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AUGUST 23, 2017

Review: “Moby Dick”



Nathan Hosner and Ensemble Member Raymond Fox.-Photo by Liz Lauren

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Where: Lookingglass Theatre Company, Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.

When: through Sept. 3

Tickets: \$45-\$80

Phone: 312-337-0665

By ANNE SPISELMAN
Theater Critic

If you missed the world premiere of Lookingglass Theatre Company’s “Moby Dick” in 2015, be sure to catch it this summer now that it’s back from a national tour. And if you did see it the first time around, go again.

Adapted and directed by ensemble member David Caitlin, the show melds storytelling and stagecraft in ways that really bring Herman Melville’s arguably ponderous novel to life—and may even turn on the recalcitrant to classic American literature. As far as I can tell, it also has been tweaked to tighten the narrative, quicken the pacing, and clarify metaphors. The section on the different kinds of whales, for example, draws more explicit connections between them and the members of the Pequod’s crew than I

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remember, and the great white whale’s assault on the ship—enacted by the Fates-turned-Furies—is more frightening than before.

William C. Kirkham’s stunning lighting and Rick Sims’ furious sound contribute greatly to the overall effect, while Courtney O’Neill’s scenic design featuring a central raked platform and overarching curved piping that extends out into the audience and resembles a whale’s skeleton—putting us right in it, just like the oft-referred-to Jonah—remains as versatile and powerful as before. Credit also goes to rigging designer Isaac Schoepp, who fitted out the stage with the ropes, ladders, and pulleys that make it feel almost like a real ship, and properties designer Amanda Herrmann, who was responsible for items like the scary harpoons and Queequeg’s carved-top coffin, which becomes the life buoy that saves Ishmael. Sully Ratke took over costume design from Carolyn Sullivan, but most of the costumes seem to be the same, from Queequeg’s fur coat and top hat to Fates’ navy hoop-skirt dresses, black capes and red wigs that keep morphing as their role changes.

These Fates—Kelly Abell, Mattie Hawkinson, and Cordelia Dewdney—are new cast members but just as impressive as their predecessors. Besides framing the action, they play wives, mothers, sisters, the innkeeper, an old blind woman, the whales, and even the sea itself, which in the end engulfs all.

The other main change is in the role of Ahab, the one-legged captain of the Pequod whose mad quest for revenge on the white-headed whale that took his leg drives the ship and those aboard to their doom. Originally played by Christopher Donahue with an air of inscrutable mystery and danger, he’s now portrayed by Nathan Hosner, who initially comes across as more approachable and closer to normal as he rallies the men to his cause. This makes his encroaching madness and single-minded determination to pursue Moby Dick tragic, and the scene in which first mate Starbuck (Kareem Bandealy) tries to pull him back from the abyss and convince him to return home is especially touching. In general, Bandealy’s performance seems deeper and even better than before. Raymond Fox also is back as the amiable Stubbs, as well as a couple of other sea captains, one of whom is refused help by Ahab.

Jamie Abelson has added new dimensions to Ishmael’s storytelling, though he still has us from the opening line, “Call me Ishmael,” and his description of the restlessness, loneliness, and need for excitement that sends him to sea. As the bosom buddy he meets when they’re forced to share a bed in a New England inn, Anthony Fleming III’s Queequeg remains a revelation, though I admit I wasn’t taken as much by surprise as the first time. (Walter Owen Briggs, who was great in The Hypocrites’ “All Our Tragic,” plays Ishmael at matinees.)

The production is a collaboration with The Actors Gymnasium, and the importance of Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi’s circus choreography can’t be overstated. While all the performers scamper all over the rigging and the whale-bone pipes with amazing dexterity, a few of the aerial feats are particularly striking. They include Queequeg’s underwater rescue of Cabaco (Micah Figueroa), who jumps out of one of the little whaling boats and loses his mind because he thinks he’s a coward, and the drowning death of Mungun (Javen Ulambayer), a ballet on straps with the Fates that’s as beautiful as anything by Cirque du Soleil. The skinning of a whale—a Fate hanging upside down and spinning—also is breathtaking and contributed to a feeling I had stronger than ever: empathy with the whales.

As Lookingglass approaches its 30th anniversary next year, I’m sure the company is reflecting on past shows, most of them world premieres. “Moby Dick” surely will go down as one of the best.



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