

With his story of opioids in the fishing industry, playwright tests the waters in Portland

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By Bob Keyes

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Mike Gorman hopes his new play does for the addiction community what Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" did for the AIDS epidemic.

"The gay community really got behind that play and leveraged it politically," said Gorman, who lives in Maine and New York, where he is playwright in residence at La MaMa Experimental Theater Club, one of New York's most adventurous off-Broadway theaters. "I want to get the addiction and recovery community on board in the same way."

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Ambergris"

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 20

WHERE: Portland Fish Exchange and Net Yard, 6 Portland Fish Pier

RAIN LOCATION: 121 Cassidy Point Drive, Portland

HOW MUCH: \$10 suggested donation

INFO: fortyhourclub.com

His play is “Chasing the New White Whale,” and it premieres at La MaMa on Nov. 24. It draws inspiration from Herman Melville’s epic whaling tale, “Moby-Dick,” and explores the roots of addiction and the destruction of the commercial fishing industry caused by the opioid epidemic in Maine, New England and beyond. In Gorman’s play, the great white whale is a metaphorical stand-in for opioids. One of Gorman’s brothers, who fished out of Massachusetts, died of a heroin overdose two decades ago.

This week, Gorman and his creative team will present scenes from the play in a breakout performance outdoors at the Portland Fish Exchange and Net Yard on Commercial Street. The Portland performance, at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, is called “Ambergris” and will feature some of the more visually spectacular moments of the play, including a procession of boats – real and suggested – multimedia projections, music, movement and dialogue performed by the New York cast, which is deep into the rehearsal process for the New York premiere. Ambergris is a waxy substance found in the whale’s digestive system and was used in perfume.

The Portland performance, supported by a grant from the Kindling Fund, gives Gorman and director Arthur Adair the chance to see how the play’s visual and dramatic elements are evolving in advance of the premiere and adjust them accordingly. They’re presenting “Ambergris” as a standalone performance that will fit into the larger play. “What I am really trying to create is the final spectacle where the skiff goes after the white whale in this visually spectacular moment,” Gorman said. “We will be making a lot happen at once, which is the beauty of theater. We will raise a sail that will work as a projection scrim, and the boat will move forward. It has elements of dance, movement, sculpture, music and language.”

The Portland installation will reimagine Ahab’s final chase with a mythical chorus of whale hunters and modern-day commercial fishermen. At LaMaMa, the full production of the play will transform the theater into a whaling ship.



A scene from "If Colorado Had an Ocean," one of three Gorman scripts condensed into "Chasing the New White Whale."

Photo courtesy of Forty Hour Club

DECADES IN THE MAKING

Gorman, 54, has been working on this play for decades. He actually wrote a trilogy of plays, each dealing with a different element of the story. The last in the trilogy and the first one written and performed, "UltraLight," debuted at La MaMa in 2000 and played at Portland Stage and other New England theaters in 2003. He wrote two more scripts that fleshed out the story, "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," which had a staged reading last year in Rockland, and "If Colorado Had an Ocean." He hoped to present all three in a marathon performance, but couldn't find a theater willing or able to take on such a large and unproven project. "Chasing the New White Whale" condenses the arc of the trilogy into one play.

"Necessity breeds ingenuity," Gorman said, explaining his decision to focus his story. "I have been pursuing production partners for a long time, but it became impractical to produce the trilogy. No one in the theater establishment could wrap their head around how to do it."

The scenes performed in Portland on Saturday will last about an hour.

Gorman sees himself as an everyman playwright with working-class sensibilities. He wants to create art "about the chorus of invisible people" whose stories are not told on stage. "A voice in society, that's something that's been denied addicts and working-class people. I want to tell their stories," he said.

Said Adair, “Mike writes for a theater that doesn’t exist and has the vision to do it. His characters are in the everyday.”

Gorman comes from a working-class tradition, and sees his job as a builder of plays rather than a writer of plays, in a similar context as a millwright or boat builder, “which is why we call them playwrights and not play-writers,” he said.



