

# 'Moby Dick' flies through the air at the Alliance Theatre

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Bo Emerson The Atlanta Journal-Constitution 1:48 p.m Monday, Oct. 17, 2016 Atlanta Events

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Jamie Abelson as Ishmael hangs from the rigging in the Lookingglass Theatre Company production of “Moby Dick,” now onstage at the Alliance Theatre. (Liz Lauren)

“**Moby Dick.**” 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays; 2:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. There will be no 7:30 p.m. performance on Oct. 30. \$20 and up. Alliance Theatre, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta. 404-733-5000, [alliancetheatre.org/mobydick](http://alliancetheatre.org/mobydick).

Two special matinee performances for students will take place at 10:30 a.m. Oct. 20 and Oct. 27. For ticket information, contact [allianceschoolday@woodruffcenter.org](mailto:allianceschoolday@woodruffcenter.org) or call 404-733-4661.

Pigs may never fly but whales go airborne at the [Alliance Theatre](#) this month during the Lookingglass Theatre production of “Moby Dick.”

The show, at the Alliance through Oct. 30, is a surreal version of the **Herman Melville tale, much of it told by acrobats swinging from trapeze, strap, lyre and Chinese pole.**

The audience occasionally catches its breath, as performers dangle like lookouts from a mast, seemingly within inches of plunging into the briny deep.

“I want the audience to experience not only with their ears and eyes, but also with their hearts and stomachs,” said David Catlin, founding member of [Lookingglass Theatre](#).

Catlin, who adapted the story for the stage and also directs, coordinated preparations before a recent preview performance at the Alliance as tech crews scurried about. His biceps revealed that he was once a participant in Lookingglass Theatre’s athletic productions, until a torn rotator cuff slowed down his acrobatics.

Atlantans will remember the “Lookingglass Alice” production that the Alliance staged in 2010, an equally athletic adaptation of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.”

Most, if not all, of the cast comes from Chicago-based theater groups, and many have trained in the circus arts at the Actors Gymnasium, also in the Chicago area. For this production, while **pitching themselves off 25-foot trusses and rappelling from ropes and wires**, they place their fates in the hands of the production crew of the Alliance, under the guidance of stage manager Mary Hungerford.

Catlin said he has full faith in the Atlanta staff. “I’d fall off a cliff if I knew Mary was going to catch me below.”

A backstage tour revealed some of the magic behind the effects, and some of the challenges of mounting this high-flying production.

The Alliance is three times the size of the black-box Lookingglass Theatre back in Chicago, so the set is more expansive. **One of the actors called this the “70 millimeter version” of the show.**

Crews built a “mother truss” to hang beneath the Alliance’s 85-foot fly space. The performers are suspended from that massive system. They also scamper up and down a series of curved pipes that surround the stage like the ribs of a whale.

Victor W. Smith, the Alliance’s director of production, said one of the challenges for the staff was designing a system that could be disassembled and shipped to Washington and Costa Mesa, Calif., where the show will appear after its Atlanta run.

“A lot of times when we take apart scenery, we use a Sawzall,” Smith said. (In other words, they destroy it.) That won’t work here. So, the set must be designed to break down and set up easily.

Suspended from their armature for some scenes, the performers, bathed in cool blue lighting, create an eerie underwater ballet. **Though the audience can see the wires and ropes, it willingly suspends disbelief, Catlin said.**

“We, as an audience, love to do that,” he said. “If we can get there, to believe that this is the ocean, that’s exciting, because reality is transcended.”

Catlin noted that Melville published the novel about a whaling ship in 1851, as the bleakest period in American history was dawning. He felt a “damp November of the soul” closing in on him. Like the novel, the play is dark. “Spoiler alert: it doesn’t end well for the Pequod,” Catlin said.

But Melville’s tale included comedy as well as tragedy, as does Catlin’s version.

In some of the sequences, the actors are clipped into harnesses. In others, they are not. Jamie Abelson, as Ishmael, along with other crew members, climbs hand-over-hand up those curved, 2-inch pipes with great abandon. The pipe is painted with a rubbery coating, and Abelson, held in place by his strength and friction, wears rubber-soled wrestling shoes to help gain a purchase.

At the beginning of the show, Catlin leads the audience in a brief chant for safety and excellence, as a way of greeting the performers. Along those same lines, Smith has developed his own mantra:

“We don’t fall,” he said.

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