

BWW Review: Thrilling Production of MOBY DICK Swims into South Coast Repertory

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by Michael L. Quintos

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Photo by Debora Robinson.

To be completely honest right off the bat, I myself have never read---nor truly have any current desire to read---the classic novel *Moby Dick* in its entirety.

I know that sounds like such a strong, perhaps unfairly dismissive stance to take, especially since [Herman Melville's](#) rather dense novel first published in 1851 is highly regarded as one of the literary world's greatest novels. But, frankly, after an early attempt at tackling it during my younger days at school (I barely made it past a few pages), the mere idea of reading through it even now as an adult has always intimidated me.

Thus, my first-hand exposures to the story of the infamous, titular whale and the obsessive ship captain hunting it have always been isolated just in the world of TV and film. But, admittedly, even in those more easily digestible mediums, the story never really resonated that much with me.

So, understandably, I approached [South Coast Repertory's](#) brand new live offering of **MOBY DICK** with equal parts cautiousness and, yes, open-mindedness (after all, SCR continually surprises me, so why not).

And, boy, I gotta say... keeping an open mind can be very rewarding sometimes!

Why? Because this incredibly absorbing play is one of the most stunning and enthralling pieces of theater I have had the privilege of experiencing from a Southern California stage. Continuing through February 19 at Orange County's Tony Award-winning regional theater in Costa Mesa, this highly creative and mesmerizing play---adapted and directed by [David Catlin](#)---is a production from Chicago's highly regarded [Lookingglass Theatre Company](#), who also produced similar successful runs of this adaptation at the [ALLIANCE THEATRE](#) in Atlanta and the [Arena Stage](#) in



Photo by [Liz Lauren](#)

If you're like me and, perhaps, do not care all that much about seeing the story of one man's fanatical quest for a giant killer whale, I wouldn't dismiss this play so easily. No exaggeration: this production is just that incredible.

Combining Melville's poetic wordplay, an inventive staging, and the dynamic athleticism of cirque, *MOBY DICK* is reimagined anew for the stage in a way that makes the story much more intriguing and, dare I say, more graspable than ever before---even for those of us who may have found the novel to be somewhat or totally unapproachable.

Catlin's rapturous and often jaw-dropping iteration definitely highlights the stylistic reaches of live theater, where movement, sets, lighting, sound, and costumes all serve to create a surreal, almost alien-like world, transporting the audience to the deck of the sailing ship *The Pequod*, where most of the action takes place.

For two riveting hours, Melville's celebrated tome comes to life as an eye-popping, sometimes amusing, sometimes jarring, and sometimes deeply emotional play that mixes abstract concepts with clever theater magic. Here, you'll be in awe watching ghosts and monsters float before your eyes. You'll be amazed by the remarkable agility of these actor-acrobats who continually defy gravity. You'll even marvel at paddle boats and ship masts gliding high above the stage---and believe wholeheartedly in this world where lives and sanity are constantly on the balance.



Photo by Debora Robinson.

It's hard not to notice that *MOBY DICK* is blessed with rich aesthetics.

We immediately examine Courtney O'Neill's artistic set design, a dark, captivating collection of fabrics, ropes, gears, and scaffolding that allow for imaginations to fill in certain spots. Smack dab in the center are suspended tubular rings that appear like the skeletal rib cage of a whale, while below it is a rock-wood platform reminiscent of water-deteriorated shipwrecks that have fused into the rocks of a sea bed. Sully Ratke's excellent period costumes verify that the setting is indeed the East Coast during the mid-19th Century. William C. Kirkham's haunting and innovative lighting designs and Rick Sim's sounds help set the often foreboding environment (my gosh, wait until you experience a raging storm on stage---but I digress).

From the first minute in, as novice sailor Ishmael ([Jamie Abelson](#)) arrives in New Bedford, Massachusetts and utters those infamous first words of the novel, you're instantly hooked---primarily because you will recognize an alluring uniqueness to the proceedings right away. This isn't just some run-of-the-mill iteration of a famous novel. This is a gripping, edge-of-your-seat adventure that will keep you enthralled and in suspense even if you've read the book before and know exactly what lies ahead.

Experiencing the story vicariously through him, Ishmael is our tour guide to this exciting and, yep, dangerous and life-altering journey. Though he's here to satisfy a personal "itch" for something exciting to counter his normal (but privileged) life thus far, we will discover along with him that for others, a livelihood on a whaling ship poses many dangers despite the promise of fair compensation and the thrill of the open seas.

Pretty much a (pun intended) fish out of water, Ishmael's first encounter, naturally, already throws him for a loop. While lodging at a crowded inn, Ishmael is forced to share a room (and bed) with Queequeg ([Anthony Fleming III](#)), a native Polynesian covered in tribal tattoos and who speaks broken English and is armed with a giant knife. Ishmael's encounter with a so-called "savage" may have been scary to him at first, but looks prove to be deceiving.

