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# [‘Meaningful nonsense’ at the Shadowbox Theatre](http://www.theneworleansadvocate.com/beaucoup/8246168-171/meaningful-nonsense-at-the-shadowbox)

**An Outopia for Pigeons**

By Jim Fitzmorris

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More Info

An Outopia for Pigeons

WHERE: The Shadowbox Theatre, 2400 St. Claude Ave.

WHEN: Feb. 6-23; 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.; 3 p.m. Sundays.

TICKETS: $15

Info: (504) 298-8676;

[outopiaforpigeons.event brite.com](http://outopiaforpigeons.eventbrite.com);

[http://theshadowbox theatre.com](http://theshadowboxtheatre.com).

Inside the Cincinnati Zoological Society of 1914, Pigeon Martha Washington coos, pens a letter to her human counterpart and dreams of a safe haven for her kind.

A nearly omniscient Gourmand glides across a landscape that is at once our time and the flotsam/jetsam of the American past. Puritanical firebrand Cotton Mather rages against witches and indulges his own sexual deviancy. Finally, Sperm Whale Charles Bronson seeks 78 cents to complete his epic journey of vengeance.

And all of it is happening under an antiquated drugstore sign in the Marigny that reads, “Marquer Drugs: Candy/Soda.”

It’s not the launch of the neighborhood’s latest marching krewe. It’s Justin Maxwell’s “An Outopia for Pigeons,” and it’s coming to the Shadowbox Theatre on Thursday, Feb. 6, through Feb. 23.

UNO playwriting professor Maxwell’s regional premiere is a wild farrago of language and philosophical subversion uniquely suited for the offbeat theater on St. Claude.

Produced by Shadowbox proprietor Richard Mayer and directed by Bonnie Gabel, the three-week run gives audiences a chance to not only see new work but also an unaccustomed style.

Nonetheless, its creators are convinced it contains something genuinely appealing to New Orleans.

Maxwell believes “Outopia” to be “a play about salvation and destruction. The ability to laugh at big scary things. Pulling things off at the last possible minute.”

With a beaming smile, the playwright said, “It’s the perfect play for Carnival.”

“Outopia” premiered last year in a Minneapolis production by the Swandive Theater Company where Daily Planet critic Matthew A. Everett described it as “a remarkable piece of theater.”

While that production was underway, the show was receiving a reading at Southern Rep’s Plays and Pints series, and it was there that producer Mayer had a chance to see it.

Describing it as “strange, esoteric and wildly funny,” Mayer immediately approached Maxwell, because he felt the piece was of a type not seen enough in New Orleans and perfect for his own venue.

“It manages to simultaneously say nonsense and still be profound and meaningful.”

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A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, Gabel, director of last year’s “Possum Kingdom,” believes the show is perfect for New Orleans’ audiences not in spite of its inherent strangeness but precisely because of it.

“It’s uncomfortably sexy. It’s a play where you laugh, question why you’re laughing, get a little turned on and have to question why you’re getting turned on,” Gabel said.

“And it’s peopled with large characters who are still laughing even though they’re at the end of their rope. Sound kind of familiar?”

Just as was the case with Mayer’s finding the play, the author and director were brought together in the simplest of ways.

Despite Maxwell having a respected national voice as a writer of the strange and absurd, he reached out upon arrival in New Orleans in search of collaborators. After hearing recommendations and then seeing Gabel’s work, the playwright offered her his script as a potential project.

He describes her as a “natural collaborator” who gets “lots of people talking in the room, while still running a tight rehearsal process.”

Featuring the talents of actors Rebecca Elizabeth Hollingsworth, Stacy Smith, Glenn Aucoin and James Patrick, “Outopia” takes audiences into a world driven more by a playful accumulation of language and what Maxwell calls “choices” than an actual traditional plot.

Nonetheless, the script has a lot to offer those only looking for a good time at the theatre.

Comic absurdities abound, titillating exchanges occur, and an episodic structure that Maxwell describes as “collage” has the feeling of some of the city’s wilder Mardi Gras happenings.

For those looking for darker, more challenging fare, “Outopia” can also fit the bill, as it possesses a sly commentary on post-modern America and how meaning has been reduced to sound bite in our current times.

But for Gabel, the key is the laughter.

“I think in New Orleans people know how to laugh in the face of unbelievable odds. That’s what this play is about. Laughing and turning things around when it looks like there’s nothing left.”