

Theatre Review: 'Moby Dick' at The Alliance

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Micah Figueroa, Javen Ulambayar, Raymond Fox, Christopher Donahue, Walter Owen Briggs, Jamie Abelson, and Adeoye in Moby Dick at the Alliance Theatre. (Photo by Greg Mooney)

By Manning Harris

The Alliance Theatre is currently playing host to Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre's production of "Moby Dick," adapted and directed by David Catlin, based on the novel by Herman Melville. The production runs through Oct. 30.

Alliance fans may recall the Chicago company's 2010 visit here with a startling, surreal show called "Lookingglass Alice," based on Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

Alliance Theatre's Artistic Director Susan Booth comments, "This ensemble of actors, directors and devisors of theatre embrace a physical language of storytelling that is truly unrivaled in our field."

I think Ms. Booth is right on the money: Take Melville's titanic 1851 novel, often called The Great American Novel (always debatable), combine it with a heroic desire for storytelling inspired in part by Cirque du Soleil, and you'll begin to have an idea of what this production attempts. Ms. Booth again: "Melville's story captures something enormous and universal about the human spirit..."

Who would argue? I would go even further; I think Melville's "Moby Dick" is a metaphorical search for ultimate Reality, a quest to see the face of God. The search for the great white whale, of which you have heard, is merely the jumping off point.

I know all this sounds awfully highfalutin, but let's just say this is not an everyday, ordinary story. Fortunately, there are some all too real human beings to guide us on our journey. "Call me Ishmael," says our guide and narrator for this adventure (Jamie Abelson), a rather fastidious man, who meets a great black giant of a man named Queequeg (Adeoye), who's ready for anything.

Talk about strange bedfellows: The pairing of these two shows a bit of comic genius on Melville's part, for we need

humor in what will be a soaring, somber story. They are roommates in a crowded Nantucket before the sailing of the Pequod, under the command of Captain Ahab (Christopher Donahue), whose sole, grimly determined mission in life is seeking revenge on the great white whale, Moby Dick. It took off part of his leg on a previous encounter. Ahab is described as “a grand, ungodly, godly man.” He is King Lear on the heath. He sees the whale as “an inscrutable evil.”

Melville’s themes and aspirations in this work are towering, Shakespearean, Biblical, yet grounded in humanity. I cannot tell you the plot of “Moby Dick”; we’d be here for days.

All I can do is say that this production is a gigantic, breathtaking, artistic gamble. It relies heavily on the audience’s ability to imagine. The Pequod is “represented by a series of curved poles, which are masts, but that also can form the carcass of the great antagonistic beast...For Moby Dick lurks inside us all,” writes The Chicago Tribune, in a poetic burst of reportage.



Kasey Foster in Moby Dick at the Alliance Theatre. (Photo by Greg Mooney)

It’s also a gamble on the athleticism and physical courage of many of the cast, who are way up in the air on part of this journey. They are trained, partly by Chicago’s Actors Gymnasium, a circus and performing arts group. Does the grand gamble work? That is the question, and the answer is totally subjective; it depends on the individual. I’m pretty good at letting myself go and giving in to the glory of the moment, shall we say (at least in a theatre). So for me, yes. If you want to play it safe and not use your imagination, this is probably not your show. But I would hate to have missed it.

There are no women in the book, but three women are used here, portraying wives and mothers or Sirens or the Fates, “the driving force behind every decision,” says actress Kasey Foster. Again, it works—for the most part. Also, there are some fine actors here; I’m sorry I cannot mention them all.

I applaud the audacity of this company. Bennett Fisher, an Alliance Keneda Playwriting finalist quoted in the program says: “If we allow ourselves the capacity for astonishment, then our own experience—whatever that happens to be—will astonish us.” I concur.

For tickets and information, visit alliancetheatre.org.

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