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Scene from a 2018 production of Michael Gorman's "Chasing the New White Whale" in New York City PHOTO: CARLOS CARDONA

## Forty Hour Club Aims to Harpoon the White Whale of Addiction No Way Out but Through Art

by Ethan Andrews

In the auditorium of Lincoln Street Center last week, playwright and director Michael Gorman was coaching actors Rob Porter and Robbie Carroll through a scene from his play "Never Leaving This Boat," which will be performed on a new outdoor stage at the Steel House in Rockland September 11 and 12.

The titular boat, a weathered dingy left behind by a former student of The Apprenticeship, was propped at the front of the stage. Behind it, Carroll, in the role of an excitable deckhand known as Billy the Crab, told Porter's character, Ray, about a large halibut

a local fisherman had just landed. He mimed stabbing the massive fish with a harpoon.

Soon the scene took a turn with Billy vaguely referring to something the fishermen have to deal with, something "bigger than us." Ray bristled, daring Billy to say it. "Deal with what, man!"

"Never Leaving This Boat" is the latest iteration of Gorman's ongoing project, "Chasing the New White Whale—Harpooning Addiction," a series of plays that uses "Moby Dick" as a framework for talking about the problem of opiate addiction in the commercial fishing community, and their

attempts, or not, to deal with it.

Gorman lost his older brother Kevin, a commercial fisherman out of Vinalhaven, to a heroin overdose in 1998. Since then he's been exploring the parallels between drug addiction and Melville's classic novel of obsession through his theater collective, The Forty Hour Club. His role, as he sees it, is part Ahab, the obsessive monomaniac, and part Ishmael, the one who lives to tell the tale.

Over two decades, Gorman wrote and staged the component plays of his trilogy "Chasing the New White Whale" in venues

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**NEW WHITE WHALE** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

in Maine and beyond, including the venerable New York City experimental theater La Mama, where he held a residency.

About three years ago, Gorman partnered with Donna Daly, the founding director of the Strand Theatre. As the core of Forty Hour Club, they work with a wide network of collaborators to realize the productions.

For the upcoming performances of "Never Leaving This Boat," they are building a stage at the water's edge behind The Forty Hour Club's office in The Steel House, for the natural backdrop of a commercial fishing port. The show, which is subtitled "fragments of a blues opera," will feature a live band performing songs by four composers.

In the early days of his theater career, Gorman said he was reluctant to have his work viewed as "issue plays," potentially limited to a narrow audience of people interested in

addiction. But the plays were well-received and attracted strong interest from the recovery community, a demographic he had hoped to reach.

He also realized art could do something that other social programs couldn't.

"It's kind of the only thing that can really open up or break down the walls. The other approaches are so bureaucratic. You'll have a panel or a summit, a bunch of leaders trying to figure out what to do with it, but it just doesn't connect with the community."

Forty Hour Club has done several readings and abridged shows in the midcoast, but "Never Leaving This Boat" will be the first full-scale performance, and what Gorman and Daly are considering an official debut for Forty Hour Club in Rockland.

Next year, they hope to bring production to New Bedford,



PHOTO: CARLOS CARDONA

Massachusetts, where Herman Melville first signed aboard a whaling boat as a young man and still a major fishing port.

## An interview with phantoms and fishermen

During a break in rehearsal, actors Rob Porter and Robbie Carroll talked about their roles in "Never Leaving This Boat," and how they got involved in the show.

**Rob Porter (Ray):** I play a fisherman whose boat crashed, and now he's shoveling fish on the docks for the other fishermen coming in. In order to supplement my income, I'm also dealing drugs. And I'm also, excuse my language, I'm pretty f— up in the head. I got a lot of delusions going on that I'd like to be in control.

*Ray is also an aspiring filmmaker.*

Everything that's happening in this town is because of me, I'm writing this script in my head, and I'm looking for talent wherever I go. So the drug dealing's a side thing, my main thing is creating a movie, a tragedy that people are gonna look at and, and someday hopefully come to me and say, awesome job, Ray.

Porter was first introduced to acting in 2012 when a representative of the Belfast Maskers put on a reading at the re-entry center in Belfast. Porter was a resident of the facility and had been in and out of prison for close to 30 years on convictions related to his cocaine addiction. When he was released, he was invited to audition for "Brigadoon" and ultimately cast in a lead role. Since then, he has been in a dozen or so Maskers shows. He met Gorman and Daly through the Waldo County Recovery Committee, where The Forty Hour Club did an abridged performance of "Never Leaving This Boat." In the production, he was cast as a phantom — an anonymous dock worker.

**Michael Gorman (director):** He was gonna be a phantom in this. The thing we did in Belfast was 20 minutes or so; this is a full production, so being a phantom was still gonna be a much bigger thing. But he approached me and said, I'd love to be the phantom in it, but I'd really like to take a shot at Ray. I had other people in mind who had approached me from New York and different places, because Ray is a great role. But he came in and he was awesome, and I just starting thinking, you know, there's an authenticity to working with people like Rob versus just Columbia University actors with master's degrees, or whatever.

*Robbie Carroll, the younger of the two actors by a couple*

*decades, described acting as a lifelong pursuit, though one he'd let slide recently. He was encouraged by his high school sailing coach to audition for "Never Leaving This Boat."*

**Carroll:** When he told me the story, I was very intrigued. I'm playing Billy the Crab. People refer to him as the crab because he moves like a crab does. (He demonstrates. Sitting down on the floor then popping up into the four-legged crab position — hands in back, feet in front — and scuttling frenetically around the auditorium floor.)

**Gorman:** There's a song in the show and a vaudeville sort of routine called Billy the Crab. And there's a line that's like, "Does he really do that?" (Answer: he does)

**FP:** Do your characters correspond to characters in "Moby Dick"? Like, are you Queequeg or ... ?

**Carroll (turning to Gorman):** That was my question, am I Queequeg?

**Gorman:** No, these are actually two of the characters who are just strictly contemporary characters.

**FP:** Have you read "Moby Dick"?

**Carroll:** I think [I did, but] it was the abridged version.

**Porter:** If I read it as a high school student, I really can't remember. There was too much dope going on. But I might actually get the audio book and listen to it.



Michael Gorman, left, directs Robbie Carroll during a rehearsal of "Never Leaving This Boat." PHOTO: ETHAN ANDREWS



Scene from a 2018 production of Michael Gorman's "Chasing the New White Whale" in New York City

PHOTO: CARLOS CARDONA



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