A scene from “Chasing the New White Whale” Photo courtesy of the Forty Hour Club

He’s got language on his side, nonetheless, and blends classical and contemporary language in a way that is both efficient and eloquent. He can conjure the ghost and glory of Melville while portraying the grittiness of the contemporary working waterfront. “The way he writes is the way people speak honestly,” said Adair, who has worked with Gorman for 20 years and has seen every play Gorman has written and staged.

That sense of grittiness is why Gorman insisted on staging “Ambergris” on the waterfront. “I was drawn to it because of its pedestrian quality. It’s a working place, and there is nothing inherently beautiful about it in a scenic way – yet there is, because it’s part of the fishing community,” he said.

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He and his creative team were still working out logistical details of the site last week, but he hoped to use both the Net Yard, an open space large enough that fisherman can roll out their nets, and the buildings of the fish exchange as part of an interactive set for the show. He wants to place his characters on and among the equipment and fishing gear “and in the heart of the industry.”

He doesn’t want it to feel authentic. He wants it to be authentic, which is why he is using a pair of real boats – two small skiffs on wheels – as well as artistically suggestive models. Some of his cast members make their living as contractors and builders and are what he describes as “interesting performers and socially progressive thinkers.”

He named his production company the Forty Hour Club, a nod to the working class. He’s also collaborating with local visual artists, including Russ Cox, whose painting, also called “Ambergris,” will be incorporated into the installation. Gorman will perform in the installation, along with midcoast residents, including Jim Reitz, who will also be in the La MaMa production, and Roland Albert. Actors from the La MaMa production who travel to Portland include Alan Barnes Netherton, Khari Constantine and Mark Daly.

Todd Weeks, an artist, writer and builder, is making a boat called Ambergris in his studio and workshop in the Lincoln Street Center in Rockland. Rockland artist and fabricator Andy White is making three harpoons, and Sarah Boyden is designing the costumes.

It’s non-traditional theater in respect to where he is staging the play, what people are involved and how he hopes it’s received. “Theater, and art in general, seems to be moving away from institutions in an exciting and challenging way,” he said, and then quoted a character from “Angels in America”: “The world only spins forward.”

“I believe that to be true,” Gorman said.



A scene from the play if "Colorado Had an Ocean." Photo courtesy of the Forty Hour Club

ENCHANTED BY VINALHAVEN

Gorman grew up in central Massachusetts, one of six in an Irish family. He and an older brother, Kevin, fished together as kids, and Kevin eventually ended up fishing out of Gloucester. That's where his substance abuse issues began. He died of an overdose in 1998, and Gorman has been telling this story in one form or another since then.

He came to Maine after college, when a roommate took a job on a schooner out of Rockland and invited him for a visit. "I got sucked in and ended up on Vinalhaven," where he wrote and performed plays and worked various jobs. "Vinalhaven was a magical, formative place for me. I had a magical time there with a whole bunch of artists, but it now exists mostly in the past. It's one of those places that you can't really go back to, if you know what I mean," he said.

Gorman became interested in theater during college, when he began reading plays. He liked the magic of the words and their ability to transport him to a place that he could visualize. He got involved with La MaMa after attending a show there and taking up an offer from the theater's founder and original artistic director Ellen Stewart, who got up on stage and told the audience, "If you want to perform on this stage, come see me after the show."

And that's exactly what Gorman did, and when La MaMa produced one of his shows in 1994, "Biffing Muscles," it got a positive review in *The Village Voice*.

Stewart taught him the importance of visual language. She was an artist who believed that language was prohibitive, because it required people to share a common understanding of words and their context. "People can understand a song, but they can't always understand an English language scene," she told him. That's when he learned the value of creating a spectacle on stage – something that grabs people's attention and holds it and advances a story with a visual narrative.

Gorman has written several plays for La MaMa, and views "Chasing the New White Whale" as his most important work. He hopes people like it and worries it might be savaged by critics. But he's been down that road before. "I'm a veteran now, and we're good at this," he said confidently.

This one, though, is different. He sees this one as a career showcase, a chance to emerge as an important new American voice in contemporary theater, capable of taking on the issue of addiction as an artist and advocate. "I'm really finding my voice with this whole culture of 'invisible' people, and oddly, I can see greater political involvement in the future," he said. "This is the boat I have built, and this is the boat I will sail."