

Lookingglass Theatre Takes on Moby Dick this Summer

“Call me Ishmael.” Many readers never get very far past the famous first sentence of *Moby Dick*, but David Catlin and Lookingglass Theatre Company are diving head-first into a world-premiere adaptation of Herman Melville's epic seafaring novel and aim to introduce theater-goers to the classic story through stunning visuals, breathtaking acrobatics and a stirring iteration of the centuries-old tale. Though Catlin knows firsthand that lots of audience members probably never made it through the novel back when they were assigned it in high school (he didn't finish it, himself, until he was about to cover it in a class he was teaching), he's confident that they'll have a much different experience exploring the story at Lookingglass. “It's not going to feel like a massive 800 page book that you were supposed read,” he told me.

Instead, his goal is to draw the audience into the story by creating a world that is both true to the novel and exciting for the viewer. “I'm a big fan of physical theater storytelling,” explains Catlin, who adapted the script and is also directing the production. “To practice theater is to explore and investigate what it is to be human. As human beings, we experience the world in a visual way; we perceive it in a kinesthetic way, in a visceral way.”

The audience is absolutely meant to experience *Moby Dick* in a very visceral way with scenes that, at various times, have actors and spectators plunging under the sea, getting trapped in the belly of a whale, and coming along on Ahab's quest for vengeance. “Ahab is very persuasive,” says Catlin. “We think of him as this madman, but there's something persuasive about him. He persuades people who are, at some point in their lives, rational.”

Catlin, himself, is pretty persuasive, though his quest (for an outstanding production rather than for exacting vengeance on a sea creature) is much more reasonable than Ahab's. His passion for *Moby Dick* is infectious, and if his enthusiasm for the production is any indication, audiences will be mesmerized by what's in store. “I hope that they will find themselves in the story,” he says, “and that they will find themselves laughing and hopefully have their breath taken away.”

Considering Lookingglass is, once again, teaming up with The Actors Gymnasium, it's pretty much a guarantee that *Moby Dick* will have some breathtaking moments. Anyone familiar with Catlin's beloved *Lookingglass Alice* knows that he's more than capable of leaving the audience breathless, and his work with the artists from The Actors Gymnasium makes for some thrilling theater. “At times I like to use circus because I feel that hits us in a visceral level,” says Catlin.

Although *Moby Dick* is certainly not “circus-y” in the traditional sense, Catlin's take on the adventure novel is that there's plenty of room for lots of movement and a healthy dose of gasp-inducing stunts. “We've got these great sequences where the cast is in these lovely swinging boats when we're flying across the water in pursuit of whales.” He adds, “I am interested in finding moments and passages in our production where it can be a movement sequence...when we go out and hook the whale. That might be a long silent sequence that the audience can experience on a muscular level.”

Certainly, thrill-seekers will be entertained by the high-flying action, but audiences looking for depth of character and powerful storytelling will be completely captivated by *Moby Dick*. The production—even with Catlin's penchant for spellbinding aerials and gorgeous visual effects—is about much more than spectacle. “The characters are very compelling,” he explains. “There's madness and obsession. It's bloody and adventurous.”

While the book is, in some ways, the Great White Whale of high school reading lists, Catlin thinks that teenaged audiences, especially, will be able to connect with Ishmael's struggle to find his place in the world. “This idea of feeling lonely, disconnected, unmoored, without a purpose, discontented, I feel like we all, at some point—especially in high school—we just don't feel connected to things. That's Ishmael in the beginning. He's in a dark place.”

Ahab, too, is a very dark character in a very dark place. And while most people would prefer not to identify with a character that, at times, is incredibly evil and unlikable, Catlin insists, “We all understand Ahab. We understand that want to be totally immersed in something, to be totally consumed by something—whether it’s love; or our job teaching students; whether it’s having that kind of focus with our kids.” The problem, says Catlin, isn’t that Ahab is pursuing something that may be unattainable. It’s that Ahab “gets too consumed.”

