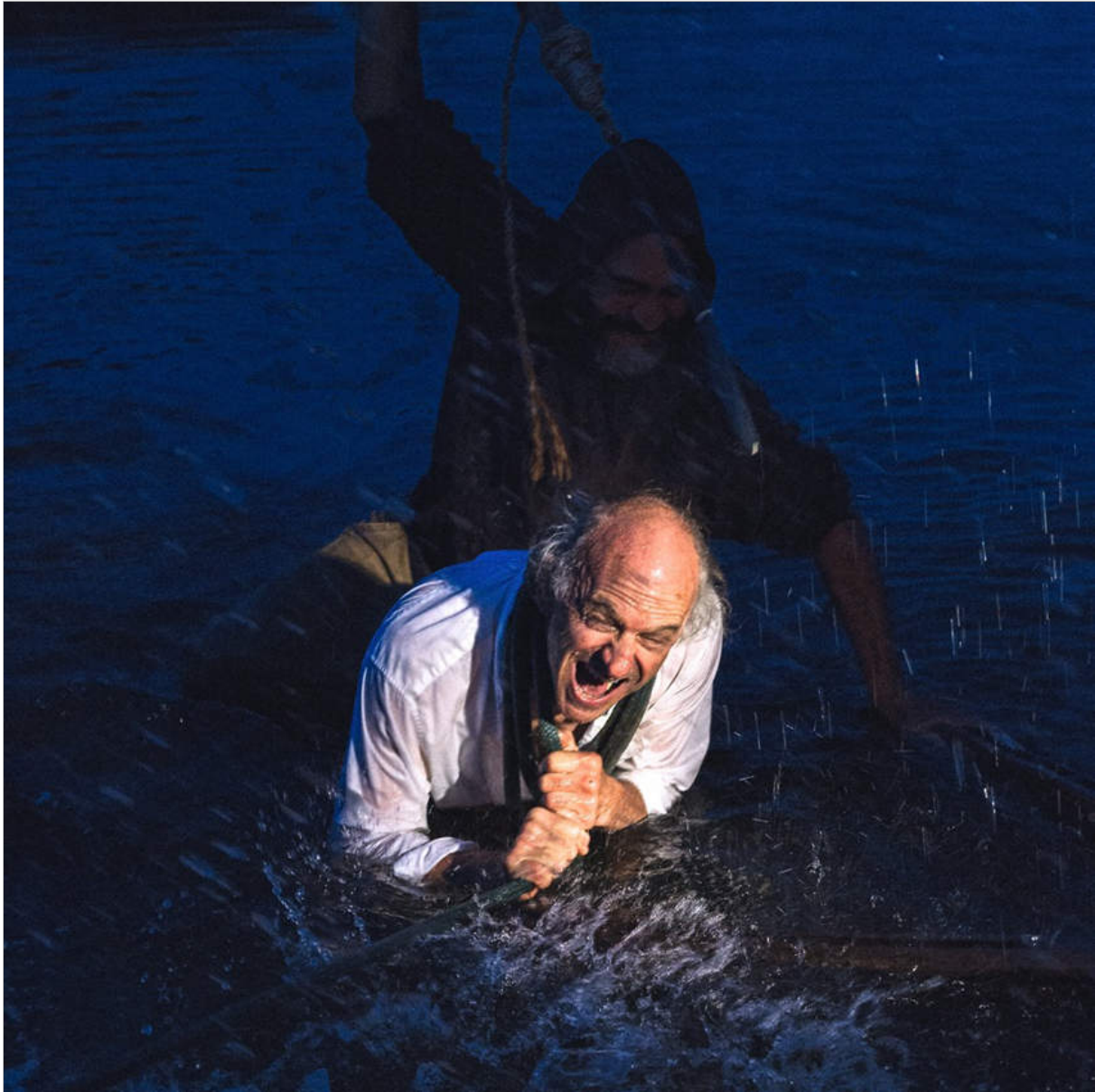
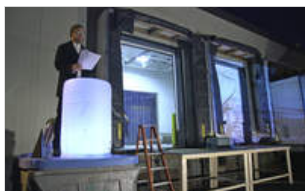