The two new pals arrive in Nantucket and soon board the *Pequod*, where they meet the notorious Captain Ahab ([Christopher Donahue](#)) and the rest of the interestingly multi-cultural crew of 33. The whaling ship's established crew includes the very serious Starbuck ([Walter Owen Briggs](#)), the ship's chief mate who---as the voice of reason in most instances---often clashes with the Captain over the true purpose of their deployment; and Stubb ([Raymond Fox](#)), the

ship's less-combative second mate. Newly-hired Queequeg situates himself alongside harpoonists/cabin boys Cabaco ([Micah Figueroa](#)) and Mungun (Javen Ulambayar), both of whom are also foreign born. (I admit, a little bit of HAMILTON's "Immigrants, we get the job done" bounced in my head).

Photo by Debora Robinson.



Hovering---or, more accurately, eerily haunting---the narrative throughout MOBY DICK are three "fates" ([Kelley Abell](#), Cordelia Dewdney, [Kasey Foster](#)), who slither (and sing) in and out of the action with sometimes lasting consequences over characters and, yes, plot direction. Like zombie-like ghosts that control all, the multi-talented actresses that play these "fates" also inhabit various other female characters that appear here and there, almost as if they take over and "possess" these other beings as they interact with the different men that criss-cross the story (later, the three ladies even come together to play the title character).

Soon enough---as anyone even slightly familiar with the story knows---the *Pequod* ("adorned with the fins of slain monsters") sets sail to enact Captain Ahab's obsessive, irrational *raison d'être*: to hunt down and exact revenge on Moby Dick, the giant white whale that bit off his one leg and that has eluded him ever since (ivory-legged Ahab wears a prosthetic to compensate).

The crew reluctantly complies with Ahab's anger-fueled quest, even though logic---and a very pointed prophecy---suggests they do otherwise.

But, as one might have expected, Ahab is so obsessed that he's practically lost any shred of humanity he has left, leaving his crew feeling as if they're endangering their lives following his orders. And, as evidenced by the post-show talkback between the cast and audience during a recent performance of the play, the show's contemporary real-world parallels are not lost on anyone, especially if you watch the news.

"We are guided only by our leader's hatred." Indeed.

Told via ingenious staging and theatrical creativity, MOBY DICK is an imaginative modern take on what feels like a classical, pre-existing play. As characters leap and twirl and somersault about the stage (beautifully choreographed by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi), you can't help, as an audience member, but to be completely rapt in the experience. Most times, such devices are used to distract from weaknesses in a play. Here, though, it is a welcome enhancement, helping to tell the tale with layers of mesmerizing poetry and hyper surreal drama.

Of course, the play's acting troupe---every one an acrobatically-inclined thespian---all give ferocious, searing performances that add to the show's wow factor. Abelson does a great job standing in as the audience's proxy, a friendly and active participant/observer. Donahue's growling Ahab is effectively menacing, yet still allows for snippets of human vulnerability to peek out. Briggs' riveting portrait of Starbuck is also worth noticing, as is Fleming's scene-stealing turn as Queequeg. And, the play's MVP's, the three lady fates played by Abell, Dewdney, and Foster, all command attention with every entrance and exit, even in moments when they're not the main [Focus](#)---only because their presence has such an affect on the story at most times you don't want to miss a second. I also LOVED Figueroa's believably wounded boy persona as Cabaco---so much so that when danger is present, he's the one we root for to survive it and be okay.



Photo by [Liz Lauren](#).

Overall, what I found most remarkable about this production of MOBY DICK was how easily I was swept up in this production's brilliant methodology of telling me this story---that in every lighting cue, in every flicker of a fabric, or with every rumble, loud bang, or set change, something monumentally significant is about to go down. It's really quite a marvel of theatricality that I willingly absorbed from my seat. The play makes it easy for an audience to immerse itself in Ishmael's world.

This exceptional production of MOBY DICK proves that when you inject challenging, dense source material with clever, innovative staging, then the results can be stunning and, yes, beautiful---even if it seems intimidating or scary.

* Follow this reviewer on Twitter: [@cre8iveMLQ](#) *

Photos by Debora Robinson for [South Coast Repertory](#) and [Liz Lauren](#) for [Lookingglass Theatre Company](#). Review also published in OnStage.

[Lookingglass Theatre Company's](#) production of MOBY DICK continues its final performances at [South Coast Repertory](#) through February 19, 2017. Tickets can be purchased online at [www.scr.org](#), by phone at (714) 708-5555 or by visiting the box office at 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.

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