

Superb 'Moby Dick' goes hunting for inner demons



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"Be gone, Starbuck," shouts Christopher Donahue's Captain Ahab in the Lookingglass Theatre's fabulous new three-act theatricalization of "Moby Dick," echoing the feelings of many an owner of a neighborhood coffeehouse.

For Starbuck, parsed with practicality here by the actor Kareem Bandealy, has dared to suggest that the voyage of the Pequod is about collecting a valuable commodity, whale oil, priced higher in the middle years of the 19th century even than in Howard Schultz's most caffeinated dreams, higher even than the sniff of coffee inside the K-Cup pod of today.

Ahab — whom Donahue renders as a man who intuits that the real struggles of life are never, ever, priced by the barrel — could not give a darn about yield. He is after a "hated fish," a great mammal who has already swallowed the limbs of those who thought themselves worthy adversaries: a monster, a harpoon-resistant other, a bugaboo, a previous relationship, an internal demon who must be vanquished whatever the cost lest a life spent eating salty crackers on the dangerous waters of the Atlantic be rendered a life that has made nary a lasting ripple.

If Ahab can't have his Moby Dick, then all his toil and sacrifices are moot. His time on the planet has no meaning.

That, of course, is what Herman Melville's great American adventure is about. And in no small part due to a truly superb adaptation, a tightly woven yet yearning script that courses to the center of this myth's story while showing compassion for those aboard (and all swimming below), David Catlin's exceptionally enjoyable and accessible show conveys all of the appeal of a life that contains actual bonafide adventure: Oh, I wish it were not the Cubs game Monday night but a voyage to the South Seas! More importantly, here is a Michigan Avenue experience that does not fill your closet but makes you think about your own white whale, and when you might be able to actually be done with the mass of blubber that haunts your dreams.

That crucial emotional underpinning is what makes Catlin's "Moby Dick" rise to the short list of great Lookingglass productions of the past two decades. As you might expect from this circus-fused company, and from a production made in association with the Actors Gymnasium, the decks and sails of the Pequod are vividly realized; narration is delivered atop rigging; scurrying deckhands behave like primates; a rich sound and lightscape emerges from the work of such designers as William C. Kirkham and Rick Sims.

But the reality of producing "Moby Dick" on stage is that much of the nomenclature of the story is now subject to cliché. We've all seen many ships on stage, with their actors swaying and the captain's wheel flying out of control; we've seen decking a-kilter and cable-knit sweaters aplenty. What is remarkable about Courtney O'Neill's design for "Moby Dick" is that it avoids such familiarities, substituting instead a slice of deck emblematic of land itself, immediately plugging in to the Melvillian theme of our obsession being not so much the expanse of the raging seas but the precise spot where the rules of the land stop and the primal conflicts of the sea begin.

Doing the best work of her career, O'Neill has come up with a series of curved poles, structures that can be masts, sure, but that also can form the carcass of the great antagonistic beast, thus suggesting that Moby Dick is on board the Pequod even before the vessel sets sail from Nantucket. For Moby Dick lurks inside us all. Otherwise he's merely the kind of whale you cruise to Alaska to hope to see.

There are a number of fascinating performances on deck. The ever-exotic Anthony Fleming III, playing the noble savage Queequeg — a tough assignment in many ways — turns his son of a king into a restless but authoritative

adventurer. Raymond Fox, playing (among others) the captain of the ship who arrives to ask Ahab to change course and look not for the whale but his fellow whaler's lost son, brings his customary note of sadness to the show. As Ahab says no, as he must, the rich characters drawn by Fox and Donahue home in on the underbelly of the scene. You don't feel anger at Ahab but you totally understand him, even as Fox reveals the human cost of such powerbrokers with agendas.

Plenty of kids with such dads know what he is talking about. Moby Dick can be the Blackhawks. Or booze. Or ambition. Or Saddam Hussein.

What is the storyteller's place in all of this? I've seen Ishmael (as in "call me") handled in all kinds of ways over the years, but Jamie Abelson somehow captures better than any I've seen the Melvillian role of Boswell: the explainer, the writer of the seamen's obituaries, the one left alive to describe what happened to the world when Moby Dick and Captain Ahab clashed in the mother of all epic quests.

What is the whale? How do they show him? You wanna know. Of course.

Well, he is something of a shape-shifter in this show, but, most strikingly, he is a collection of women — played by Emma Cadd, Kasey Foster and Monica West — all of whom also play the wives and widows and soon-to-be-widows left behind on shore.

They are tri-headed monstrous all right, and formidable foes for the men of the Pequod. They rise to the epic occasion. But they also are a reminder that the great adventure of American literature also is fundamentally a quixotic quest, its benefits temporary, if they ever existed at all. Just a few years after the Pequod's voyage, whale oil was worth virtually nothing.

Undaunted, Moby Dick took new forms. And his great seas — newly warmed now — rage on, still threatening to swallow all our ambitions.

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When: Through Aug. 28

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

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$25-\$80 at 312-337-0665 or lookingglasstheatre.org

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