

# FOR THE MAN WHO CHASED THE MONEY FISH

## LIFE IS THE PAYOFF

By Gregory Moore, *Contributing Reporter*

**J**ohn Cox navigated choppy seas from childhood to the premiere of his one-man show, *The Money Fi\$h*, in Hollywood. But without the difficulties of the long voyage he never would have gotten at all.

At 13, Cox was already sure he was heading for nowhere. Struggles with an abusive stepfather and a mother unable to provide a solid foundation left him disaffected enough for the latter to bring him to a psychologist. But as Cox tells it, after she rattled off a litany of things wrong with Cox, the psychologist asked her to step outside so he could talk with Cox alone.

“Your mom will probably never bring you back here,” Cox recalls him saying. “So I’m going to tell the truth, son. You seem like a really tough kid, but there’s no easy way out of this situation you’re in. But one day it will end. So for the next five years, you’re going to have to be strong. Then one day you’re going to turn 18, and you can go do whatever the hell you want and make a better life for yourself.”

“When you’re a kid, you think that shit’s forever. But after he told me that I went home and look[ed] around my room and thought, ‘Five years? I can do five years.’”

There weren’t many bright spots in those five years, although during his senior year his English teacher proclaimed that Cox had a gift for writing, a gift he shouldn’t ignore. But Cox wasn’t ready to hear it.

“I was a punk kid,” he says. “I was like, ‘What am I going to do with that?’ [...] All I knew was working with my body, working with my hands.”

The quickest way out of his former life was the military. So after graduating from Torrance’s South High School, Cox covered up a childhood foot injury in order to enlist in the army. He made it through basic training without serious difficulty. But the injury began to catch up with him during the intensive training he underwent as an airborne ranger. After two years he received a medical discharge, not that he minded by then.

“I was stationed in Seattle with a group of good ol’ racist boys from the South,” he says. “They hated me because I was Hispanic. And after a year of being with them, I hated them, too.”

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Longshoreman John Cox in *The Money Fi\$h*, which debuts at the Hudson Theatre in Hollywood. Photos by Michael Lamont.

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[Calendar, from page 15]

Venue: Alpine Village, 833 Torrance Blvd., Torrance

**Oct. 31**

#### Howl-o-ween Pet Parade

Well-behaved pets, their parents and families are invited to the LA Waterfront Howl-o-ween Pet Parade, from the downtown harbor to the Fanfare Fountain in San Pedro. Costumes are encouraged but not required.

**Time:** 9 to 11 a.m. Oct. 31

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** lawaterfront.org

**Venue:** Downtown Harbor, San Pedro

#### Southbay Pavilion Mall-o-Ween

Register for the costume contest and the pumpkin carving contest online. There will also be face-painting and a magic show.

**Time:** 5 to 7 p.m.

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** www.southbaypavilion.com

**Venue:** Southbay Pavilion

**Nov. 1**

#### San Pedro Día de los Muertos Festival

Celebrate the special lives of dirt-nappers at the 4th annual San Pedro Día de los Muertos Festival in Historic Downtown San Pedro. The streets will fill with art, culture, food and entertainment. There will be a sacred altar competition and exhibition, along with craft vendor booths, a food court, children's stage and play area and main stage entertainment.

**Time:** 3 to 9 p.m.

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** www.spdayofthedead.com

**Venue:** 6th Street, between Pacific Avenue and Mesa Street, San Pedro

**Nov. 6**

#### United For A Cause Music Festival

Justice For Murdered Children is looking to unite the community around peace while focusing attention on murdered children. It kicks off Friday with a cruise night peace ride through the community, candlelight vigil and ends with reggae on the waterfront. Saturday features a BBQ cook-off, a red and green Chilli Cookoff as well as music from around the world. Sunday's activities include a car and bike show for charity and music by Low Key Band.

**Time:** 3 to 10 p.m. Nov. 6 through 8

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** (310) 738-4218

**Venue:** Ports O'Call Village, Berth 75, San Pedro

**Nov. 7**

#### Bully Olympics 2015

Join Bully Breed Clothing in welcoming the West Coast's finest bully dogs. Enjoy live music, barbers, tattoo booths, car showcase plus much more. No dogs in heat, no aggressive dogs and no outside food or beverages allowed.

**Time:** 9 a.m.

**Cost:** \$10 to \$25

**Details:** www.queenmary.com

**Venue:** Queen Mary, 1126 Queens Highway, Long Beach

#### Leland Park PAB Community BBQ

Come out for the face painting, crafts and free hot dogs. There will also be a flashlight walk at 6 p.m.

**Time:** 2 to 6 p.m.

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** http://nwsanpedro.org/

**Venue:** 863 S. Herbert Ave., San Pedro

## Theater

**Nov. 6**

#### Stick Fly

The annual trip to Martha's Vineyard by a well-to-do African-American family confronts issues of race, class and deep family secrets, forcing them to face their uncertain, yet, optimistic future.

