

'Moby Dick' gets a stellar Lookingglass treatment

Hedy Weiss

Lookingglass Theatre's world premiere production of "Moby Dick" is a triumph of grand theatrical imagination, deep thought, superb acting and eye-popping, ingeniously deployed physical daring. Superbly adapted and directed by David Catlin, who finds the perfect balance of poetry, madness and muscle, the show works a remarkable sea change on Herman Melville's massive novel, a landmark of world literature. And in this process of transformation and condensation it not only holds fast to the book's essence, but enhances the dark magic and fever-dream quality of the story.

A tale of obsession, loneliness, self-exile, the quest for vengeance and, of course, the looming presence of mortality and an accompanying vision of hell, "Moby Dick" is biblical in scale (most notably in its evocation of the story of Jonah and the whale) and American to its bone. But even as it rides the waves of all its grand themes, it also manages to home in on intimate relationships — the strange bonds that both hold men together and tear them apart. As a co-production with the Actors Gymnasium, it also is shot through with astonishingly original aerial choreography by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, and its fearless, acrobatic cast brilliantly captures the grueling and perilous labor of life aboard a whaling ship.

'MOBY DICK'

Highly recommended

When: Through Aug. 28

Where: Lookingglass Theatre

at Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan

Tickets: \$40 – \$80

Info: (312) 337-0665;

www.lookingglass

theatre.org

Run time: 2 hours and 45 minutes with two intermissions

The narrator and understated witness to this saga is Ishmael (an ideally controlled Jamie Abelson). A rather prim and solitary man, desperate to flee "civilization," he signs on for a three-year stint on the Pequod, a whaling ship that sets sail from Nantucket for the Pacific Ocean in search of the creatures whose oil is in great demand. Little can he know that the captain of this ship, Ahab (Christopher Donahue, at his very best in a fiery speech about a life sacrificed to the sea), has another goal in mind. He is on a hunt for the great white whale that devoured his leg — a limb now replaced by a prosthesis made from a whale's jawbone.

Before even boarding the ship, Ishmael develops an unlikely friendship with a most exotic man, Queequeg (Anthony Fleming III). A heavily tattooed harpooner of staggering strength and unique habits, his father is king of an island in the South Seas, and Queequeg has fled home in search of the experience of the wider world he hopes will prepare him to succeed the man. Fleming easily steals the show. An actor of immense range, intensity and wit (just watch how he smokes a pipe), he possesses the grace of a dancer and strength of an Olympic athlete. His coffin scene is one of the show's most wondrous and riveting sequences.





Anthony Fleming III plays Queequeg in the Lookingglass Theatre production of "Moby Dick." (Photo: Liz Lauren)

Once on board (where a crew of 33 is evoked by just six men), these two meet the ship's rational and decent first mate, Starbuck (an easily elegant and thoughtful Kareem Bandealy); the good-humored second mate, Stubb (the excellent Raymond Fox, who also makes quite a fearsome harpoon forger), and two other harpooners: the boyish Cabaco (wonderfully mystical Micah Figueroa), whose rescue from the sea by Queequeg takes the form of a breathtaking aerial ballet, and Mungun (the fleet and fearless Javen Ulambayer).

Hovering over the action are a trio of Fates (the uniformly sly and seductive Kasey Foster, Emma Cadd and Monica West), redheaded women who morph from the widows, mothers and sisters of sea-going men, to figures of both comfort and death at sea (with a great all-encompassing black skirt suggesting the latter). In a feat of highly imaginative stagecraft, one of them also plays a whale skinned and "processed" for oil.



Monica West (from left), Kasey Foster and Emma Cadd play the Fates in the Lookingglass Theatre production of "Moby Dick." (Photo: Liz Lauren)

The production plays out on Courtney O'Neill's handsome, subtly raked dark wooden deck of a stage, framed by a series of arched pipes that suggest the horizon, and hauntingly lit by William C. Kirkham. The whole thing is outfitted with a complex system of rigging (the masterful work of Isaac Shoepf) used to hoist sails, smaller crafts and bodies. Rick Sims' soundscape is a marvel (listen up, Tony Awards, and learn about the power of sound design). Carolyn Sullivan's costumes are period perfect.



Jamie Abelson (left) is Ishmael and, Anthony Fleming III is Queequeg in Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby Dick." (Photo: Liz Lauren)

There are countless moments to cherish in this production, one of those landmark Chicago originals that simply should not be missed. And it can only be hoped that the show lures every tourist strolling past Lookingglass' Michigan Avenue home this summer, and then sails on to many other theatrical ports.

Hedy Weiss has been Theater and Dance Critic of the Chicago Sun-Times since 1984, reporting on local, national and international productions, as well as a wide range of other subjects including art and architecture, books, travel and international affairs.