Even more than identifying with the characters in the story, Catlin hopes audiences will appreciate that *Moby Dick* is about something deeper within us all—a connection to the water that so many humans feel

Catlin chose to attend Northwestern University in part because of its fantastic theater program. “But more than that,” he explains, “was this massive body of sharkless water right next to it. We are drawn to the water’s edge. For we (sic) human beings, there’s something so beautiful and humbling and settling about standing at the water’s edge. But then you don’t know what lies beneath the surface. You don’t know what monsters lurk beneath.”

Catlin feels that we all share that experience of being drawn to water, being calmed by it, and being stirred by it. Mid-conversation, he is compelled to share a quote from JFK: “All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea—whether it is to sail or to watch it—we are going back from whence we came.”

Catlin is not the only theater artist in Chicago who shares a connection to the sea and to *Moby Dick*. Blair Thomas and Company (known for contemporary puppets and unique storytelling) won a grant from Boeing to collaborate with Lookingglass Theatre and The House Theatre on three distinct adaptations of *Moby Dick*. That collaboration initially took place in 2012.

“It was a lovely experience,” Catlin recalls. “We would get together every four to six weeks over the course of about a year. We’d meet at the Lill Street Art Center. The First Slice Pie Company has a store over there. We would have pie and we would talk about chapters from *Moby Dick* and share ideas and steal ideas.”

Though all three adaptations have had workshops across the Chicago area since that time, The House Theatre was the first to fully produce a script. Shawn Pfausch’s *Season on the Line* was produced earlier this season and used *Moby Dick* as inspiration for a story about a monomaniacal theater director still trying to redeem himself after a disastrous production of *Moby Dick* twenty years before. Catlin’s version is more of a true adaptation of Melville’s story but with many layers of theatricality to help bring audiences into the world of the play and the minds of the characters.

“The House version was decidedly updated,” says Catlin. “Ours is a little bit more literal. Costumes will have a period feel to them. We’re telling the story in hindsight, and the set will reflect that time and distance.”

Also reflective of the time and distance is the heightened, almost Shakespearean language of the production. Catlin believes that “the characters need that kind of language to process the heighten experiences they are having.” He reminds us that Melville himself included a remarkable amount of theatrical language throughout the novel, such as Ishmael’s musings upon why he ended up going whaling: “Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces.”

While the language and design elements reside, in many ways, firmly in the past, the story is as relevant today as it was when *Moby Dick* was first published in 1851. Originally a commercial failure, the novel has become a classic in part because Melville’s skillful writing, and in part because the story of adventure and revenge, life and death is one that resonates with readers of all backgrounds.

The men aboard the Pequod are on a quest that will surely result in death for some—possibly because of the rigors of life at sea and possibly at the hands of “cannibal savages” they expect to meet throughout their travels. Remarks

Catlin, “That these men would willingly say goodbye to their wives and families, go out on ships in search of whales...that within them contain oil, this precious light that allows for safety...it feels like this valiant, brave impossible quest that these men are going on.”

As the men—Ishmael in particular—encounter and slaughter whales, they sense “that these creatures have some sense and some humanity about them. In that moment for me onstage,” says Catlin, “the men are just coated in blood... These 'civilized' men...have become these savages that they've feared.”

Indeed, Catlin says that, in addition to all of the aerials and acrobatics, there will be “lots of blood” in this production of *Moby Dick*. After all, it's a gruesome story. Whaling is a gruesome trade, and Catlin doesn't plan to skirt around the issue. Struggling with the moral issue of whaling is part of Ishmael's journey as is his ever shifting view of the world.

Just as Ishmael takes us along on his travels through the novel, Lookingglass and Catlin's visceral, visual, and thoughtful adaptation of this American masterpiece aims to send the audience on a journey that will at once have them hopeful with the prospect of adventure and appalled by the horrors they encounter along the way.

As always, the story of *Moby Dick* is certain to challenge us, to make us think, to make us question who we are and where we are going. We are all Ishmael, and we should all be so lucky to live to tell our tales.

Moby Dick begins June 10 at Lookingglass Theatre's Water Tower Water Works space and is recommended for “seafarers” ages 12 and up.