**Time:** 8 p.m. Nov. 6 and 7, and 2 p.m. Nov. 8, through Nov. 22

**Cost:** \$15 general admission, \$10 students and seniors

**Details:** (310) 243-3589; www4.csudh.edu/theatre-arts/buy-tickets

**Venue:** Edison Studio Theatre, CSUDH, 1000 E. Victoria St., Carson

**Nov. 7**

#### Hay Fever

The Long Beach Playhouse continues their 87th Mainstage Season with Noel Coward's classic comedy *Hay Fever*. The play examines what was supposed to be a quiet weekend away with the Bliss family, while it turns into a ridiculous, banter filled farce.

**Time:** 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays, Nov. 7 through Dec. 5

**Cost:** \$14 to \$24

**Details:** (562) 494-1014; www.lbplayhouse.org

**Venue:** Long Beach Playhouse, 5021 E. Anaheim St., Long Beach

## Art

**Nov. 1**

#### 10th Annual Día de los Muertos Group Art Exhibition and Celebration

Celebrate the 10th Annual Día de los Muertos art exhibition, cultural event and celebration of life. All artwork will have as the main theme *calaveras* (skulls) celebrating life as they come down to visit. DJ CHeeBo will be spinning his *muerto* sounds. *Pan de muerto* and tequila tasting to make a toast to the remembrance of loved ones.

**Time:** 3 to 10 p.m.

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** (562) 225-8535

**Venue:** Gallery Azul, 520 W. 8th St., San Pedro

**Nov. 5**

#### Sam Arno Retrospective: 1995 – 2015

South Bay Contemporary at The Loft presents a retrospective of the works of Sam Arno. Arno is a former art and creative director for various Los Angeles ad agencies. As a graphic designer, he received numerous awards for packaging, outdoor billboards and magazine advertising. Arno was a founding member of Angels Gate Cultural Center. He had work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Art Rental and Sales Gallery, Barnsdall Art Park and in galleries in Long Beach, Palm Springs, Idyllwild and throughout Los Angeles. He prefers abstract art, but has also created landscape and "cosmos" paintings.

**Time:** Opening reception, 6 to 9 p.m. Nov. 5.

The exhibition continues through Dec. 18

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** (310) 429 0973

**Venue:** SBC Studio at The Loft, 401 S. Mesa St., 3rd Floor, San Pedro

#### Be Friends With Your Burning New Works by Hyung Mo Lee

Hyung Mo Lee's practice reflects many of the aesthetic and philosophic strategies associated with the Italian *Arte Povera* (literally poor art) movement whose artists attacked corporate mentality with an art of unconventional materials and style, often incorporating found objects. Lee's drawings, sculptures and installations are notable for their radical choice of materials and emphasis on laborious, time-consuming process. His Sumi Ink drawings, both delicate and dynamic, are meditations on geologic time—strata rendered brush-stroke by brush-stroke—while sculptural works expand on lessons learned from drawing. Found objects are negotiated to the point of transformation, often bordering on dissolution, always stressing materiality and physicality, evocative of myth over scientific rationalism.

**Time:** Opening reception, 6 to 9 p.m. Nov. 5.

The exhibition continues through 28

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** (310) 429 0973

**Venue:** SBC STUDIO At the LOFT, 401 S. Mesa St, 3rd floor, San Pedro

#### Artists and Writers

Cornelius Projects presents a gathering of artists and writers reading in conjunction with the current exhibition, *I can't eggsplane: Peggy Reavey*. The participants include poet Amy Gerstler, artist and writer Benjamin Weismann, writers Michelle Latiolais and Jim Krusoe. There will also be a performance by Planet Queens (writer, critic and curator Kristine McKenna and musician Weba Garretson).

**Time:** 1 to 6 p.m. when the red flag is flying

**Cost:** Free

**Details:** (310) 266 9216

**Venue:** Cornelius Projects, 1417 S. Pacific Ave., San Pedro

[Fi\$h, from page 11]

# MONEY Fi\$H

Cox remained in Seattle for a year, working as a waiter until the brother of a woman he was dating clued him in to how much money he could make as a commercial fisherman in Alaska. With no better idea of what to do next, he crossed the border.

Based on what he had endured in the military, Cox was confident that the life of a fisherman would be a breeze.

"I went out [to sea] cocky, believing that nothing could beat me," he says. "Next thing you know, I'm out there on the Bering Sea in winter time with 40-foot swells and I'm seasick. Three weeks in, after working 20-hour days, I was mentally and physically broke. I had never felt so low in my life. I had to rebuild myself. I told myself I would never get cocky again. Cockiness kills."

It was then Cox found a humility that would prove invaluable to his personal growth, opening him up to a series of mentors who over the ensuing four years would help shape the person he was to become.

