

Lookingglass Theatre moves Moby-Dick from sea to sky

By Zac
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Moby-Dick ranks up there with the Bible on the short list of literary masterpieces that are very nearly unreadable. Like the Good Book, Herman Melville's 1851 novel about the doomed voyage of the *Pequod* is cosmic in scope, rich in interpretive possibilities, extraordinarily powerful in places, and, for long stretches, tedious beyond imagining. Captain Ahab may have been single-minded in his pursuit of the white whale that done him wrong, but his creator tends to get distracted, repeatedly breaking away from the narrative to teach us lessons on sailing and the finer points of cetology.

Translating the book's uniquely discursive quality to another medium is no easy task, which is one reason why there's never been a decent movie version. Still, Lookingglass Theatre Company's dazzling new stage adaptation is the third *Moby-Dick*-related show to appear in Chicago in the last four years. In 2011, the now defunct Building Stage supplied a [brainy and playful take](#) (a reworking of a [previous production](#)) with toy boats and multiple Ahabs; last year we got Shattered Globe Theatre's *The Whaleship Essex*, about the real-life disaster at sea that inspired Melville's tale.

If I had to guess a reason for this renewed interest in 19th-century whaling, I'd say it has something to do with the current vogue for morally ambiguous antiheroes (Ahab would fit right in on cable TV). Not to mention our apparently boundless appetite for first-person accounts of life-altering journeys in faraway places—a trend satirized last year on the website [Clickhole](#), where the entire text of *Moby-Dick* appeared under the BuzzFeed-esque headline "The Time I Spent On A Commercial Whaling Ship Totally Changed My Perspective On The World."

In Lookingglass's version, adapter-director David Catlin zeroes in on the book's most theatrical aspects—the action sequences and Shakespearean soliloquies—and manages to provide a visual equivalent to Melville's overstuffed prose without filling the stage with whale carcasses. As a matter of fact, Courtney O'Neill's scenic design is notably restrained, centering on a large platform of what looks like driftwood surrounded by a grouping of steel hoops that resembles an enormous rib cage. It's as though we're stuck in the belly of a giant fish, which of course recalls Jonah but also serves as a potent metaphor for the way Ahab's mad pursuit traps him, the *Pequod*, and its crew within the narrow confines of an obsession.

The production's claustrophobic feeling is in fruitful tension with an expansive sense of adventure, represented by our narrator, Ishmael (Jamie Abelson), and his "bosom friend," Queequeg (Anthony Fleming III, riveting as usual), both of whom have signed on for the voyage in order to sow their wild oats. Also onboard: the pragmatic first mate and principal Ahab foil, Starbuck (played by Kareem Bandealy with an intense stare and a thick New England accent), and the jolly second mate, Stubb (Raymond Fox). The ship may eventually become a prison for everyone on it, but it's still on the wide open sea, and Catlin's staging is never more thrilling than when he lets the men periodically break free of their fetters.

As in many past Lookingglass shows, the primary means of expressing this freedom is deft and daring aerial acrobatics. Abelson, Fleming, and, as two whaling newbies, Micah Figueroa and Javen Ulambayer are forever shimmying up the set's steel hoops, dangling from rigging, and lowering themselves from the ceiling on rowboats to go harpooning. Since he couldn't get the ocean onstage, Catlin uses the air as a substitute, and the poetry of bodies moving gracefully through space makes an ideal theatrical analogue to Melville's lyrical passages about life on the ship.

A less successful innovation is the casting of Emma Cadd, Kasey Foster, and Monica West as three redheaded Fates dressed in black, as if in mourning. At various times, they act as a kind of chorus commenting on Ishmael's narration, play ancillary characters, deliver technical information, supply sound effects, and flap sheets of fabric to indicate tempestuous seas.

As the action progresses, the trio start to seem less like Fates than angry, avenging furies standing up for the elemental forces Ahab thinks he can beat. I appreciate Catlin's efforts to put some women in this sausage fest of a story, and they do help out with conveying the novel's range and propensity for going off on tangents. But as a device, their role often feels portentous and arty. At the end, when the women show up sporting white dresses and smoky eyes to represent the supposedly fearsome beast we've heard so much about, it's an anticlimax to say the least.

Their big white whale seems an unworthy foe for Christopher Donahue's ferocious Captain Ahab, aptly described by Stubb as a "grand, ungodly, godlike man." Bearing a nasty scar down the middle of his face and swiveling awkwardly on his wooden leg (two injuries from you-know-who), he presents a fierce and frightening image of unchecked hubris, monomania, and a soul warped beyond recognition by rage. v