

Dancing Queequeg, the secret weapon in 'Moby Dick'

Picture this: A timid, would-be mariner arrives in a crowded New England whaling port — and winds up sharing a bed with a nearly naked, heavily tattooed, oddly coiffed reputed cannibal, the proud owner of a six-and-a-half-foot harpoon.

We're talking Ishmael and Queequeg of Herman Melville's 1851 novel, of course. More to the point in 21st-century Chicago, we're talking director David Catlin's current Lookingglass Theatre world-premiere adaptation, "Moby Dick."

Often called the first Great American Novel, Melville's tome actually confronts issues of racial and ethnic difference, epitomized in that odd bedroom scene. But in Catlin's transformative conception, white America not only comes to terms with the "other" but embraces it. Literally.

[Superb 'Moby Dick' goes hunting for inner demons](#)

The magic of dance reconciles Ishmael and Queequeg in a matter of minutes, through a comic, tender adagio duet complete with lifts and more-or-less graceful poses and landings. Essentially a love duet, it begins in the fear of intimacy — specifically, the fear of being eaten — but ends in wordless communion. (So much tragedy could have been avoided had the partially gobbled Ahab come to terms with his "other," the Great Whale.)



As Queequeg, the splendid physical-theater performer Anthony Fleming III gives this dream-sequence duet much of its zest. A Lookingglass ensemble member since 2013 (after 10 years as an artistic associate), he also does plenty of swinging from the rigging in "Moby Dick."

Fleming has never formally studied dance or circus arts, he says — though, like many Lookingglass actors, he's worked with the Actors Gymnasium, an Evanston company that offers circus-art training. Yet he's not only utterly at home with movement but clearly capable of thinking and feeling in purely physical terms. "I'm a very instinctual performer," he says, "especially in process — in that freedom to move, just move, and see what happens."

That's what he did in the workshops that produced the duet. In a process very similar to what dancers would have done, Fleming, Jamie Abelson (Ishmael), and choreographer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi simply experimented with movement. "I just started picking [Abelson] up," Fleming says, "feeling his weight, seeing how he moves."

After fine-tuning, movement onstage can "tell such a big part of the story," Fleming adds. "You can take the audience on that visual ride, and they know exactly what you mean, they're with you: They feel that from your interaction with another body through space."

How a whale swallowed Chicago theater

Fleming, 37, is perfectly suited to the strong, silent Queequeg, a man of few but pungent words. Articulate and pithy in conversation, Fleming is the child of an African-American father and Filipino mother who grew up in Chicago and its suburbs. He's also an athlete: a group-fitness trainer who runs 40 miles a week and loves long-distance cycling. He once bicycled 122 miles in a day in Arizona; it would have taken him 12 hours, he says, but he had to stop for a couple hours because he "took the route less traveled," ran out of water, and cramped up.



Fleming admits he has "a little bit" of a taste for danger. He was a bike messenger for 11 years — "longer than I should have done it," he says. "But I loved it, almost as much as I love acting. I was pretty good at it, at moving through traffic at high speeds." Did he ever get hit? "I got doored," he says. "I went through a windshield once."

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But as one of the four male actors who regularly climb the rigging and perch 15 to 20 feet above the stage, he has "a healthy fear" of what's essentially aerial dance. Less than a week before we talked, an actor fell during a performance and broke his leg. "We had to stop the show," Fleming says. "The paramedics came." An understudy has taken on the role for the rest of the run.

"As unfortunate as that was — and we really feel for him — it's a great reminder of the focus we need every moment out there," Fleming says. At the same time, the inherent danger is another reason he loves physical theater: "It really forces you to be present in a unique way, as opposed to sitting-on-the-couch plays. When you're moving around, and you have other people in the air, it causes you to be in the moment in a way that propels the story."

Even in more traditional plays, Fleming digs for the physical qualities of his role. When he played young trumpet player Levee in Milwaukee Rep's 2011 production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," he says, "I tried to find the rhythm and the movement in the character: how he'd move down stairs, get up from a chair, reach for his horn, reach for the doorknob. Music was always running through his veins, and I wanted to show that." The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel singled out Fleming's performance as "galvanic."

Fleming is clearly one of those enviable physical specimens, like many dancers, who live through their bodies. Also like most dancers, he's highly attuned to the nuances of character, story and emotion.

"Melville has put a lot of the story's humanity in [Queequeg]," he says. That's despite the fact that, to some people, "he might come across as this savage. He can be frightening to look at: He has this whole facial tattoo and weird hair."

Fleming's two makeup artists have whittled down the pre-performance task of applying all those tattoos from an hour to 45 minutes. While his back, chest and lower arms require stencils, an airbrush and a compressor, his face entails only 10 transfer stickers. To get rid of it all after the show takes tons of cotton balls, witch hazel, baby oil and scrubbing.

Clearly it's worth it to him. Even after a month of playing the role, Fleming says, he's still finding "more of what propels Queequeg." Fortunately, he adds, "I've always worked with great directors — Catlin, Ron OJ Parson — who let the actors create. I'm not a robot, not a puppet."

At this point, Fleming clearly sees Queequeg's "longing for forgiveness, because of his back story: He left home, left his father, left his world. That runs parallel to my personal life. When I was growing up, my father and I butted heads. I was 18, 19. It was his way or the highway — and I chose the highway. We had a strange relationship for years.

"My father passed away about five years ago, and I just think about all that time wasted being mad, with ego and pride and who's right and who's wrong. It's time you can't get back once that person is gone."

*"Moby Dick" continues through Aug. 28 at the Lookingglass Theatre in Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-337-0665 or **lookingglasstheatre.org***