

BWW Review: MOBY DICK at Arena Stage - Take a Dip Into the Ocean for An Adventure to Remember

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by Charles Shubow

I have never read MOBY DICK. I do remember the 1956 film starring [Gregory Peck](#) as the infamous "Ahab", the Captain of the ship Pequod which is based in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Ahab sets sail not just for whale oil but for revenge for the big white whale who took away one of his legs. (I wonder if the story of "Peter Pan" where an alligator removed the hand of Captain Hook was taken from Melville's novel?)



I fondly remember visiting the charming Irish town of Youghel, County Cork where "Moby Dick" was filmed. You can even visit the pub "Moby Dick's" which was used in the movie and view film memorabilia and pictures from the set.

What a triumph this [Lookingglass Theatre Company](#) of Chicago production of MOBY DICK is. I have never seen anything like it anywhere and will remember it forever. Thank you [David Catlin](#), who directed and conceived this unique piece of theater with great assistance from Chicago's Actors Gymnasium, one of the nation's premiere circus and performing arts training centers.

This production has merited visits to three different Tony-winning theaters - The Alliance in Atlanta, the [South Coast Repertory](#) in Costa Mesa, California, and now the Tony- winning [Arena Stage](#). Thank you Artistic Director [Molly Smith](#) for the courage and confidence to bring this work of art to audiences in the Baltimore/Washington area.

When you enter the confines of the Kreeger Theater, you imagine you are looking at the skeleton of a large whale represented by curved poles. These poles later will become part of the ship, the Pequod, where the actors will swing and sway and climb and hold onto the rigging of the ship as it sets sail. The whale remains on the set the entire play designed by the talented designer Courtney O'Neill. I will not even mention how she presents the water spout out of the whale. Ingenious!

The work of The Rigging Designer, Isaac Schoepp, is not only done by the actors but by the great backstage crew who appear on stage accomplishing this complex work and even get a chance to take a bow with the cast after the performance. Great idea. One of the highlights was the design of two boats swaying and swinging in the air as if on the ocean chasing a whale.

Wait till you see the aerial choreography (by the talented Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi) by the superb performers Michah Figueroa and Javier Ulambayar. I was amazed how Hernandez-DiStasi convincingly had actors swimming in slow motion under the ocean.

The costumes by Sully Ratke are so imaginative, the Lighting by [William Kirkham](#) spectacular, and the Original Music and Sound Design by Rick Sims is spot on.

Now to the actors. "Ahab" does not make his appearance either in New Bedford where the play begins, or Nantucket Island where the ship will disembark from, or immediately after the Pequod sets sails. But when he ventures forth, you may get goose bumps.

[Christopher Donahue](#)'s Ahab is a just plain magnificent in this role. Ahab has always reminded me of "Captain

Queeg" (played by [Humphrey Bogart](#)), the diabolical character who becomes mentally unstable in the "The Caine Mutiny". The character "Starbuck" (yes that's where the coffee emporium got its name) is played by [Walter Owen Briggs](#) who even attempts an unsuccessful "mutiny".

Ahab has just one goal on this excursion into the vast ocean and that is to find the "Great White" who took part of his leg. I cannot envision any other actor in this role on stage.

James Abelson is the narrator/sailor "Ishmael" and opens the play. [Jamie Abelson](#) does a wonderful job in this complex role. [Anthony Fleming](#) deserved the standing ovation he received playing the Polynesian cannibal Queequeg. The two characters bring a little levity at the beginning of the play when they share a small bed in New Bedford and become friends.

The three women in the cast, [Kelley Abell](#), Cordelia Dewdney, and [Kasey Foster](#) function as widows, innkeepers, and as a Greek chorus.

Catlin's imagination is what makes this whole experience work. When a whale is caught, I will not reveal how they dissect this huge mammal to retrieve the blubber and oil.

MOBY DICK runs until December 24. For tickets call 202-488-3300 or visit www.arenastage.org.

CAROUSEL continues at [Arena Stage](#) until Dec. 24 as well.

And don't forget HAIRSPRAY LIVE! on NBC, Wednesday night, Dec. 7 at 8 p.m.

cgshubow@broadwayworld.com

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