

THEATER

Dockworker readies a different big lift: a one-man performance

By Richard Guzman

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By day, Seal Beach resident John Cox makes his living working on the docks, where he drives cranes in Long Beach and San Pedro.

By night, at least through November, the seasoned longshoreman will have a very different job.

Cox is slated to star as more than a dozen characters in his one-man show titled “The Money Fi\$h,” which was inspired by his experiences in Alaska working as a commercial fisherman.

“The story will talk about the guy who hits rock bottom,” Cox said. “I go out there cocky, like I knew everything, like I was the toughest guy in the world. And then by the time I’m two days into this experience, I realized I didn’t know anything. I was just this stupid dumb kid.”

Cox’s baby face and raspy voice make for a combination as a tough-as-nails blue collar dockworker turned playwright and actor.

The play, written by the 44-year-old, opened Thursday and runs through Nov. 22 at The Hudson Theatres in Los Angeles.

The story takes the audience through Cox’s three years on a boat, from newbie “greenhorn” all the way to the wheelhouse. Along the way, Cox deals with the brutal waters of the Bering Sea, where he witnesses a tragedy in the ocean but also experiences peaceful life-affirming moments.

The play is directed by Michael Arabian, an accomplished theater veteran whose work includes a production of “Waiting for Godot” at the Mark Taper Forum, which won five Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards. For Arabian, working with the first-time playwright and relatively inexperienced actor was an easy decision.

“Even though he hasn’t had a lot of acting experience, he has had good training, and his instincts are really powerful both as a writer and as an actor,” Arabian said. “I think he’s a real discovery.”

Cox, who grew up in Pontiac, Mich., moved to California at the age of 13. He had a tough childhood with a stepfather who was often violent, Cox remembered, so after graduating from Torrance High School he joined the military and became an Army Airborne Ranger in 1991.

After his service, while coming out of a bar in Seattle, he chatted with a girl who told him her brother was a commercial fisherman who made a lot of money. That was when he decided to try commercial fishing. He traveled to Dutch Harbor, Alaska, in search of a job and learned the tough trade from such mentors as a Japanese deck boss who didn’t speak English yet still taught him the mental skills he needed to survive on the ship and beyond. He also had a friend die in his arms out at sea after a pulley hit him in the head.

“I was deck boss and I had to hold his head on my lap and see



COURTESY PHOTO

Seal Beach resident John Cox wrote and stars in “The Money Fi\$h,” a one-man play inspired by his time as a commercial fisherman. It opened Thursday at the Hudson Theatres.

THE MONEY FI\$H

When: 8 tonight, 8 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through Nov. 22.

Where: The Hudson Theatres, 6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles.

Tickets: \$20.

Information: 323-960-7780, www.themoneyfishplay.com

this whole experience unfold,” Cox recalled.

Those characters and incidents are among the many Cox will recreate on stage with the help of lighting, sound work and real water, all meant to give people the feeling of being on a commercial boat.

But not all his stories end in tragedy. There were other less harsh yet significant moments that Cox plans to share with the audience.

For instance, one day when the boat was steaming towards Dutch Harbor and Cox was out on deck enjoying the ocean breeze, a pod of more than 30 killer whales popped up and followed in the boat’s wake. They were so close Cox could lean over and touch them.

“There was a tiny little baby with them and there were several enormously powerful adults swimming close together protecting the baby,” Cox remembered. “From where I was standing, it was like I was part of their family. ... It was so beautiful. I came from this very violent childhood, I was beaten and stuff, and to see the way this baby was being protected, I thought one day I want to have a family like that. I want to be strong like that and protect my baby.”

But Cox didn’t decide to write about his sea journeys until well after he was off the ship.

While still on the boat, he be-

friended a marine biologist who was assigned to his vessel.

“She told me John, this isn’t you; you’re a creative person,” he said.

So he made a list of things he was going to “attack” creatively. On the list were career goals such as architecture, psychology and business. Near the end of the list was acting.

Cox then moved back to L.A. and decided to attend Golden West Community College in Huntington Beach, where he took an acting class and discovered a new love in his life.

“I found I had a natural ability to act, and it just led from one connection to the next,” he said.

Cox immersed himself in the class and later graduated from the South Coast Repertory Acting Intensive Program and studied with respected acting coach Larry Moss, who persuaded him to write his story.

It took five years to write the piece, which Cox did between taking on small roles for various local theater productions.

Opening night, Cox said, will be the culmination of not just the past five years, but of all the experiences he’s had that brought him to this point.

“I’m feeling like the biggest moment in my life is coming up,” Cox said. “It’s like I needed everything in my past to have strength for this.”

On opening night, the marine biologist who encouraged him to follow his creative side is expected to be in the audience. She’s now his wife, Kimberly, and she’s no longer making a living on commercial boats either.

“She has been a huge source for me. I wouldn’t be where I am now without her — and she actually drives cranes now with me at the docks,” Cox said, with a laugh.