"Their words resonate with me to this day," he says. "Stuff that I learned on that boat helped me make this crazy thing [*The Money Fi\$h*] a reality."

One of those mentors was Kim, a marine biologist who came on board during his final year at sea.

"She blew my mind," Cox says. "She opened my mind to a whole new world of possibilities."

Within a year she was his wife.

Glimpsing this new world of possibilities moved Cox closer to leaving the old world behind. So after a four-month stretch in which he caught a serious lung infection, was nearly killed and saw a comrade die, it was time to begin the next phase of his life.

"I felt I had become this person who was giving his life away for money," he says. "Eventually what happened is I outgrew the boat."

Shortly after quitting the fishing business, he and Kim moved to San Pedro, where they opened a coffeehouse they would operate for "three long, hard years" before throwing in the towel.

"We lost everything, everything, every penny I made on the boat," Cox says. "The IRS was after me and everything."

In need of money, Cox landed a gig as a longshoreman. But he soon became discontent with a life of nothing but physical labor. He yearned for a creative outlet.

"I wasn't happy," he says. "I felt like I wasn't doing anything that was me.... My wife said, 'You're a creative person. You're always putting together creative stories. Don't you realize you do it naturally?'"

So Cox enrolled in community college, where he began to take writing and acting classes. Before long he was landing roles in plays and short films.

"As soon as I stepped into that world, it fit like a glove," he says. "At first I thought theatre was something for weak-minded people. I was turned off [by my conception] of all the flamboyance. But then I realized how crazy it really is. It's really hard to step in front of people and do that! It gave me the same rush of being alive as when I was on the Bering Sea or preparing to jump out of a plane."

It also provided him with clarity he had never before experienced.

"It's like the 405 is crowded at 5 o'clock, but then I step on stage, and all the cars are pulling off the road, and it's totally empty, and I'm just driving along," he says.

But because Cox was "casualing" as a longshoreman (he had not obtained a full-time position and the flexibility that comes with it) he found himself in a kind of limbo, unable to fully pursue his artistic passions.

Finally, after more than a half-decade on the job, Cox became a full-time longshoreman and began to undertake the project that would become *The Money Fi\$h*.

He first wrote a series of short pieces documenting individual stops on the journey of his life. Eventually he saw all this work as of a piece, an opus on which he would need to focus the whole of his artistic efforts in order to realize fully. He stopped acting entirely and for



Photo by Micahel Lamont

years poured himself into its realization.

That realization came later than he expected. Earlier this year the Hudson Theatres decided to world premiere *The Money Fi\$h*. A director was chosen; a set was built; and a lighting concept was created. But one month before opening, Cox insisted on doing a rewrite.

"I did a reading, and an LA critic who was there said, 'It's good, but it's too long. It's going to be two hours, [not including] intermission, and you'll get killed on reviews,'" Cox recounts. "I drove home, and I said: 'I have to rewrite it. I gotta cut it and start it from Alaska and refer back to the [earlier moments]. I'm not going down like this. I've put in too much time to go down because it's too long.' It was an act of desperation....Everybody was freaked out. My director, my producer was scared. They said, 'It's too late.' I said, 'The hell it is.'"

After a sleepless week, Cox completed—for real, this time—the artistic work of his life. *The Money Fi\$h* opened on Oct. 1. When asked how it feels to be at this point after all this time and life, he cannot hold back the tears.

"Everything in my life that happened—my abusive childhood, military training, going to Alaska, all the bullshit—brought me to this point and gave me the strength to make it through," he says. "I felt like everything was against me to make it happen, you know? It's like [the world is set up] to make you push your dreams aside and follow what other people [say you're supposed to do]. This was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Up until weeks before [opening], I didn't see it happening. And then when I thought it might happen, I didn't see it happening the way I hoped it would, at the highest level that it could happen...on every level. You hope it will be this magical experience that people will find entertaining....Everything in my life, everything that I'm about, was coming towards that moment."

Not surprisingly, the theme of *The Money Fi\$h* is the theme of Cox's life.

"I was a guy who came from nothing," he says.

"No one gave me a damn thing, and I was a stupid, punk kid. But I went out there on this boat and I found my way. Instead of being cocky, I started listening to people that I respected.... I learned how to constantly change and grow. You don't [necessarily] know who you are. You might be living one way and not know that you're someone else. Live to learn and discover.... All along the way there were people who offered their love to me, mentorship, and I took it, and I moved up.... And eventually what happened was: I outgrew the boat. I said, 'My life's bigger than this boat. I need to go find my true self.'"

Now, he finds himself onstage in Hollywood, playing out the story of his life for all to see. Where it goes from here, only time will tell. But in this life, John Cox is at sea no more.

*The Money Fi\$h* plays at the Hudson Theatre (6539 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; hudsontheatre.com) Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. through Nov. 22. Details: themoneyfishplay.com.