

Killer Creatures of "Moby Dick," "The Birds," Arrive at Griffin, Lookingglass Theatres



Dangerous creatures are stalking Chicago stages this summer, and I am not talking about actors who lack proper training in stage combat. At Griffin Theatre, a sky-blackening flock of winged evil stars in "[The Birds](#)." At Lookingglass, a great white whale is smashing seamen to smithereens in "[Moby Dick](#)."

We caught up with directors **David Catlin** ("Moby Dick") and **Kevin Kingston** ("The Birds"), to talk about what it takes to bring (respectively) a legion of avian horrors and the most destructive sea creature this side of "Jaws" to the stage. Here, a tale of two shows that go into the wild.

Non-spoiler alert: We won't be giving away any stage secrets here. For that, you'll have to head for the ticket booth.

What prompted each of you to stage a story that seems so completely un-stageable?

Kevin Kingston : It wasn't entirely the challenge of dealing with killer birds. Daphne du Maurier's "The Birds" is a short story about a small group of people trying to figure out how to survive at what might be the end of the human race. The questions that situation raises - what happens to the rules of society are turned completely off? How do you behave? What do you become? To me, those are fascinating, frightening questions.

David Catlin: I think all stories are ripe for telling - the more dauntingly impossible, the greater the lure. Back in college some 5,000 years ago, I read "Moby Dick" straight through in a monomaniac stint of coffee and sleeplessness. I was left exhausted and awakened by the heart-pounding blur of whale and whaling; obsession heeling over into madness; and the extraordinary characters that crewed the doomed Pequod.



Right, David, but what about the whale? How do you put a whale on stage without, you know, putting a whale on stage?

DC: We did a developmental production at Northwestern last year. For that version, Moby Dick was represented by a massive white opaque curtain that rose 20 feet in the air. The conceit was to let our imaginations complete the horrifying imagery of boat-splintering chaos. I loved the idea, yet in the playing of it, it didn't feel quite as satisfying as we had envisioned.

Am I correct in that Moby Dick doesn't show up until about page 300?

DC: True, we don't meet Moby Dick until the final chapters. We hear about him, we learn about him and all he is capable of. So by the time he arrives in the play, each audience member - if we've done our job - has a particular and spectacular image of Moby Dick in their brains. No amount of stagecraft can surpass the imagination of our audience.

Kevin, what about birds attacking? How do you stage a bird attack without attacking birds?

KK: We heard about one production of "The Birds" that actually involved real birds, but we decided not to go that route. We started by listening to bird sounds, audio files we pulled off the internet. Ducks, crows robins. Then we went to birds of prey. Vultures, eagles, crows. Crows will give you nightmares. Spine shivers. When we started combining all the sounds, something happened that I can't quite put my finger on. It was like this familiar, ordinary sound became monstrous.

We've also done some stuff with a garden claw and chicken wire that's pretty effective in conveying how the birds aren't just randomly attacking - they're actively looking for potential victims.



But it's not just sound that conveys the birds of "The Birds," right?

KK: No, it's not. We figured out some visuals, very low-tech, very inexpensive, ridiculously easy to do, but really unnerving.

Do you think there are too many pigeons? In Chicago I mean? Should we be worried?

KK: I have to say, this show has changed the way I walk through the world a little. I notice birds a lot more. They are countless, everywhere. If they decided to attack, I don't know how well we'd do. It's easy to get spooked thinking about it.



David I need to ask about ponchos. Do people need ponchos, like at Seaworld, for "Moby Dick"?

DC: I love elements like actual water and earth and fire on stage. But we opted to not use water for this one.

We partnered with the Actors Gymnasium, and with the amount of (Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi's) aerial choreography, the actors have plenty to think about as they're soaring above the decks without worrying about slipping on water when they land.

I remember that the whale is not really a whale anyway. When a whale is not just a whale, what is it?

DC: The White Whale is everything that looms before us in the distance, just out of reach. (It is) whatever consumes us. And if we are not careful it has the ability to capsize us.

Griffin Theatre Company's "The Birds" runs through July 19 at Theater Wit, 1229 Belmont Ave. Tickets are \$35, \$30 students, seniors. For more info go to www.theaterwit.org.

Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby Dick" runs through Aug. 28 at Lookingglass Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave. Ticket are \$40 - \$80. For more information, go to www.lookingglasstheatre.org.

Photos: "Moby Dick" - (l to r) Raymond Fox, Emma CadD, Christopher Donahue, Micah Figueroa, Kareem Bandealy, by Liz Lauren

"Moby Dick" - Christopher Donahue, Raymond Fox, Jamie Abelson (background)

Jodi Kingsley and Keith Neagle in Griffin Theatre Company's Chicago premiere of THE BIRDS by Conor McPherson, based on the short story by Daphne du Maurier and directed by Kevin Kingston. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

Emily Nichelson and Keith Neagle in Griffin Theatre Company's Chicago premiere of THE BIRDS by Conor McPherson, based

on the short story by **Daphne du Maurier** and directed by **Kevin Kingston**. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

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Catey Sullivan

Catey Sullivan has been writing about Chicago theater for over 20 years and is quite pleased to be blogging for Choose Chicago. She is the Chicago theater critic for TheaterMania.com and *Pioneer Press* and *Chicago Magazine's* contributing editor for theater. Over the decades, her reviews and features have also been published in *Playbill*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Midwest Living* magazine. She serves as a mentor with the Cindy Bandle Young Critics program at the Goodman Theatre, teaches piano at Oak Park's Steckman School of Music and has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Illinois at Chicago. When she's not working, she travels and has thus far made two trips to the Antarctic, two treks through Nepal and numerous journeys into the wilds of Transylvania, Bhutan, Croatia, Bosnia, Peru, Ecuador, Thailand and Argentina as well the not-so-wild big cities of England, Germany and Italy. When she is not working or traveling, she enjoys spending time with her pugs, Colonel Snopes, Truman Capote and Sweeney Todd.

