

Ahab takes to the air in Alliance Theatre's acrobatic adaptation of *Moby Dick*

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The company mounts a unique new production of the Herman Melville classic

October 2016 Tess Malone



Photograph by Lookingglass Theatre Company

Adapting the 135-chapter *Moby Dick*—a novel that's equally famous for being a literary masterpiece and one of the most difficult-to-read books of all time—for the stage is an epic task on par with killing the white whale itself. But that doesn't stop writers from trying. Among the versions: a play-within-a-play by Orson Welles, an opera, a multimedia

musical concert, and an unusual take in which no dialogue is even spoken aloud. When playwright David Catlin was creating a new adaptation for Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre last year, he incorporated acrobatics and trapeze work to demonstrate the violence of whale hunting. "I wanted the audience to feel like they're on the boat, to feel the terror [the characters] felt," he says.

The play's 10 actors spend the show climbing up and down Chinese poles, swinging from aerial straps, and being hoisted into the air—sometimes as high as 22 feet. The set moves with them, too, as boats swing from the rafters to mimic the chaos of the ocean. "It's a visceral story, [and] the business of whaling is bloody," says Catlin. "With acrobatics, we get to feel the story in our muscles, and that draws us in."

The original production was so lauded—*Chicago Tribune* called it "a truly superb adaptation . . . tightly woven yet yearning"—that [Alliance](#) artistic director Susan Booth, who was classmates with Catlin at Northwestern, asked him to bring the show to Atlanta. "We're always looking for stories to tell that are so big and so wildly universal that anyone can walk through that story's front door," says Booth.

Catlin believes the 165-year-old Herman Melville classic resonates now more than ever. "Ahab is obsessed with what he believes to be a noble task," he says. "I think we all want to have something that grips us like that, especially today when we're being pulled in so many different directions."

Moby Dick runs October 12 through 30.

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