

Evanston's Actors Gymnasium partners with Lookingglass on 'Moby Dick'

By Catey
Sullivan

Some people give swimming lessons during the dog days of summer. Evanston's Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi teaches people how to drown. On a recent Wednesday afternoon, she was overseeing the final moments in an especially gasp-inducing demise:

"I needed this guy to fall from the very top of a ship's mast, then just plummet down when he hit the water — that's the death I'm most excited about," says DiStasi, director of the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, a facility known across the country for teaching normally earth-bound people to fly and leap and dance like circus stars.

There's no need to call out a search and rescue squad. DiStasi isn't literally sending hapless victims to watery graves. As the choreographer of Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby Dick," she's charged with creating a credible rendition of sailors being swallowed up by the sea and the titular whale.

"It's epic," DiStasi says of David Catlin's adaptation of Herman Melville's 1851 yarn. "The storms, the whale, the ship being tossed around — there's a lot of opportunities for storytelling through movement."

Catlin's adaptation follows Melville's 800-plus page saga from the wharves of New England to the depths of the sea. Told through the eyes of a young sailor named Ishmael, Captain Ahab's quest to slaughter the great white whale is both a ripping fine yarn and a commentary on obsession, power, hubris and the eternal war between man and nature.

The cast and crew of "Moby Dick" have been training for months to depict the violently swaying movements of men careening over storm-lashed decks and under ruthless attack by a sea creature determined to destroy them.

Evanston's Emma Cadd is among those charged with much of the aerial work in "Moby Dick." The newly minted Northwestern grad has spent her summer working the ropes and riggings of the Actor's Gymnasium. Cadd plays one of the Fates, a mesmerizing, deadly trio of otherworldly sirens who lure sailors to a watery grave.

"The Fates aren't actually characters in the novel," Cadd says, "But Ahab talks about fate a lot — he calls fate the steel locomotive that drives him on. It's all men on board the ship, a completely masculine world. But everyone refers to the ship and the whale and the ocean as 'she' or 'her'. " Having women play the fates taps into that mysterious feminine power."

Cadd says she's having a ball learning to fly. "It's scary sometimes, but it's such an adrenaline rush," she says.

DiStasi uses flight to upend audience perspective when the action moves beneath the waves. The open air above the stage becomes the swirling depths as actors spin through an airborne, underwater ballet.

"Lots of times actors will come up with their own movements," DiStasi says, "There's a real collaboration going on. The key is to make sure the movement enhances the storytelling and deepens the dialogue, that it doesn't become just a series of tricks."

'Moby Dick'

Lookingglass Theatre in association with the Actors Gymnasium

Through Aug. 9

Lookingglass Theatre at the Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.

\$40-\$80

312-337-0665; <http://www.lookingglasstheatre.org>

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