Midcoast to Manhattan: ‘New White Whale’ opens at La MaMa

By Dagney C. Ernest | Nov 21, 2018



Jim Reitz, pictured front with Roland Albert in a promo photo taken on Camden's Hosmer Pond, is part of Mike Gorman's "Chasing the New White Whale" at New York City's La MaMa Experimental Theater Club. Photo by: Jolene Silver



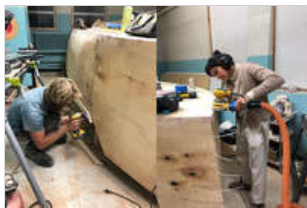
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The opioid epidemic has cut a particularly jagged gash through the commercial fishing community, whose members pursue one of the most dangerous jobs in the country. Twenty years ago, Mike Gorman's fisherman brother was lost to heroin — and the playwright has been addressing the personal and national crisis in his work ever since.

In recent years, the Midcoast has been privy to Gorman's ongoing series of theater works exploring the opioid epidemic's devastation of the commercial fishing industry. As an Ellis-Beauregard Studio Resident, he spent last winter at Rockland's Lincoln Street Center, working on a project that has seen different types of staging at Rockland's Center for Maine Contemporary Art and Steel House South; and on the



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Portland waterfront. The day after Thanksgiving, the work will culminate with a three-week run of “Chasing the New White Whale” at New York City’s famed La MaMa Experimental Theater Club.

The production is being staged in La MaMa’s largest space, the Ellen Stewart Theater, at 66 East 4th St., named for the late, great “Mama” herself. That space will be filled with many an object, and a few people, from the Midcoast. It took a village — or two — to create this work, which weaves together elements of Herman Melville’s “Moby-Dick” with modern-day commercial fishing in New England and, as the title suggests, the white menace of opium, both an ancient and very much a 21st-century threat to life and livelihood.

Gorman is the Playwright in Residence for La MaMa’s 57th season and co-director of The Forty Hour Club, one of La MaMa’s almost two dozen resident companies. He and Forty Hour Club co-director and partner Donna Daly are producing “Chasing The New White Whale,” and their production office is at Steel House. Daly, former director of the Strand Theatre, also has designed the video projections used in the show, using footage by Dale Schierholt, who got his start as a filmmaker during the Strand’s renovation.

“So, it’s nice to be working with him again on this new project,” said Daly, and to “have the opportunity to create from the perspective of being **on** the stage, rather than in front of it.”

Also working on the production a good part of the year were artist Andrew White, who hand-crafted four authentic-looking toggle harpoons in his studio at Thomaston’s MidCoLab; and local cabinetmaker, craftsman and builder Todd Weeks, who designed and built a boat at Lincoln Street Center, as well as building another on-site at La MaMa. And Sarah Boyden, whose work with Gorman goes back to his 20-something Fabulous Giggins’ Bros days on Vinalhaven, is the costume designer. Some of those costumes, specifically, foul weather gear, were donated by Brooks Trap Mill of Thomaston; Brooks also donated some modern-day fishing gear.

The actors are New York-based, with two exceptions: Gorman, who plays The Chaplain; and Jim Reitz of Rockport, who plays Elijah. Both are characters that appear in “Moby-Dick,” and the two actors have worked together before, both on and off stage.

“Mike and I have done a lot of construction together. That’s actually how I met him, back in maybe 2003, up in Camden. We were both on the same job,” said Reitz a few days before heading south on the Concord Coach Plus Bus.

That’s also how Reitz met set designer Donald Eastman, on a remodeling job with Gorman in Portland. And he’s looking forward to meeting Christopher Akerlind, a Tony Award-winning lighting designer, at La MaMa ... and not just because he’s in the show. Reitz, a self-employed carpenter, is a member of the International Alliance of Theater and Stage Employees — in fact, he represents Maine on the union’s New England local executive board. He works on film shoots, most of which are in the Boston area, and he’s been thinking about changing his craft status from carpenter to grip.

