

Theater | posted: 6/22/2017 6:00 AM

Rugged grandeur, superior storytelling define Lookingglass' 'Moby Dick'



Barbara Vitello

Two years after its celebrated premiere and four months after the conclusion of its national tour, Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby Dick" has returned triumphantly home.

Adapted by David Catlin from Herman Melville's classic 19th-century adventure tale, and produced in collaboration with Evanston's Actors Gymnasium, "Moby Dick" -- the latest in a series of singular theatrical works from Lookingglass -- has earned a place alongside company-defining productions like "Lookingglass Alice," "Metamorphoses" and "Hard Times."

Lookingglass' remount has a kind of rugged grandeur befitting its setting: the 19th-century whaler Pequod. Captained by the relentless Ahab, it's crewed by venturesome men who become unwitting comrades in his doomed quest to kill the great white whale that bit off his leg.

A cautionary tale of self-destructive obsession and unchecked vengeance, this adventure yarn is rooted in the bond forged between men navigating the outer edges of civilization. It's also an examination of man's essential nature: his quest to uncover his purpose and his desire for dominion.

To this multifaceted story, Catlin adds another provocative layer that suggests a desire to put off or escape domestic responsibilities and demands. Nowhere is this more evident than in the tattooed harpooner Queequeg (the charismatic, subtly comedic Anthony Fleming III), an island chieftain's son unwilling to assume tribal leadership from his ailing father.



The Pequod's crew sets out in boats to pursue their prey in Lookingglass Theatre's award-winning adaptation of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." - Courtesy of Liz Lauren

"I'm not ready," Queequeg tells his new friend Ishmael (a nicely understated Jamie Abelson), the would-be adventurer turned narrator whose existential ennui entices him to the sea.

Shipmates Cabaco and Mungun (talented actor/aerialists Micah Figueroa and Javen Ulambayar), are similarly unencumbered by wives and families and eager for adventure.

All of which suggests a kind of arrested adolescence on the part of the men who seemingly spurn the comfort of domesticity represented by Kelly Abell, Cordelia Dewdney and Mattie Hawkinson, who play the mothers, wives and sisters the whaling men leave behind. The superb trio also play the enigmatic Fates who determine the destiny of the Pequod and its crew, as well as the whales they pursue. In one whimsical scene, the trio circles set designer Courtney O'Neill's clever ship, whose curved masts resemble a whale's skeleton. Dressed as if in mourning, in Sully Ratke's period hoop skirts, they carry black lace parasols, which they open to mimic the whales spout. But what begins charmingly turns ghastly when the men capture one of the whales, hoist her aloft and skin her. The most imaginatively staged and most unsettling scene in the play, it suggests the men have rejected civilization entirely and embraced the violence of the natural world, which will ultimately consume them.



Cordelia Dewdney, left, Mattie Hawkinson and Kelly Abell play The Fates in Lookingglass Theatre's remount of its Joseph Jefferson Award-winning 2015 adaptation of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." - Courtesy of Liz Lauren

The theatrical flourishes, for which Lookingglass is renowned, don't stop there. Catlin's ingeniously staged, thrillingly physical production boasts several, including an elegant, aerial pas-de-deux and a poignant pas-de-trois beautifully choreographed by Actors Gymnasium artistic director Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi.

"Moby Dick" is a handsome production, strikingly lit by William C. Kirkham and accompanied by Rick Sims' yearning original music and inventive sound design.

But more than sheer spectacle powers this stirring remount, whose impact comes from deeply felt performances by the actors, many of whom have been with the show since its 2015 premiere.



Captain Ahab (Nathan Hosner) contemplates the pursuit of his nemesis in Lookingglass Theatre Company's "Moby Dick."
- Courtesy of Liz Lauren

The notable exception is Nathan Hosner, making his Lookingglass debut as Captain Ahab a haunted man, hunted by his own demons even as he pursues the elusive Moby Dick. Hosner's keenly etched performance -- which falls somewhere between madness and defiance -- contains traces of humanity. It's evident in his treatment of the poor, unhinged Cabaco. And it's evident in his emotional exchange late in the play with first officer Starbuck (the soulful, deliberate Kareem Bandealy), who implores Ahab to give up his quest and allow his battered, demoralized crew to return home.

Also deserving mention is Raymond Fox, terrific as the stalwart whaling captain Gardiner, who begs Ahab to help search for Gardiner's 12-year-old son swept overboard during a typhoon. Ahab refuses. We see in his eyes the pain of his decision even as we see sorrow and acceptance mirrored in Fox's eyes. It's the unspoken understanding between men powerless to change their nature.