficult to overstate how shocking they were at the turn of the century. The poem represented, as Mallarmé himself once put it, an all-out "attack on verse."

*707 Hazardous Moves* is an attack on poor Mallarmé. MacLaughlin has seized on the least interesting aspects of the poem and rendered its most exquisite features invisible. This is not, for example, a poem that is well-served by reading aloud. Reciting it rather than allowing the reader to experience it on the page as a work of visual art reduces the poem to its most conspicuous and insipid clichés. And yet, recite it MacLaughlin does, not once, not twice, but three punishing times. Though he labors mightily to work the poem up into the stuff of Greek tragedy, the text remains inert, unmusical, and largely incoherent. MacLaughlin claims to love this poem. One trembles to imagine a performance based on a poem he hates.

The mise-en-scène offers little to distract from this ordeal. A couple of young acolytes MacLaughlin doesn't bother to introduce scurry around on the periphery making inscrutable adjustments and calculations with the aid of various decorative machines. Occasionally, they interject with a numerical "count" that supposedly corresponds to MacLaughlin's choreographed movements, but this simulation of physical rigor cannot compensate for the absence of the real thing. Curiously for a prolific maker of what has been called "physical theater," cerebral MacLaughlin scarcely seems aware that he has a body at all. He wears a suit and speaks to us from behind a podium, recalling nothing so much as a long-tenured professor who has lacked any incentive to push himself beyond his comfort zone for decades.

At one point fairly early on in the piece, composer Bhub Rainey plays a saxophone "song" that we are told is based on the "non-zero vacuum expectation value of the Higgs boson field." At the

performance I attended, approximately forty percent of the audience adjourned to the FringeArts bar during this interlude and never returned.

In between recitations of the poem, MacLaughlin regales us with anecdotes drawn from his personal and familial history cut with dorm-room philosophizing. “Does everything happen for a reason?” he asks.

One anecdote involves the time MacLaughlin got shot by a mugger on the way home from rehearsal. His aim was not true; missing a vital organ, the thief only succeeded in shooting our hero in the foot. This was fortunate for MacLaughlin. It was less fortunate for the American theater.