“The grips do anything that fastens the lights to something,” he said.

Reitz has been doing theatrical set work since his college days in Kansas City, when he “got the bug.” But it wasn’t until he took a Belfast Maskers course taught by Michael Toner in 1993 that he began appearing on stage.

“The Maskers had this really good guy who used to come up every year, he was an actor at the Walnut Street Theater, because that’s where Basil [Burwell, the troupe’s founder] was,” Reitz said. “And that’s when I started doing theater.”

Right after that class, Reitz got cast in something at the Theater Project in Brunswick; he later did a couple of shows with the Penobscot Theatre Company in Bangor. And he did lots of productions with the Maskers, when Bob Hitt and then Gardner Howe were artistic directors.

“They did a lot of really great work. I was in my car to Belfast a lot,” he said.

In recent years, Reitz has worked with Camden’s Everyman Rep, including last year’s “The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui,” staged at Rockland’s Bicknell Building; and most summers with college friends at a little backyard theater in Cushing. But this is not his first appearance at La MaMa. He and Gorman performed another of the playwright’s works in one of the famed off-off-Broadway theater’s smaller performance spaces some dozen years ago.

“Death by Joinery!’ It’s funny, it’s about two carpenters who rag on some guy’s book about the spirituality of building rock walls,” Reitz said.

In the past month, Reitz has made a few trips to New York and back to work with the rest of the cast. One was driving with Boyden who, he said, put a lot of effort into making his costume look right for Elijah, a wharf rat, and, in both Melville’s tale and Gorman’s re-imagining, a prophet of sorts.

“She did a really great job! She distressed some old wool pants; a shirt she actually bought new, she rubbed it on rocks and put coffee on it. And then a watch cap and some really beat-up boots,” he said.

Elijah carries a lantern, a typical we-need-this-thing prop Reitz devised that fills the bill perfectly.

“I got this Mason jar and I put in these twinkly battery LED lights and I put parchment paper in it and made a handle for it. So that will be there, I used it in Portland, too,” he said.

The October event at the Portland Fish Exchange & Net Yard was more of a happening than a play performance, although it used scenes that are incorporated in the about-to-open production in New York. Reitz still marvels at how it came together.

“It’s like Tillson Avenue, but 10, 20 times bigger, these giant warehouse buildings with doors and loading docks. They opened two of those doors right next to one another, and that was the proscenium,” he said. “And when the sun went down and it was backlit, it was really cool — so simple, but so amazing!”

Another thing Reitz finds amazing, and not for the first time, is “Moby-Dick.” He said he read it in a night when he was 22 “and like any peak experience, I remember specifically where I was and what a great thing it was.” When he started talking to Gorman about “Chasing the New White Whale,” even before he ended up in the cast, Reitz began reading “Moby-Dick” again, as well as some good literary criticism, “to square the brain.”

“Now I’m getting back into it, it’s an amazing piece of literature. I mean, it’s like America’s Shakespeare,” he said.

Arthur Adair, the La MaMa production’s director, came up to Rockland to meet with Reitz; a week later, after the New York audition, he received word he was in the cast.

“They needed an older guy for Elijah,” Reitz joked. “I’m just really thrilled to be part of the talented group of cast and crew. They’re great actors!”

One suspects the feeling is mutual. Gorman refers to his carpentry cohort, who is married to artist and poet Lois Anne, as Gentleman Jim Reitz.

“Jim represents everything I think a citizen and member of our community should represent: selflessness, generosity, creative and intellectual curiosity, activism and stalwart reliability,” Gorman said. “Jim is always up for anything. His interests and energy are endless.”

“Chasing the New White Whale” will open Friday night, Nov. 24, to run through Sunday, Dec. 9. Show times are Thursdays through Saturdays at 7 p.m.; and Sundays at 3 p.m.; plus an added show Monday, Nov. 26, at 7 p.m. For more information about the show, including tickets (\$25), and the 2018 Tony Award-winning La MaMa, visit lamama.org/new_white_whale.

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